

¡Celebrating our 20th Anniversary This Year!

Fall 2014

News from the Nicaragua Street Kids Project



Sí a la Vida Evolves to Address Social Changes in Nicaragua

Several years ago the staff at *Sí a la Vida* began noticing that there were fewer homeless kids around the markets in Managua -- fighting over food, sniffing glue and living in misery. The population that *Sí a la Vida* traditionally served seemed to be disappearing.

It soon became apparent, however, that the kids who used to be homeless were often now vagrants during the day, still hanging out on the streets and vulnerable to many kinds of trouble, but living at home with some family member at night. And it became clear that many of these kids still suffered from family violence, emotional abandonment, poverty, school truancy and other problems that *Sí a la Vida* addresses. (cont. on page 2)

Kids, Staff, and a Volunteer (in plaid shirt) who is loaned to us by The Pulsera Project to teach English



Fernando and Edwin Pozo

A spotlight on two brothers at the project

Edwin Pozo joined *Sí a la Vida* in January 2013. At age 15, he was referred to the Managua center by The Pulsera Project, which had been teaching him to make hammocks in his hometown, Chichigalpa, in the north of Nicaragua. The training took place in the little spare time he had, since he was attending school as well as working full time in the fields with his mother.

Edwin was referred to *Sí a la Vida* because he was being exploited as a child worker in the fields, and because he was vulnerable to gang activity in his hometown, where many kids are lost to the gangs or subject to their violence. It also turned out that he had skill and interest in making hammocks, which meant that he might be able to teach other kids at *Sí a la Vida* to make hammocks.

His family situation had never been easy. Edwin's father had been a violent drunk and eventually died of alcoholism and health complications related to working in the sugar cane fields. On many occasions, Edwin tried to defend his mother and was beaten up himself. He grew up in these difficult conditions with three younger brothers and an older sister (now with a family of her own). Early in his life, Edwin was forced to become overly responsible and take on the role of head of the family.

A highlight of Edwin's first year at *Sí a la Vida* was when he earned enough money from making and selling *pulseras* to buy a makeshift door for his (cont. on page 3)

Why do we still make pulseras?

For many of us who have worked with the project for a long time, there seem to be *pulseras* hiding everywhere. In our kitchen drawers, falling out of our coat pockets and the trunks of our cars. That's because we are always trying to sell them in one way or another. Or because we may have bought more than we needed for Christmas presents. Or because we just like this one or that one and have bought it.

And that is not to mention the ones we most always have tied to our wrists!

We have been asked at times why the boys don't make other handicrafts that can be sold. Why are we still doing *pulseras* after 20 years? We are, in fact, branching out into hammock making and other crafts. But *pulseras* will probably always be our "signature" product. This is because they serve some very important functions at *Sí a la Vida*.

Often, *pulsera* making is the first way that we engage a new boy coming into the project. It is a kind of "occupational therapy" that helps him deal with his anxiety at being in a new environment, and gives him an activity he can focus on.

Pulsera making is creative. Kids develop new designs and teach them to each other. It helps them learn the value of careful work, concentration on a task, patience and perseverance. We have



Some of our new designs!

educadores at both sites of the project who help the kids learn to make *pulseras*, review their work, and make suggestions about how they can do better.

Pulsera making has another great advantage: it is portable. It is done entirely in the hands, so kids can wander around the project, socialize, listen to talks, and even do them in bed before they go to sleep. And it is a personal activity - an activity that highlights the skill of one particular kid.

Probably even more important to the kids, making *pulseras* earns them extra spending money. We provide for all their basic needs - food, clothing, shelter. We don't have extra money for allowances or special treats. But we pay the boys for each *pulsera*, and they use the money to buy little extras, to take something home when visiting their families, to get that special t-shirt, or to take their girlfriend out to eat!

We, then, sell the *pulseras* to help support the project. This has been an important source of funds for the project since its early days. However, it has become more important in recent years because of the generous participation of The Pulsera Project. They have been buying large quantities of our *pulseras* and selling them in schools all over the U.S. as part of a module on fair trade and sustainability. We are very grateful to them for this significant addition to our operating funds.

And that's why we still do it!

Sí a la Vida Evolves to Address Social Changes in Nicaragua (cont. from page 1)

Surprisingly, at the same time family members of kids in the local neighborhood began coming to *Sí a la Vida* to ask for help for their children. This was a major change, since in the past the residents of the Villa Austria were contemptuous of the project, referring to the boys in it as *huelepegas* (glue sniffers). Now they see the project as a possible hope for their own children who are not going to school, getting into trouble, and becoming vulnerable to gang recruitment and violence. Since most Nicaraguan parents have to work long hours every day, it is difficult to supervise a child who is out of control.

Sí a la Vida also has become better known to other social service organizations as an important resource, and these organizations have begun to make referrals of kids in distress. Because of these many referrals, *Sí a la Vida's* initial intake process, the formal way kids are brought into the program, has broadened into a screening and referral process that also serves the community. For example, boys who are addicted to drugs are referred to drug treatment centers. Others with severe mental problems are evaluated and referred to mental health agencies. Some "harder cases," kids who have progressed too far with anti-social behaviors, sadly cannot be helped in the relatively open environment of *Sí a la Vida*. We make referrals for them as well. We are only able to accept about 50% of the kids who come to us. Often we

can't accept kids because we just don't have the room.

Thus *Sí a la Vida* still helps vulnerable and unsupported kids with histories of trauma and unstable family situations. These are the same kinds of kids that have in the past benefited from a period of safety and stability, regular schooling, supportive therapy and family intervention. What is changing is that these are no longer "street kids" in the traditional sense. They are "kids in distress" or "kids at risk." Our motto - "From the world of the streets to a world of respect" - is still true, but we may eventually restate it to better convey our mission of supporting troubled kids and their families. Your help is still vitally needed by ALL of the kids we continue to serve - kids who won't get help without *Sí a la Vida*.

*Professor Kathleen Morrison
Visits Sí a la Vida to Help in Our
Quest for Foundation Grants*



Kathleen and Boys from Managua Center

Kathleen Morrison, a noted expert on programs for street kids in Latin America and a retired professor from Stanford University, visited *Sí a la Vida* last Spring. She came to help us develop criteria for measuring the success of our program. We know it works, but we need concrete measurements to prove our success to the foundations from whom we seek help. She made this visit on her own initiative as part of a yearly trip she makes to Latin America. Thanks, Kathleen!

New Short Video on Sí a la Vida

David Adler has created a 10-minute video to introduce *Sí a la Vida* to people unfamiliar with the project. You can see it on line. Go to YouTube and type in:

To a World of Respect: *Sí a la Vida*

David is a good friend to *Sí a la Vida* and has worked hard on his own time to produce this video which we plan to use not only on our web site, but at fund raising events in the future. Thanks, David!

Credits: For producing this annual newsletter many thanks to: Alexis Bonoff stett and David Adler.



These are just a few of the many boys you are helping with your donations to *Sí a la Vida*. Please be generous and give them a fighting chance!

*Fernando and Edwin Pozo
(cont. from page 1)*

(Cont. from page 1) mother's house. Characteristically, he had been worried about the lack of security for his family, living in a home without a door.

Edwin's mother visits the project when she can get to Managua, participating in the family counseling that *Sí a la Vida* offers. She trusts the project to the point that she asked for her second son Fernando to be enrolled.

Fernando's story is a little different from Edwin's. Now 13 years old, he was born during the worst period of family violence and carries both physical and psychological scars to this day. He also has significant learning difficulties. With the help of *Sí a la Vida's* dedicated tutors, he is beginning to overcome these setbacks and continue his education.

Now both boys are at *Sí a la Vida's* center on Ometepe Island. Seeing them working and playing, you wouldn't be aware of the earlier difficulties in their young lives. Fernando appears to be the more carefree of the two. Edwin still carries his quality of seriousness and responsibility. For example, when asked what food they both like best, Fernando immediately said "Hamburgers!" - a food not normally served at *Sí a la Vida*. Edwin, on the other hand, quietly answered, "I am happy with all the food that they serve me" - and he truly seems to be.

Both are going to school, playing sports and interacting well with the other kids. They are also stabilizing emotionally after their traumatic early childhoods. For this brief time at *Sí a la Vida*, they are finally able to be kids.

It will not be long before they will again have to cope with the intense difficulties of living in a very poor country. But they will do so fortified with the benefits of being part of this caring and effective program. They will be prepared for their future with a better education, a stronger sense of self-confidence, a greater emotional resilience, and assured that they have the continued support and assistance that *Sí a la Vida* offers its graduates.

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“ From the World of the Streets to a World of Respect”

Staff Corner:

Juana Hury Gutiérrez, Our General Coordinator Extraordinaire

One of our most valued staff members, Juana Hury Gutiérrez, known by staff and residents alike as Juanita, has worked at the project for 18 years. She began as an instructor in handicrafts, dance and music in 1996, but a year later she became the project's Social Worker. Initially her job involved searching out needy kids in Esteli province to the North. But then she became involved in the overall process of bringing kids to the project. As Social Worker, she also had responsibility for finding the family members of the kids and assessing the possibilities for counseling and reconciliation.

She has unparalleled knowledge of the dramatic circumstances that the boys faced before they arrived at the doors of *Sí a la Vida*. These include physical and emotional abuse, economic exploitation, vagrancy, psychological trauma, learning difficulties, bullying, and abandonment. She also has in-depth familiarity with the boys' complicated family histo-

ries, including alcoholism and substance abuse, domestic abuse, and extreme poverty. Juanita's knowledge and her skill combined to make her a highly effective Social Worker. Her profound understanding and unflappable approach were and still are remarkable.

Juanita assumed the role of General Coordinator in 2012, the culmination not only of her own personal achievements but also the natural development of the organization. Until that point, *Sí a la Vida* had one coordinator for the Managua site and a separate coordinator for the Ometepe site. Divided in two, the project lacked a chief executive. With Juanita's appointment by the board as the first General Coordinator, *Sí a la Vida* gained an excellent leader, and the project began to function as one organization with two coordinated facilities.

Along with her clinical skills, Juanita brings excellent administrative skills and to the job of General



Coordinator. She can write a concise but thorough grant request, supervise and support her employees at both centers, and still have time to play the guitar for the boys, celebrating each important event that comes along.

Nearly two years ago we welcomed the birth of her son Diego, the newest member of the *Sí a la Vida* family. We are truly thankful for her presence at *Sí a la Vida*!

Please Consider an additional donation to *Sí a la Vida* in this Anniversary Year!