

Interview

Autor: Derrin Pinto (Minneapolis 29 de Mayo 2008).

1.) Tell me about Voces para Latinoamerica? What kind of things does the organization do? What do you do as director?

1. I have been working for the past eleven years in the planning and development of Voces para Latinoamérica, an international organization based in Spain. Voces carries out activities in Bolivia, Peru, Colombia, Argentina, United States and Spain. Our main focus is on the children and adolescents that are in the process of being marginalized by society, especially street children, which are currently estimated to be 90 million (including countries like Spain, U.S., Russia, etc.). The four pillars of the organization are: to raise the level of social awareness through the teaching and dissemination of information about how local and individual decisions can have a global impact; the investigation of the different causes, both on a local and global level; the formation and training of technicians (in the areas of education, psychotherapy, and prevention); the prosecution of those responsible for ethical or legal violations of human rights.

As director, my duties include: coordinating the different projects, supervising the work in the streets, collaborating with the local offices of Voces in the various countries to help them with their particular needs, establishing institutional alliances, and searching for financial support.

2.) Explain a bit about your concern for children and teenagers living in the streets in Latin America.

One of my primary concerns is the lack of institutional support and political policies, on the international level, that focus on the millions of children living in these conditions. There is a complete shortage of specialized attention (preventive, educative, and therapeutic) for these children. For example, the solution is much more complicated than simply offering food and shelter to these children. Another concern is the aggressive nature of the Neoliberal economic system that inevitably ends up marginalizing and fragmenting society, one of the basic factors that has led to the severity and extensiveness of the current situation.

What situation has given rise to this problem?

1. The egoism of the alleged “developed countries”.
2. The high level of exploitation and extortion of transnational corporations in the so-called “third world” countries.
3. All the clandestine activities that benefit from this situation (child pornography, trafficking of organs, prostitution, pedophilia, exploitation of child labor, “el sicariato” (children and adolescents who, in order to survive, are sucked into a life of assassinating for money), etc.

What kind of conditions do these children face?

The situation has now reached dimensions of a third-generational problem; that is, there are now children who are born in the streets that have 15-year old parents and 30-year old grandparents that have lived their whole life in the streets. The problems that these children face include:

1. The high level of police aggression and brutality.
2. The pervasiveness of addictions to: glue, alcohol, marijuana, among other substances. (The damage caused by sniffing glue, which includes 'toluene', a substance that damages nerves, muscles and fatty tissues in the body, is especially worrisome).
3. The amount of street violence among the children and gangs.
4. The extreme levels of malnutrition, exposure to pollution, lack of medical attention, etc.
5. The absolute rejection and alienation by society and institutions, which can lead to suicide.

How can the problem be solved or helped?

On the global level, the international institutions (such as the UN and UNICEF) would need to take this problem seriously, which includes investigating and prosecuting the responsible parties. On the national and local level, more resources would need to be dedicated to preventing the factors leading to the problems, educating our citizens, raising awareness, training workers, and intervening. On the individual level, we would have to stop supporting the transnational companies that engage in the exploitation of child labor, become more aware of the impact that Neoliberalism has in our community, and support or collaborate with organizations dedicated to helping street children.

3.) Tell me about an incident in your work with children and teenagers in the street or with Voces para Latinoamerica that had a great impact.

One recent experience would be when I was in Pereira, Colombia, where I witnessed a mass grave of 200 children and adolescents that had been raped, tortured, and chopped into pieces. Then it's really beyond comprehension trying to come to terms with the fact that the government has no interest in investigating the matter since many of these unidentified children appeared to be street children.

Why did you decide to come speak at Carleton?

As I mentioned previously, one of the goals of Voces is to raise awareness of this problem throughout the world. Giving talks at schools and universities throughout the world gives me the chance to share my experiences with children and young adults from a variety of backgrounds. Since a liberal arts college like Carleton is a community that is sensitive to these types of issues, with students who will be in the position to foment change in the future, I am grateful to have the opportunity to come speak here.

How can members of the Carleton community become involved and help?

We can all try to become responsible consumers in order to avoid purchasing products from companies that exploit children. We can also develop a sharper awareness of the negative impact that our consumer habits may have in other parts of the globe. In the world today, the responsibility lies on all of us as individuals. We could sum this up with the words “tell me what you consume, and I’ll tell you what responsibility you have”.

In our local communities, we can all seek out opportunities to get involved in local organizations. We can all try to maintain a healthy lifestyle that promotes both our own wellbeing and that of our environment. The idea is that by changing ourselves, we can also contribute to changing the world.