

Street Kids in Guatemala City

The capital of this Central American nation, where a civil war has raged for more than 30 years and human rights are routinely violated, is overrun with tourists and street children.

The perfectly cone shaped volcanic mountains, the magnificent ruins of the Mayan civilization and one of the poorest economies in the region are like catnip to North Americans and Europeans whose dollars go a long way here. Hotels ranging from basic and dirt cheap all the way to posh cater to their whims and for those unwilling to trust their tummies to the local food, there is the familiar McDonalds, Taco Bell and Pizza Hut.

In the same place but in a seemingly different world are some 5000 to 10 000 children who live on the street (no reliable figures exist). They are runaways and throwaways. They don't go to school, they don't eat three well balanced meals a day and they don't get tucked into comfortable beds at night by loving parents.

Their beds are the concrete of the streets and their pillows are each other. Blankets are a rarity. The lucky ones might have a piece of cardboard but for most street kids, the only warmth at night comes from the cluster of their bodies pressed closely together. Food comes from garbage or what they can steal or purchase with money they beg. But more important than spending what little money they acquire on food is using it to buy glue which is usually manufactured in the United States. The glue, inhaled from a plastic bag, transports them to an oblivion where the hunger and the daily misery of their lives no longer exists - at least for a few hours.

Rarely do the worlds of the tourists and the street children collide and when they do it is usually by way of a light tapping on the tourist's arm and the mumbled words "por comer", "for food" which may or may not be true. It is easy to give a kid a few Quetzals (1 Quetzal is worth 20 - 25 cents depending on where you change your money) but glue only costs four and a half Quetzals for an afternoon's high.

Many in Guatemala City have little compassion or concern for the street children. They are nuisances, pests and sometimes even dangerous. Until recently, they were the victims of extra-judicial execution by members of the National Police.

he Murder of Nahaman Lopez

In 1991, Amnesty International released an Urgent Action Bulletin documenting the death of Nahaman Carmona Lopez.

Published reports and court testimony from witnesses indicate that four policemen found 13 year old Nahaman and nine other children -- ages 6 to 14 -- sniffing glue. The

officers seized the glue and poured it over the children's heads. Nahaman resisted and the officers, according to the witnesses, viciously kicked Nahaman rupturing his liver, breaking six ribs and two fingers and left him with open wounds on his face. It was said that Nahaman's screams could be heard for three blocks. Unconscious, Nahaman was taken to a state run hospital where surgery was performed to repair his liver. Nahaman died ten days later. No police report was ever filed.

It was through the efforts of Casa Alianza, an agency which provides services to street children, that the world learned of Nahaman's murder. Executive Director Bruce Harris led an investigation into the incident and brought formal charges against the four policemen. The first trial resulted in a conviction but on appeal, the conviction was thrown out. A second trial also resulted in a conviction and an appeal but, this time much to everyone's surprise, the conviction was upheld. Nahaman's killers will be in jail for 18 to 20 years.

Nahaman's last recorded words were "I only wanted to be a child and they wouldn't let me." His coffin was paid for by other street children.

Nahaman was not the first to be murdered by the police or by their friends in the Death Squads. In 1990 when Casa Alianza started counting, fourteen children were murdered; in 1991 there were four. So far, there have been no reports of street children murdered in 1992.

Founded 11 years ago as part of the New York based Covenant House, Casa Alianza is the only ray of hope for many of the street children in Guatemala City and several other Central American cities. Its extensive network of services includes "Street Educators" who befriend the children while they are on the streets, offer counseling and provide basic first aid for their cuts and bruises, real or imaginary. In a backpack, art supplies are carried so the kids can draw or paint. And then there is "Where's Waldo". The book fascinates the kids to the point that they will put aside their bags of glue and pour methodically through the pages of the book.

For children who want to leave the street, there is the "Refugio", a crisis center open twenty four hours a day seven days a week which offers a place to live, eat, shower, clean clothes, and receive counseling and adult support to begin the process of re-socialization.

"Leaving the street is difficult" says Eugenia Montorroso, Casa Alianza's Guatemala Director. "Children have total freedom on the street and in the Refugio there are rules and structure and expectations and," she added, "the longer a child has been on the street, the harder it is to leave it."

According to Montorroso, only about half of the children who enter the Refugio will stay for the several months it takes to get ready for the next level -- the Transition Home where the groups of children are smaller and expectations, which include school attendance, are higher. Once successful in the Transition Home, the child moves into a Group Home -- an even smaller group of children who live in ordinary houses scattered

throughout the city. Currently, Casa Alianza has two Transition Homes and twenty-eight Group Homes. They also operate a drug rehabilitation center. Some 550 children reside in these various facilities.

"Poverty and family factors" says Montorroso, drive kids out of families or cause them to be thrown out. "Sometimes it is alcoholism or physical or sexual abuse which causes a child to run away. Sometimes it is poverty, sometimes it is cultural. In our society men do not accept the children of another man in a family. Step children become slaves. Sometimes they are just abandoned to the streets because there is no food to feed them."

n The Street With the Street Educators

It is early in the morning and 24 year old Mary (it has been requested that, for security purposes, last names not be used), a volunteer from Vancouver, and Wellington, a 23 year old Guatemalan economics major at San Carlos University, are checking the contents of their backpacks and refilling the first aid kit. Wellington checks the battery on the walkie-talkie which is carried by all Casa Alianza staff when they are away from the facilities or offices. Harassment or worse actions by the police and death squads has been a problem.

We leave the Refugio and head south on a city bus that costs about a dime. We are going to a street nicknamed "El Hoyo", The Hole. It is an apt description.

Garbage litters the street and the sweet smell of chocolate from a nearby factory mixes with the odor of urine and feces. Plastic bags from yesterdays or last weeks glue are all over. On one side of one block more than two hundred discarded bags were counted. Flies are everywhere.

Children live here. On this street.

Soon, one by one, a dozen boys ages ten to fifteen gather around us. They are wary of the gringo with the cameras and some exclaim "no foto, no foto" and wave their arms as if to make the gringo go away. But the gringo doesn't go away and soon the lure of the cameras is too much. They all want their photograph taken and want to take photographs themselves. The camera is handled almost reverently.

All of the boys have bags of glue and when they are asked to put their glue in their pockets when they are handling the camera, they respond immediately and without question.

No one tries to steal the camera and they all patiently wait their turn. They also want to be close to the adults, to have an arm around their shoulder and, for some kids, cuddled. For, in truth, despite the grime that covers them and the rags they are dressed

in, despite their aggression and youthful bravado, despite the glue that has blitzed them to oblivion, they are very needy little boys.

Out of the back packs come paper, colored pencils and water color paints. A small boy is sent off with plastic cups to get some water. One boy has a cut that needs cleaning and dressing.

As they quiet down and begin to work on their drawings or paintings, Mary and Wellington quietly circulate among them, spending a few minutes with each boy. Mary says that the boys are subdued, almost depressed today. A couple of the older boys talk about how miserable their lives on the street are. They are not, however, willing to give up the street. This is their home, their family. It is where they feel they belong. And so amid the garbage, they stay.

There is one new boy, Jose. He came to the city from the highlands because there was no food. But El Hoyo is not what he thought the city would be like and he wants to get out. The resources available at the Refugio are explained to him and he elects to return with Mary and Wellington.

After about an hour and a half, it is time to leave. The boy's drawings are labeled with their name and date and collected -- the boys themselves have no place to keep them -- and will be saved at the Refugio for future study. The boys are unhappy with the ending of the visit by Mary and Wellington but they dare not show sadness. Their play becomes aggressive - the older ones intimidating the younger ones. Jose leaves the street, maybe for good, maybe not; but at least it is a start.

There are seven Street Educators and they work in only three zones, a very small portion of the city. Yet in the average week, they will visit with and provide a measure of comfort to more than 500 street children

ut For A Drink At The Bar El Ray

"Come have a drink with us" Bruce Harris said. "We are going out at 7:30." The bar we visited, Bar El Ray, wasn't much but, in some circles, it is well known and, if Harris gets his way, it will soon have a worldwide reputation.

Not very large, the decor consisted of a few colored lights and dozen or so mirrors on one wall. About twenty tables were scattered around and only half of the chairs were filled. The beer and Pepsi were over priced and all of the records in the juke box were scratchy. But this was of little concern to the customers - all men except for one boy about sixteen who was barely able to contain his excitement. The customers did not come the El Ray for the ambiance or the drinks.

They came for the girls and not one of the eight young women working the place tonight

appeared to be over thirteen years old. The youngest looked about ten and they all knew the ropes. They were real pros.

"Kimberly" -- at least that is what she said her name was, and only Kimberly as she would not divulge her last name -- was dressed in a semi-clean t-shirt and a short, red frilly skirt. Her physical development suggested that, at best, she was twelve or thirteen.

She came over to our table and flirted with us before taking our order of four Pepsis. When she returned with our drinks she subtly checked out if we seemed interested in anything more and when she realized that we didn't, she was quickly off to another table. Other girls came by and left as soon as it was apparent that we were tourists not interested in purchasing a few moments of cheap sex...

According to Harris, the girls cost ten Quetzals - about \$2.00 depending on where you changed your money. He said "the girls are expected to turn ten tricks a night" to pay for room and board at the bar. If they don't, he added "then they are charged and must make it up another night."

Harris explained that the girls are not being paid for their work and contends that this is slavery. He plans on going after the bar owners -- yes, there are many more places like this -- using Guatemala's labor laws.

"All of the evidence was turned over to the government months ago" he said, adding "they have done nothing." Harris would prefer that Casa Alianza not play a major role in closing down the bars where the girls sell their bodies. Rather, he would like the government of Guatemala to take the lead but so far that doesn't seem to be the case.

Nor does it seem to be the case that the girls at the Bar El Ray will be making their quota tonight. Business is very slow. But there is tomorrow and there will be more men. Bar El Ray is not unique. On the street nicknamed "El Hoyo" there are many like it. Most don't have names but they all have little girls turning tricks in order to survive.

he Boy the US Didn't Want

Dressed in a ragged red t-shirt and pants held tight around his thin waist by string, he was covered with grime and his hair was matted with filth. His blue Nike rip-off sneakers were falling apart. Maybe he was fourteen, maybe he was twelve. He stood there and said in perfectly fluent English: "Excuse me sir, could you please buy me something to eat?"

Meet Michael Valasquez, now fourteen years old. His real first name is Mynor but he prefers Michael. There is no reason why his English shouldn't be fluent because he lived in Arizona and Florida for ten years before the United States threw him away..

Michael got a pizza and told a little of his story. He was a year old when his father, Mynor Valasquez Sr., brought him to the US illegally. Valasquez Sr., said to be a machinist by trade, was working in the United States -- legally -- in order to save enough money and return to his native Guatemala.

Having a one year old must have been difficult for Valasquez because, as the records of the Real Life Children's Ranch indicate, Michael was immediately given to his grandmother in Phoenix, Arizona, where he lived for the next eight or nine years.

Of his natural mother, Michael only says "She is lost." For unexplained reasons, when Michael was about nine or ten, he was returned to a father he did not know and became a chronic runaway. "My Dad kept beating me," Michael says though this never came out in court records.

Michael came to the attention of the Juvenile Court, was made a ward of the court and placed in the Real Life Children's Ranch where the records reveal that he was a couple of grade levels behind in reading and math. The psychologist who evaluated him, however, was optimistic in his appraisal. "Michael was no angel but he was a warm, loving boy who actively sought out father figures and related well with them" said the Ranch's director, Scott Fraser.

After a year of making slow but steady progress at the Ranch, Michael's father petitioned the Court for a return of custody. He had saved \$40 000 while working in the US. and now wanted to return to Guatemala. The father who had never really been a father wanted to take his son back with him.

"The hearing took about fifteen minutes" said Mr. Fraser, "and the Judge ruled that Mike's dad could take Mike back to Guatemala." Fraser says that he and his wife were devastated. On June 1, 1991, Michael was forced onto an airplane at Miami International Airport and was brought, against his will, to a country he did not know.

Once in Guatemala City, Michael says "my Dad left me at the airport" though it also has been reported but not confirmed that Michael was deposited in Rafael Ayau - a government run children's home from which Michael escaped. Whichever the case, Michael's father continued the pattern of abandoning him.

Now Michael lives on the street near a market in Guatemala City's central zone. It is not a nice neighborhood. He spends his days sniffing glue to starve off the hunger and the memories. At night he sleeps on the streets with the other boys he hangs with. He begs for food and money. It is how he eats and how he buys his glue. He is distrustful of adults yet at the same time still seeks them out for affection. He is small for his age and is often picked on by older or bigger kids. Recently all of his clothes were stolen. He tries to be aggressive and obnoxious but he isn't very good at it. He is as out of place as a fish would be on a bicycle and he is struggling to survive in a place where the police kill, torture and routinely harass kids like him. And he is not being successful.

As for Michael's father, it is said that he is back in the United States and his specific whereabouts are unknown.

Michael says he would like to return to the US and more specifically to Scott and Doris Fraser. The Frasers would like to have him back. What stands in the way is the US government and Michael himself.

Eugenia Montorroso is familiar with Michael's plight and says "Before anyone can help Michael, Michael has to help himself. He must decide that he is worth helping, he needs to get off the street." Those who know Michael concur but Michael has been effectively taught not to trust nor to take risks.

So until Michael decides to help Michael, he is slowly dying on the streets of Guatemala City.

What will happen to Kimberly? Will Jose stay in the Refugio? Will Michael get off the street? What will happen to the kids who live in El Hoyo?

Their future is very dim. Many will die, many will wind up in jail, some will eventually get marginal employment. "Kids," says Harris, "are on the lowest rung of the ladder. Nobody gives a damn."

Even Casa Alianza has had its difficulties. Harris said "one of our workers was murdered and three others have been moved to Canada for their own safety. We have had bomb threats, death threats and the Refugio has been machine gunned. They have tried to get rid of us, kill us and shut us down and all that we want to do is help kids. We are not against the army, the police or the government (but) we are sick and tired of burying kids (and) we are not about to be patient. These things happen because no one is there to say 'this should not be.'"

- Brian Quinby, Aurora (Illinois), USA

Casa Alianza works with street kids in Mexico City, Guatemala City, Tegucigalpa, Honduras and in Panama City. Readers wishing to support their work with street children may do so by sending a tax deductible contribution to:

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