

Spring 2004

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# Leaving the Streets

Jane Slater  
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Spring 2004

## Methodology:

For the past month, I have been volunteering at Casa Alianza Nicaragua (C.A.N), a non-profit Catholic organization in Managua that works to rehabilitate adolescents between 13 and 18 years of age, who come from the streets and abusive homes. My intentions at C.A.N. were (1) to learn about the phenomenon of street children in Nicaragua and what organizations were doing to appease the situation, and (2) to offer my help as a volunteer at the center. Instead of conducting interviews, I believed that I would learn more about street kids, by working hands on in the center, participating in the activities and talking informally with the residents and staff members.

There are a number of different organizations, each with their own methodology doing incredible work with street kids in Nicaragua. I chose to volunteer at Casa Alianza Nicaragua (C.A.N.), a Catholic non-governmental organization with the capacity to house just under 100 adolescents. The reason I chose to volunteer at C.A.N. is simple: It does a great job publicizing on the internet, and it was the first organization for street kids in Nicaragua that I came across. Luckily, as it turned out, C.A.N. was a great resource for a number of reasons. First, C.A.N. has a team of “street educators” who go into the streets, markets, and parks to spend time with children and adolescents dwelling in these places. Although I only went out into the streets on three occasions with the street educators, I learned an incredible amount about who these kids are, why they are on the streets, and why it is so hard for them to leave the streets. Second, the C.A.N. methodology stresses the importance of group discussions. Everyday, there are at least three small group discussions that address the problems many of these adolescents face including poverty, addiction, and abuse. Through these discussions, I slowly began to see the world through the eyes of the adolescents residing

in the center. Third, C.A.N. is a well-funded organization with a staff of knowledgeable staff-members, as well as volunteers. While I did not conduct informal interviews, I learned an immense amount by asking questions throughout the day about the many points I did not understand.

I volunteered at Casa Alianza Nicaragua, Monday through Friday for about a month, from 8:30 a.m. until 3:30 p.m., and recorded my experiences in a journal each night. The majority of the information in this essay comes from my personal experiences at C.A.N., and a significant part comes from email correspondence with a former volunteer at C.A.N. and from informal discussions with C.A.N. staff members. The remaining information comes from studies conducted by non-governmental organizations including TESIS and UNICEF.

## Introduction

Currently thousands of children and adolescents live in the streets of Managua, and this phenomenon is moving rapidly into the smaller cities of Nicaragua. In other countries around the world, civil war is a leading cause of street children, but in Nicaragua, physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, often committed by the father or stepfather, combined with poverty is usually why children and adolescents turn to the street. Street kids range in age from about 5 or 6 years old to 18 years old, and many kids living in the streets have children of their own. The majority of street kids have families, but often claim their parents are dead to avoid thinking or talking about the abuse they have suffered. Time spent in the streets ranges from several days, to several months, to several years, and the longer children reside in the streets, the more difficult

their rehabilitation process becomes.<sup>1</sup> When stealing, distrust, and deceit become a mode of survival, it is difficult to unlearn this behavior.

There are two general categories of street children: *Niños de la calle* (children of the street) and *niños en la calle*, (children in the street.) *Niños de la calle* live and sleep in the streets and have broken ties to their family unit, while *niños en la calle* generally sleep at home but spend all of their waking hours in the street either because of vagrancy or because they are selling goods and services and have not broken ties with their family unit. According to a study conducted by TESIS, a Nicaraguan non-governmental organization, the majority of children and adolescents who work in the streets are connected to a family unit and attend school. Children selling products in the streets are generally working to help their parents afford food and clothing. They often have aspirations for the futures and receive the least hostility from society.<sup>2</sup>

It is not uncommon for female child workers to alternate between venders of various products and prostitution. Some boys who work in the streets turn to female prostitutes for sex, while some boys prostitute their own bodies. Children workers, especially females, who are out late at night in various transportation terminals selling goods and services are at serious risk for abuse.<sup>3</sup>

*Niños de la calle*, children and adolescents who have broken all ties with their family, generally live in groups with other street kids. They sleep in abandoned buildings, beneath bridges, in the entrances of buildings, public parks, and rough houses. They frequently commit minor robberies or resort to prostitution to survive. The

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<sup>1</sup> Rivas, Karelia. Educador, Interview re: street kids. 3 May 2004, Casa Alianza Nicaragua, Managua. Telephone: 228-6771

<sup>2</sup> Lic. Medrano Martinez, Danilo, Lic. Pauw, Josefina, Dra. Gorter, Anna in collaboration with UNFPA (Fondo de Población de las Naciones Unidas). "*Estamos en la calle*": *Un estudio sobre niños, niñas y adolescentes en situación de riesgo de Managua: su modo de vida, su sexualidad, ETS y SIDA*. Managua: Asociación TESIS, 1995. 16

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 16

majority of street children and adolescents who have broken all ties to their families are addicted to inhalants, most commonly shoe glue.<sup>4</sup>

There are about a dozen centers for street children in Managua, and others in different parts of the country, each with their own age requirements and methodology niches. The majority of street kids have found their way into one or more of the centers at one time or another and many bounce in-between centers. These kids are often referred to as *proyectoros*, because they move from one *proyecto*, or center, to another when it is convenient. All of the centers for street children in Nicaragua communicate with one another through an organized network, so that when the centers find a street kid who does not meet their particular age requirements or not suited for their particular methodology, they will take him or her to another organization that is more appropriate.<sup>5</sup>

### Street Kids and Prostitution

Children and adolescent prostitutes work during the day and night. According to a study conducted by TESIS, only seven out of forty locations where prostitution was taking place in Managua did not include minors under 18 years of age. Many young girls do not know or employ protection methods, and often they are infected with sexually transmitted diseases and are at high risk for HIV and pregnancy. A study conducted in León by the NGO Mary Barreda reported that the motives which lead adolescents to be sexually exploited include sexual violations at a young age, the influence of older friends, and deceptions.<sup>6</sup>

The dress, language, behavior, and income of children and adolescent sex workers vary depending upon their location. Child and adolescent sex workers addicted

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<sup>4</sup> Casa Alianza, "Devolviendo a los niños y niñas su infancia." Costa Rica: Casa Alianza, 2002

<sup>5</sup> Guggenheim, Paul. Interview by email re: street kids. 21 February 2004. Email: cedrito@hotmail.com

to inhalants and other drugs are located primarily in the *Mercado Oriental*, other markets marginal streets and neighborhoods, especially in Managua Antigua, and dumps. Some work near the *Mercado Roberto Huembes*, moving between bus terminals and the plaza *Ana Maria*. These young sex workers are usually poorly dressed and many are malnourished. The clientele in these regions are mostly informal workers, including trash collectors, vendors, and bus and taxi drivers and the sexual acts occur in obscure regions of the markets, neighborhoods or dumps.<sup>7</sup> During the day, these children and adolescents often live with other young *huelopegas*, (children and adolescents who inhale glue) or stay in rough houses. The owners of the rough houses convince the girls that the rough house is the safest place that they can count on. There they can wash up, clean their clothes, and consume drugs.

Minors that prostitute in the night near the *Estadio Nacional* and the *Mercado Ivan Montenegro* are slightly better dressed. Their clientele are mostly people of middle income including officers and workers and owners of small service shops, and sexual acts usually take place in cheap motels. There is visible competition between the minors in these areas and older sex workers.<sup>8</sup>

Minors that prostitute in recreational centers are well dressed and work for themselves. Their clientele are usually upper and middle class Nicaraguans and foreigners, and sexual acts usually take place in motels.<sup>9</sup> According to a study conducted by the NGO Mary Barreda, in León there exist recreational centers that promote the sexual exploitation of girls from the age of twelve. Often the clientele of these minors are bus drivers. Also, according to the same study, taxi drivers have been

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<sup>6</sup> UNICEF. *Análisis de Situación de la Niñez Nicaragüense*. Managua, Nicaragua. June 1999. 97-99

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Lic. Medrano Martinez, Danilo, Lic. Pauw, Josefina, Dra. Gorter, Anna in collaboration with UNFPA (Fondo de Población de las Naciones Unidas). "*Estamos en la calle*": *Un estudio sobre niños, niñas y adolescentes en situación de riesgo de Managua: su modo de vida, su sexualidad, ETS y SIDA*. Managua: Asociación TESIS, 1995. 16

known to transport minor sex workers to the houses of male clientele, receiving a commission. In Granada, according to *El Comité de la Niñez de Granada*, a network of taxis transports adolescent sex workers to tourists at the entrances of hotels or the Granada wharf. Furthermore, according to TESIS and MIFAMILIA of Chinandega, the existence of sexual exploitation is increasing in Somotillo, a municipal of Chinandega including the possible trafficking of girls, boys, and adolescents for sexual exploitation.<sup>10</sup>

According to a former volunteer at C.AN., approximately 70 percent of the female adolescents residing at Casa Alianza have been sexually exploited, although not necessarily commercially.<sup>11</sup> There are abuse and rape councilors who work with these girls at the center. In my own personal experience at Casa Alianza, I have not spoken to any of the girls about being sexually exploited, nor have I met adolescent prostitutes while participating in the street outreach program. On my first day of training in the street outreach program, we looked for a group of teenage prostitutes who usually hang out near the *Estadio Nacional*, but they were not there. I was told that they probably went to the market.

### Kids and Drugs

It is estimated that out of the 40 million street children that exist in Latin America, 70 percent are addicted to shoe glue, the most common drug consumed by street children in Latin America. The inhalation of shoe glue increases aggression, causes damage to the liver, lungs, and brain, and can cause sudden death. In addition to the severe physical effects of shoe glue, the addiction to this deadly inhalant traps

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 16

<sup>10</sup> UNICEF. *Análisis de Situación de la Niñez Nicaragüense*. Managua, Nicaragua. June 1999. 97-99

children in a vicious cycle of life in the streets. Children buy shoe glue from *zapaterías* (cobblers) and *ferreterías* (hardware stores) and transfer it to baby food jars and plastic bags to be inhaled.

Addiction to shoe glue and other drugs in Nicaragua is a growing phenomenon. During the 1980s, according to the National Police, only about 280 cases of drug addictions were reported annually. In the 1990s, the magnitude of child and adolescent inhalers, known as *huelopegas* in Nicaragua increased dramatically. In 1990, about 200 *huelopegas* existed in Nicaragua, 300 children *huelopegas* in 1993, and 940 in 1994. In 1995, the *Centro de Salud Francisco Buitrago* reported the existence of 1,300 *huelopegas* in the *Mercado Oriental* alone.<sup>12</sup> Today, the number of *huelopegas* is somewhere in the thousands, and the age at which children in the streets begin consuming shoe glue is decreasing. In the 1980s and early 1990s, children began inhaling shoe glue between 12 and 13 years. Since the late 1990s, children as young as 5 or 6 years old have been found inhaling shoe glue in order to mask their hunger and escape reality. In some cases, entire families are addicted.

As the number of *huelopegas* in Nicaragua continues to grow, the consumption of stronger drugs, including cocaine and crack is becoming more common among adolescents in the streets. In the 1980s and early 1990s, drug consumption among adolescents was largely limited to marijuana and shoe glue. Today, according to the *Ministerio de la Familia*, it is not uncommon for children and adolescents to roll joints mixed with marijuana and crack. In the Atlantic Coast, and especially Puerto Cabezas, the consumption of shoe glue has almost disappeared, only to be replaced with cocaine, marijuana, and crack.<sup>13</sup> Children and adolescents are becoming increasingly involved not only in the consumption of drugs, but in the cultivation, trafficking, and especially

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<sup>11</sup> Guggenheim, Paul. Interview by email re: street kids. 21 February 2004. Email: cedrito@hotmail.com

<sup>12</sup> UNICEF, *Análisis de Situación de la Niñez Nicaragüense*, Managua, Nicaragua. June 1999. 110

commerce of marijuana, cocaine, and crack. In Matagalpa, many kids who shine shoes or vend ice cream and bagged water, have been enticed into selling drugs, from which they receive the majority of their daily income.

Each time I went into the streets with the street outreach program of Casa Alianza Nicaragua, I encountered children and adolescents inhaling glue. The glue seemed to affect each kid differently. Some were impatient and aggressive. Others laughed at things that were not funny. All appeared totally disconnected from reality.

One day, I sat for a while on a park bench with a girl about 16 years old, inhaling glue from a baby food jar. She was tiny, clearly malnourished, with a dirty old stretched-out t-shirt. She wanted to know how many shirts I owned in the United States, and seemed to absolutely loathe her single pair of dirty clothes. She talked about leaving the streets and quitting glue, but her mind was somewhere else. We had a picture book from the Casa Alianza backpack about a princess. It was written in large letters for about second or third graders. She read aloud slowly, looking to me for confirmation after finishing each page. When I indicated that she had read well, she would smile and laugh like a small child, proud of her accomplishment.

Naively, when she expressed interest in leaving the streets, I got really excited, thinking that maybe I had inspired her to change her ways. When I told Lilliam, the street educator, about her interest in coming to C.A.N., I learned that she always claims that she wants to change, but when it comes down to it, she never leaves the streets. I found out later that her sister recently died of drug abuse and malnutrition.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 112

## Casa Alianza

Casa Alianza is a private non-profit Catholic NGO dedicated to the rehabilitation and defense of children and adolescents living in the streets of Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Mexico, and is one of the leading defendants of children's rights in Central America. Casa Alianza is the Central American branch of the New York based Covenant House, which was founded in 1968. Casa Alianza annually serves about 9000 children and adolescents.

The C.A.N. Residential Center is located near the *Estadio Nacional* in Managua. It is a large modern facility surrounded by pink walls that are lined with white flowers. It now has the capacity to house just under one hundred boys and girls, with slightly more capacity for boys because there are more boys than girls in the street. In order to enter the C.A.N. Residential Center, kids must be between 13 and 18 years and show a commitment to changing their lives. Before 2003, C.A.N. was divided into different centers around the city, including boys' and girls' residential centers, a transition house for boys, and a young mothers, (*niñas madres*) program. Today, only the *niñas madres* program remains separate.

## Casa Alianza's Street Outreach Program

The first goal of Casa Alianza is to meet and reach out to kids in the streets, parks, and markets of Nicaragua and establish a relationship based upon friendship, trust, and respect. The Casa Alianza street educators bring to the streets recreational activities such as Frisbees, and pick-up-sticks, and also learning tools including books and coloring materials, with the intention of alerting kids to the high-risk nature of life in the streets. The books and games serve as a way to establish an initial relationship

with the kids and also to take their attention away from their jar of shoe glue, if only a half an hour out of the day. The games are also a reminder to children and adolescents that spend all of their time in the mean and ugly streets, that they are kids, and kids play games. Once a relationship is established with the kids, the street educators attempt to talk to the kids about various themes associated with life in the streets, including addictions, sexuality, violence, and health. The principle objective is to teach kids that there are viable alternatives to life on the streets.

If a child or adolescent demonstrates a desire to leave the streets and join Casa Alianza or one of the other centers, the street educators work with the kids set small goals for themselves in order to begin the rehabilitation process. For example, a common goal that the educators set for kids that want to leave the streets is to stop inhaling glue and smoking marijuana for a certain period of time. If the kids show after a period of time, that they are meeting the goals and committed to changing their life, they are invited to enter the Pre-Community or Residential Program at Casa Alianza. If Casa Alianza is not appropriate for a particular kid because he or she is not between 13 and 18 years of age or because the C.A.N. methodology is not fitting, the street educators will seek another center.

Casa Alianza has a phrase that goes, “Casa Alianza is for all kids, but not all kids are for Casa Alianza.” Although everyone basically agrees on this statement, people have different opinions on which kids are right for C.A.N. Specific guidelines for which kids fall into the profile of Casa Alianza, including their age, history of addictions, history of abuse, abandonment, etc. However, an important question that staff members at C.A.N. struggle with is to what degree they should be working with at-risk adolescents, as opposed to those who have gone through extensive *callejizacion*, or adaptation to the street, and are more difficult to help. There often exists a tension

between the street educators and the educators in the Residential Center about which adolescents should be admitted into C.A.N. Those who work within the Center, generally seek prepared kids who understand at least the rules of C.A.N, some of the principals, and have made a commitment to try and stay. But those who work in the streets sometimes believe that admitting an adolescent who may shortly return to the streets has its worth if he or she becomes familiar with the C.A.N. environment. That way, if he or she at some point has a crisis in the streets, they will be more likely to turn to C.A.N.<sup>14</sup>

All staff members at Casa Alianza agree that in order to enter the Pre-Community or Residential Program, kids must be “ready.” The definition of “ready,” however, varies from person to person. Most people agree that an adolescent must decide he or she is willing to actively change his or her life, whether or not he or she fully understands what that entails. The desire to make an effort has to be there. He or she must also realize that the streets cause him or her harm. The street educators encourage the kids to look within and realize that a he or she is harming himself or herself by spending time in the streets. If kids do not understand this, then often they will not understand what they are committing themselves to by entering the C.A.N. Residential Center. This self-awareness, in addition to some ability to resist influences of others, and to understand that the Center is not an extension of the street, but means to actively change their lives, all contribute to an adolescent’s readiness to enter C.A.N.<sup>15</sup>

The street outreach program also has a family component. Whenever possible, the street educators meet with the parents of street kids, in order to discuss their options for the future. On my second day in the streets, Lilliam, the street educator, told me that

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<sup>14</sup> Guggenheim, Paul. Interview by email re: street kids. 1 May 2004. Email: cedrito@hotmail.com

<sup>15</sup> Guggenheim, Paul. Interview by email re: street kids. 1 May 2004. Email: cedrito@hotmail.com

we were going to meet with the mother of Roberto,\* a boy about 18 years old who seemed to be the leader of a network of street kids in the park. At this point, I did not even know that street kids *had* parents, and found myself once again, extremely confused. As we were leaving the park to go to his house, a fight broke out between Roberto and another boy. Roberto, who was extremely high, picked up a large rock and threw it at the other kid, fortunately missing. The fight was apparently over a box full of puppies, which came with us on the bus to Roberto's house.

The bus dropped us off in the poorest neighborhood I had probably ever stepped foot in. We walked down a dirt road, the air so hot and filled with dust, I felt as if I was suffocating. His house was a small shanty made out of metal slabs, surrounded by a small dirt yard which held several chairs, a water pump, and a tree. Roberto's mom welcomed us and brought us each a glass of water, which I politely refused in order to avoid diarrhea for the next two weeks. Lilliam and Roberto's mom chatted for awhile about Roberto's options. They discussed several centers Roberto could enter for rehabilitation as Roberto's mother braided her daughter's hair for school. Roberto seemed too high to even comprehend reality. He was difficult to communicate with and laughed at things that were not funny. It seemed as if he could snap at any minute, becoming angry and violent. Roberto has probably undergone an extensive amount of *callejizacion*, and would probably not last long in the Casa Alianza Residential Center.

#### The Casa Alianza Nicaragua Residential Center

When an adolescent between the ages of 13 and 18 demonstrates a strong desire to leave the streets and actively change his or her life and C.A.N. educators agree that he or she is ready to begin the Casa Alianza rehabilitation process, he or she is

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\* fake name

immediately taken to the C.A.N. Residential Center where he or she will receive a shower, clean clothes, and hot meal. The Casa Alianza rehabilitation process is based upon five principles: Urgency, Sanctuary, Communication of Values, Structure, and Option. The meaning and importance of these principles are discussed with the adolescents virtually everyday at the Residential Center, and it is imperative, according to the Casa Alianza philosophy, that every adolescent understand why these principles are important. The reasons we have discussed are the following:

#### Urgency and Sanctuary

When adolescents leave the streets and enter Casa Alianza, they are in a state of urgency. They have been living in a constant state of fear, distrust, insecurity, and often abuse and addiction. Upon entering the Residential Center, adolescents automatically receive sanctuary. This includes a hot meal, shower, clean clothes, refuge, and respect. These are the basics from which the rehabilitation process can begin.

#### Communication of Values

Robbery and mistrust are often required to survive in the streets, and adolescents must unlearn these behaviors in order to reenter society as productive members. Casa Alianza attempts to teach adolescents that the values they have learned in the streets are not acceptable or healthy. Educators at Casa Alianza try to instill in adolescents the value of interpersonal relationships based upon unconditional love, trust, respect, and honesty.

#### Structure

One of the most important values that Casa Alianza emphasizes is structure. In the streets, life is unstructured. Kids often do not know where they will find their next meal or even where they will sleep. The daily regimen at Casa Alianza is extremely structured. From five o'clock in the morning until 9 o'clock at night, the adolescents are

required to participate in all of the activities, which include group meals, informal classes and discussions, cleaning, and free time.

### Option

The success seen by Casa Alianza requires the principle of option. That is, kids leave the streets and enter the Pre-Community or Residential Program when they are ready and willing to actively change their lives. Kids are free to leave Casa Alianza when they desire, because in any rehabilitation process, the first and most important step is recognizing that you have a problem, and deciding that you are going to work to overcome it. The rehabilitation process at Casa Alianza is intense and sometimes rigorous compared to life in the streets, and if kids are not committed to changing the course of their life, and defining their own future, then the Casa Alianza rehabilitation process will not work for them. Many adolescents return to the streets several times before becoming fully committed to the rehabilitation process.

### The Rehabilitation Process

The rehabilitation process at Casa Alianza consists of three different components. (1) The Pre-Community program, for adolescents seeking the help of Casa Alianza but not yet ready to reside in the center; (2) The Residential Program; and (3) Family Reintegration or Independent Life.

### Pre-Community Program

Adolescents that wish to change their lives, but suffer from a strong addiction to drugs or for other reasons are not ready to leave the streets completely, are enrolled in the Pre-Community program. The Pre-Community program is a non-residential day program, which serves to reduce the risks of daily life in the streets and help adolescents

overcome an addiction. The Pre-Community program attempts to stabilize adolescents and prepare them for life in the Residential Program or, if the C.A.N. methodology is not appropriate for a particular adolescent, for life in more fitting center. Adolescents enrolled in the Pre-Community Program participate in all of the daily activities at the Residential Center, learning about the risks associated with life in the streets, the rules of Casa Alianza and why these rules are important, general hygiene, sexuality, and addiction. Educators and psychologists work with these adolescents individually and in groups to overcome their addiction, including informal discussions and Narcotics Anonymous meetings. Generally, the kids participate in the Pre-Community program for about 30 days until they enter the C.A.N residential program, or another center. Some adolescents choose to return to the streets.

One day, I sat in on one of the Narcotics Anonymous Meetings, led by one of the male educators. He began by welcoming two new adolescents to the group, and following each introduction everyone would recite, "Welcome so and so." The meeting was conducted almost exactly by the book. The educator even announced that in order to maintain anonymity, no last names would be used. This seemed rather silly to me, considering that everyone lives together and already know each other's last names. After the new people were introduced, everyone recited a prayer for those who have lost their lives to an addiction. Afterwards, the kids took turns reading passages from the Narcotics Anonymous booklet about the 12 steps and the Narcotics Anonymous methodology, which included surrendering your life to God. They talked a lot about self-acceptance and coming to terms with your faults. That, a drug addiction not simply a dependency upon drugs, but also a cycle of covering up and drowning your faults and problems. The educator presented a metaphor to the adolescents comparing the choice to overcome an addiction to the choice to go to the dentist for a toothache, even though

you are scared and know it will be painful. Several of the girls used this time to apply makeup and tweeze their eyebrows, and one boy slept, but from what I could tell, they generally took it seriously. After about an hour discussion, we ended the session with another prayer.

### Residential Program

Adolescents who choose to go through the C.A.N. rehabilitation process are enrolled in the Residential Program anywhere from several months to several years. Time spent in the program depends upon the amount of *callejizacion*, or adaptation to the street, they have undergone in the streets; the length of time they have lived in the streets or without a family structure; their ability to influence other kids; their vulnerability to be influenced by others; their overall capacity for maturity; and what kind of living environment is waiting for them outside of the Center.<sup>16</sup> In order to complete the C.A.N. rehabilitation process, adolescents must pass through three distinct levels. Each level grants the adolescents more personal responsibility and freedom within the C.A.N structure.

Level 1 is for adolescents entering the Residential Program from Pre-Community directly from the streets or from a dysfunctional home. This time is used the adolescent to become stabilized. It provides a safe space for the residents to demonstrate personal changes, including drug detoxification, basic personal hygiene, showing respect for others, shedding the desire to return to the streets, reducing violent and aggressive behavior, etc.<sup>17</sup> During this period they learn the importance of participating in the activities at C.A.N., including “the concept of the day”, groups discussions, meal times, cleaning, and other activities. This requires that the adolescents

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<sup>16</sup> Guggenheim, Paul. Interview by email re: street kids. 1 May 2004. Email: cedrito@hotmail.com

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

adjust to living by a structured schedule, as opposed to the endless freedom to which they become accustomed in the streets. Additionally, adolescents learn how to acknowledge and work through their problems and how to set goals for their rehabilitation and future success. Usually after at least 3 weeks they are able to visit their homes accompanied by an educator from the Family Reintegration Program. Adolescents at C.A.N. usually spend 30 to 45 days in Level 1.

Adolescents in Level 2 have shown enough responsibility to begin to take advantage of the opportunities offered by Casa Alianza. These include enrolling in school, taking a vocational course if they are 15 (or very mature 13 or 14 year-olds), beginning to participate in activities like chorus or dance, and begin to spend some weekends at their family's house. Adolescents in Level 2 continue to participate in the daily activities when they are not at school or at vocational training. Level 2 usually takes 30 to 50 days to complete.

Level 3 is for adolescents who have demonstrated some form of real stability. Promotion to Level 3 often means nothing in day to day activities or opportunities for the adolescents, but it serves more as a confidence booster, to let the kids know they are on the right track. Kids in Level 3, who have few options outside of C.A.N., can spend months or even years in Level 3. Adolescents with viable family options in Level 3 begin spending more time on home visits, and working more frequently within the Family Reintegration Program.<sup>18</sup>

#### The Role of the Family in the Residential Program

Virtually all of the adolescents living at Casa Alianza Nicaragua have families, although many who have lived and slept in the streets have broken all family ties. The

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid

majority of CAN residents have been mistreated by one or more of their family member, usually the father or step-father, and often claim that their parents are dead to avoid thinking or talking about the abuse they have suffered at home. When an adolescent enters the residential program, his or her family generally does not know of their child's whereabouts for the first month, although some adolescents seeking help from Casa Alianza arrive accompanied by their parents. After about a month in the center, C.A.N notifies the family members, if they are not already aware, that their son or daughter is residing at Casa Alianza. Family members can visit their son or daughter any day of the week at the Residential Center, and kids can leave the center, usually over the weekend, to spend time with their family. Following each visit, a staff member meets with the adolescent in order to ascertain whether or not the visit was comfortable. If the adolescent reports that any mistreatment occurred, visits with the family member will be discontinued. No adolescents residing in Casa Alianza are obligated to see their family.<sup>19</sup>

### Family Reintegration and Independent Living

The Family Reintegration Program is based upon the belief that the family is the best alternative to life on the streets. The personal at C.A.N. meet with the families of residents in order to evaluate the possibility of family reintegration, following the rehabilitation process at the Residential Center. Staff members work with family members in order to improve family dynamics and promote the attention of health and education. When the immediate family (mother or father) is not a possible or recommendable option for an adolescent, C.A.N. seeks out extended family members. If there is no family available for an adolescent to turn to, he or she will remain in the

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<sup>19</sup> Rivas, Karelia. Educador, Interview re: street kids. 3 May 2004, Casa Alianza Nicaragua, Managua. Telephone: 228-6771

center, or if he or she is approaching 18 years of age and demonstrates enough maturity, will begin the Program of Independent Living.

Adolescents are officially reintegrated into their families after several months or more of weekend family visits. The Family Reintegration program is intended to provide two or more years of attention to former residents of C.A.N., who have returned to their families' homes. In the past five years, C.A.N. has reintegrated between 200 and 300 adolescents. Adolescents in the Family Reintegration program can take advantage of C.A.N.'s resources, including psychologists and addiction counselors. When C.A.N. opened five years ago and had more money, families of reintegrated adolescents automatically received a shopping bag full of basic foods and cleaning products each month to help lessen the burden for struggling families. While this practice helped keep families in touch with C.A.N. it also created dependency, which for practical reasons could not be maintained forever.<sup>20</sup>

Every other Saturday from 9 a.m. until 2 p.m. at the Residential Center, C.A.N. invites the parents of adolescents in the residential program, *niñas madres* program, family reintegration program to attend the School for Parents. Each session, different themes are presented, including parent-children relationships, marital relationships, abuse, sexual exploitation, drugs, and addiction. One day every other week certainly does not instantly transform dysfunctional families into the perfect home, however, many mothers and fathers have reported that they learn from the meetings and made changes.<sup>21</sup>

The success rate of the Family reintegration is extremely hard to track. The vast majority young adults who complete the entire 2-year reintegration process do not return to the streets; however, completing the rehabilitation and family reintegration

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<sup>20</sup> Guggenheim, Paul. Interview by email re: street kids. 1 May 2004. Email: cedrito@hotmail.com

process is challenging for most. Sometimes adolescents live with their families for several months, attending school, and keeping up with their vocational course, and then for whatever reason they relapse, resorting to drugs and/or the streets and return to Casa Alianza. Other adolescents have a difficult time reintegrating with their families, but things eventually work themselves out. Some adolescents show mixed success. They might be home, attending school, and even working, but at the same time smoking a lot of pot, dealing drugs, or involved in theft, etc.<sup>22</sup> For some adolescents this is just a stage that will pass, and for others it will lead to great problems in their future.

### The Program of Independent Living

The Program of Independent Living is geared towards adolescents approaching or over 18 years of age, who do not have family alternatives. For many C.A.N. residents, Casa Alianza becomes their family, and as they approach 18 years of age they have a hard time leaving. Young adults in the Independent Living program remain in touch with their C.A.N. advisor and attend meetings with other C.A.N. graduates pursuing independent lives. I spoke with one male of 21 years in the Independent Living program. He spent two years at Casa Alianza and another three years in the Independent Living program. Since finishing the rehabilitation process, he obtained a job in construction and bought his own house, where he currently lives. When I told him that I was from the United States, he asked me if he could write down a message for me to bring back. This is what he wrote:

May 4, 2004

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<sup>21</sup> Rivas, Karelia. Educador, Interview re: street kids. 3 May 2004, Casa Alianza Nicaragua, Managua. Telephone: 228-6771

<sup>22</sup> Guggenheim, Paul. Interview by email re: street kids. 10 May 2004. Email: cedrito@hotmail.com

I rose from the flames that were in the street because the life in the street is very painful but like I saw it, it was very hard. They hit you to steal your jar of glue or to steal your clothes or money. I had to rob, but was always afraid because I did not have anyone to talk to, father or mother. The worst that happened to me was to have sexual abuse and afterwards many beatings in the markets and the park. And the worst was that I didn't have a father or mother. But afterwards, I had those people who had values [Personal and residents of Casa Alianza]. Who took me from the streets and I saw that I had many problems, with God, and had the courage to attain my future. And the organism that helped me was that I had to study regeneration and education and life values. But now...I have a better life....

Signed, Freddy Josue

#### Young Mothers (Niñas Madres) Program

The Niñas Madres Program, which is separate from the main Residential Center, houses young mothers and expecting mothers between 13 and 18 years. Currently nine adolescent girls live in the Niñas Madres residence, eight with one or more small children and one expecting mother. Towards the back of the residence there are about four bedrooms with bunk beds and cribs. In addition there is a small kitchen, office, *pila* room for the girls to wash their clothes, large living room with rocking chairs and a dining table, and a TV. room. The Niñas Madres residence provides a safe environment for young mothers with no where else to turn. The girls learn about how to take care of their children and themselves, and some attend school and vocational courses during the day.

At the *Niñas Madres* center, I met a 15 year-old girl who was eight months pregnant. She sat for long periods at a time, sketching flowers, suns with smiley faces,

hearts, and other simple designs. Then, with a set of colored pencils, she contently colored in pages and pages of cheerful child-like designs that she had sketched previously. I asked her if she like living at Casa Alianza, and she answered no. When I asked her the reason, she told me it was because she missed her mother. I could not even image the fear and pain she must feel to be fifteen-years old away from her parents, and about to give birth. Something about the image of this quiet 15 year-old child, soon to be mother, shading flowers, hearts, and smiling suns stays with me.

## Conclusion

The 15 year-old girl in the *Niñas Madres* Program is not the only adolescent I have met that sketches suns, flowers, and hearts. In fact, there is something disturbingly innocent about the pictures drawn by most of the street kids I have met at Casa Alianza. Their life experiences, which often include poverty, abuse, and drug addiction have left them anything but innocent, and yet at 15, 16, and 17 years old, they draw the world with bright colors and a sun smiling down.

I have often wondered, where is their anger? Where is their disgust for the world that has allowed them to sleep in the streets, to inhale glue in order to mask their hunger and escape reality, and to sell their bodies? How can they draw a smiling sun and multi-colored flowers after spending every waking hour in the hot and dusty streets of Managua? Where is their resentment?

I think that, in a way, the street kids I have met at Casa Alianza *are* innocent. Casa Alianza does a great job working with adolescents to overcome drug addiction, employ basic hygiene, recognize and cope with a history of abuse, and plan for their futures. However, Casa Alianza does not teach adolescents that the phenomenon of street children does not exist in every country and has not always existed in Nicaragua.

The majority of the adolescents do not think about the politics and history that led to the rise of street children over the past fifteen years. Most know little about the Revolution that was fought in their country, to improve the lives of poor people. They do not understand how neo-liberal economic policies have channeled Nicaraguan money out of the country and into the hands of foreign elites.

Casa Alianza recognizes that “poverty and global economic imbalance contribute to the street children’s suffering, the organization has chosen to focus its resources on offering these children the option to improve their lives by offering free sanctuary, rehabilitation services, vocational training, and legal aid.” Perhaps if street kids were taught that there is a connection between their life in the streets and the political and economic measures taken by their government over in the last decade in response to pressure from the United States, they would not be drawing smiling suns and colorful flowers. It is important, for the future of Nicaraguan youth that kids learn about the larger picture. Not only should these adolescents be taught how they can turn their own lives around, but how they can turn around the future of their own country.

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