The goal of Project Rising Women was to build a computer center and childcare center, and implement a computer training skills program in the Sol Naciente (Rising Sun) shelter for women in situations of homelessness and gender violence on the edge of the largest and most violent ghetto in Buenos Aires, Argentina. While the primary intention of the project was to give the shelter residents (homeless single mothers from all over Buenos Aires) time and space to learn valuable computer skills that would help them find jobs in the future, Project Rising Women also sought to help change the lives of the women living in the neighboring ghetto, by employing them as caretakers in the childcare center.

Thanks to the Davis Grant and extensive collaboration with the staff of the Sol Naciente Shelter, Project Rising Women was able to meet all of its goals. The Sol Naciente Shelter currently boasts a large childcare center with two rooms and children’s toys, operated by ghetto-dwelling women who are paid a small sum to watch the shelter women’s children. Additionally, the shelter now has a computer center and library with five computers, one printer, Internet, a sofa and two chairs, and a large collection of learning materials. A professional computer teacher is currently teaching hour-long classes twice a week to an enthusiastic group of fourteen women. Over the course of a summer, Project Rising Women touched the lives of two different groups of vulnerable women in remarkable and unpredictable ways. Not only has this project given the women a means to gain economic independence, it has also allowed them to realize their own personal strength and self-worth by showing them their capacity for learning and growth.

The success of Project Rising Women could not have been possible without planning and building that began long before I arrived in June to begin my work on the project. Having worked collaboratively on the plans for the project with the Sol Naciente president Lidia Hernandez during the 2008-2009 academic year, the Sol Naciente staff was able to find private donations and begin work on the childcare center, and was actually able to finish building by the time that I arrived. According to our plans, Sol Naciente began employing ghetto-dwelling women as caretakers. Arriving at the shelter and seeing a large part of our combined dream already in place was truly incredible. My first day back at the shelter I encountered a ghetto-dwelling woman named Carmen wearing a caretakers uniform and working for a formal wage. Only a year before this same woman had been making her living collecting cardboard boxes in the street and exchanging them for pennies at a recycling center. It was so wonderful to see these women at work!

The fact that the childcare center was already completed upon my arrival allowed me to pour all of my time, energy and funding into the computer center and computer classes. However, I soon realized that the budget realities of building the computer center far exceeded my original calculations. Additionally, structural problems in the shelter itself, including a horrible cockroach infestation and broken plumbing that spewed sewage onto the floor were obstacles that had to be overcome before building could take place. The Sol Naciente staff and I decided that it would be best if we used the majority of the funding to build the physical space necessary for the computer center, and to look for donated computers rather than buying them. While this left us one computer short of our original goal of six computers, in the end it left us with more money to put into building and classes. We also decided that rather than starting the computer classes with volunteers as we had originally planned, it would be better to hire a trained professional who could fully commit to the women. Despite the good intentions of the students whom I tried to recruit as volunteers, few had the time to commit, and others were wary of entering the ghetto.

Safety turned out to be one of the biggest issues affecting our original plan of attack. Before building could begin we had to install locks on the doors and windows of the shelter, and tint
the windows so that light would enter but no one in the ghetto could see into the building. The ghetto is incredibly dangerous, and the fact that we were working in one of the most violent parts of the city reared its ugly head time and time again. One of our women, who literally had nothing more than the clothes on her back, was robbed at gunpoint at our front door. Several times, I happened to look out the window and witness a robbery. However, despite the adverse conditions, with time and hard work, we were able to start building the computer center and library.

The success of the project was also aided by the assistance of another Mount Holyoke student, Danielle Forsythe, who had been working as an intern in Argentina, and with whom I was able to collaborate during the month of July. With Danielle’s help, work that would have taken me the whole summer to complete (such as stripping and painting the walls of the computer center) was finished during a few short weeks. Danielle’s presence also allowed us to go above and beyond the scope of the project and begin teaching English classes to the women. In addition to being incredibly fun, the English classes allowed me to witness the enthusiasm the women had for learning, which inspired me and drove me to work harder. Danielle also helped me with the challenging task of buying and transporting furniture to the ghetto in the back of a broken truck, which turned out to be a lot harder than I would have imagined. With Danielle’s help, the month of July was devoted to creating a beautiful library with black couches and easy chairs, a red and orange rug, a glass lamp, a cherry wood bookshelf full of books related to job searching and English and Computer skills, and cheery bright orange walls, complete with two paintings of flowers.

Project Rising Women was so successful that I have decided to stay in Buenos Aires, Argentina and turn it into a non-profit organization. My original vision of the project’s sustainability had centered around the idea that the center could be opened to local women in the slightly more economically secure neighborhood on the other side of the ghetto, who could pay a small sum to use the computers. Now that I will be permanently supervising this project, I have faith that in addition to opening the center to outside women, I will be able to raise more funding which will ensure the future of this project. Thanks to the additional support of my friends, family and teachers during the summer, I was able to raise over seven hundred dollars in private donations. Additionally, families from my hometown donated two computers and several enormous suitcases of women’s clothing to the project.

I am incredibly excited to continue work on the project; fundraising to make sure that the computer classes and Internet will be paid for in the future, and adding the exciting addition of English classes to the project. The women love the computer classes, and it has been unbelievably inspiring to watch them get excited about the project, from helping us to paint the walls of the library to learning how to type and use Google. From the beginning this project was about the Sol Naciente women and I could not have done it without them. Working with these women has changed my life, and I remain firmly dedicated to making sure that the current Sol Naciente residents and all the women who pass through the shelter in the future have available to them the means to learn skills that will help them grow.