

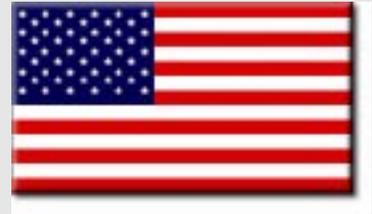


Fall 2001
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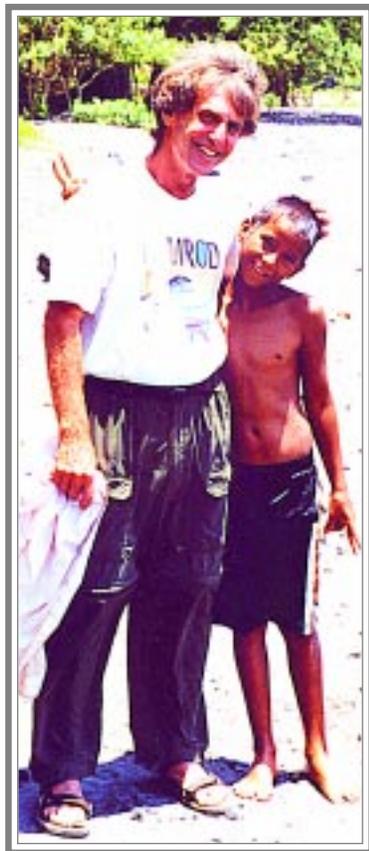
News From Amigos de Sí a La Vida — U.S. Friends of the Nicaraguan Street Kids Project

We of *Sí a la Vida*, both in the United States and in Nicaragua, are shocked and saddened by the events in New York and Washington, D.C., and grieve along with the families of the victims. Part of our response to the hatred and misunderstanding that motivated the terrorist attacks should be a renewed commitment to help the underprivileged throughout the world to improve their lives.

We hope that our many friends will stay mindful that the human development work we do in Nicaragua is the most basic type of development possible, taking society's castoff children and helping them become conscientious and responsible citizens who will help create a more loving, just, and secure world. There is no greater guarantee of future peace.



A Day in the Life of *Sí a la Vida* —by John Riess



John and Marvin on the beach near the Ometepe center

In mid-April of this year I went to Nicaragua to volunteer for a month with *Sí a la Vida*. As an active member of Partners for Health/Amigos de *Sí a la Vida*—the support organization in the U.S.—I wanted to see the program in operation first hand.

During the time there, I lived in a room at the 15-bed residential center on Ometepe Island and helped support the staff by working with the boys or by working with the construction crew building the new kitchen.

The residential center is a mile outside of Altagracia on a plantain farm with a majestic view of a large volcano. Nestled among the palms and other towering trees and just above Lake Nicaragua, it has fresh breezes and ready access to swimming,

two good ways to beat the intense heat.

The program unfolded as I lived and ate with the boys. I participated in their group activities (evening meetings, weekly evaluations, and group therapy sessions), and traveled with them on outings (baseball games, fishing, or swimming).

In addition, I was able to observe the dedicated educators who tutored the boys individually and also helped guide them with their daily tasks—bathing, washing clothes, making beds, cleaning the dormitory, as well as the common rooms, latrines, laundry area, and patio.

After about three weeks on Ometepe, I traveled to Managua to visit *Casa Nuevo Amanecer*. This 12-bed residential center is where the kids, recently arrived from

More than 1000 children have been reached on the street and over 300 boys have entered the SALV residential centers since the project began in 1994.

Continued on page 6

Financial Report

Operating Expenses 2000

\$ 54,683

Operating Funds

In 2000, *Sí a la Vida* spent \$54,683 to operate its programs in Nicaragua, including work in the streets of Managua and residential rehabilitation centers in Managua and on Ometepe Island.

During the past year, our funding to meet these needs came from donations by individuals, support groups, and small family foundations in the United States, Spain, Canada, Australia, Italy, Great Britain, and other countries. We are not dependent on financing from any government entity nor does *Sí a la Vida* receive funding from any major foundations.

Our operating budget for the year 2001 is \$68,302, not including the legal aid program or construction. Because we do not have financial commitments for all of this amount, we have had to cut back on some nonessential services such as family visits and field trips outside of our local area. We have also been unable to give much-needed raises to *Sí a la Vida's* excellent staff, who currently earn \$100 to \$250 a month, including benefits.

Overall, the rehabilitation programs cost approximately \$6 per resident child per day, including food, utilities, staff salaries, transportation, and all associated operating costs.

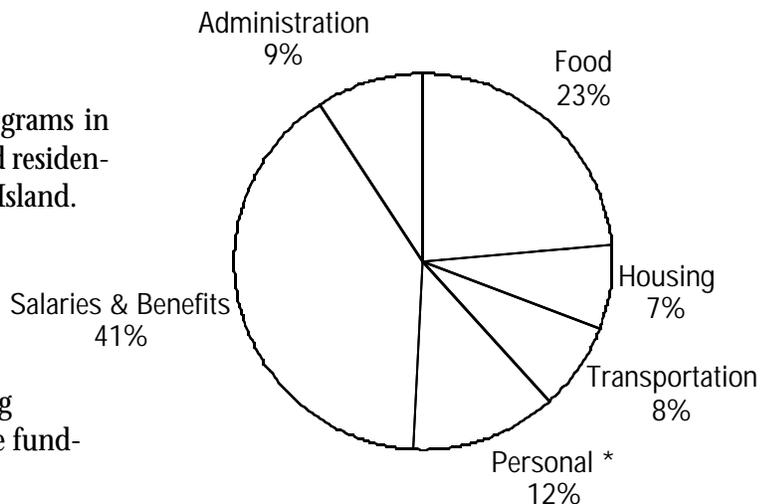
Construction Funds

At our 17-acre site near Altagracia on Ometepe Island, a total of \$60,000 has been spent on construction of the new long-range rehabilitation center since work began in 1999. To date we have constructed roads and trails, installed a water system and temporary electrical power, undertaken agricultural development, built a storehouse, constructed our first residential center now occupied by 15 kids, and substantially completed a separate kitchen building which will eventually serve 50-60 kids.

Donations for construction have come primarily from the United States, from friends and supporters in New York, New Jersey, California, and Washington.

We still have on hand approximately \$20,000, which is earmarked for completion of a study room and computer lab at the residential center, and construction of a dining hall adjacent to the new kitchen.

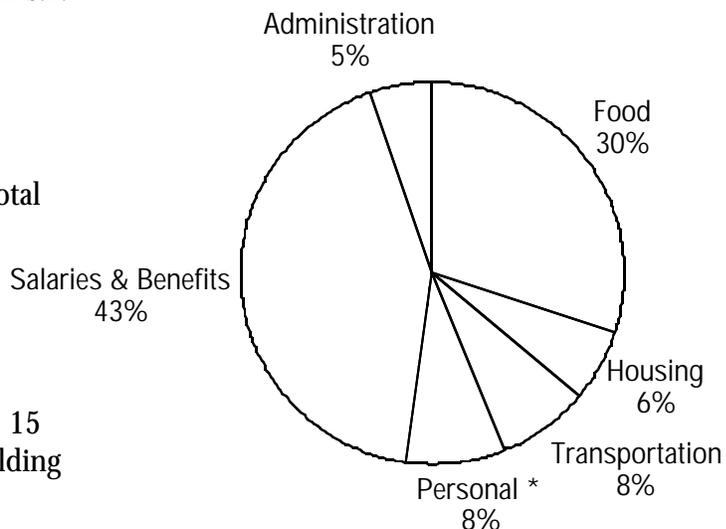
Soon we will be seeking funding for construction of the second residential complex (approximately \$45,000) and a workshop



* The category "personal" includes educational materials, medical care and medicine, clothing and shoes, hygiene, and recreation.

Operating Budget 2001

\$ 68,302



for teaching carpentry and mechanics (approximately \$30,000, not including equipment) and permanent electrical power to the land (\$5000). Further down the road are plans for a basketball court, a third residential house, and a small rustic hospedaje for guests.

Update from Jonathan Roise



S*a la Vida* continues to move forward in response to the growing needs of Nicaraguan street kids.

Earlier this year construction of the first residential center was completed at our new Ometepe Island site, and the eleven boys who had been living in a rented house in Altagracia made the move to the land. Two months later the new house reached its full capacity of 15 kids with the transfer of more boys from *Casa Nuevo Amanecer*, our house in Managua for kids recently arrived from the streets.

The new house is named *Casa José María* in honor of José María Salvado i Urpi of Barcelona, Spain. José María was a friend and long-time supporter of *Sí a la Vida* who visited our centers in Managua and Ometepe shortly before he died suddenly last year.

In Managua, the Austrian Embassy has announced a \$12,000 grant to *Sí a la Vida* for construction of a new building at *Casa Nuevo Amanecer*. The structure—to be built on the adjacent lot purchased four years ago—will include a multipurpose room dividable into two classrooms, a room for medical and psychological care, and office and storage space. The intention is not to increase the capacity of the house, but rather to advance the quality of the care given the kids, who are all recently arrived from the streets and need a wide variety of activities to keep their minds away from thoughts of returning to drugs and street life.

In July, we were very pleased when Luis Velasquez accepted our invitation to assume leadership of *Casa Nuevo Amanecer*. Luis began his teaching career during the Sandinista literacy campaigns of the 1980's, and later founded the Martin Luther King School to serve the children of a very poor coffee cooperative in the tiny village of El Cañon on the outskirts of Managua. Luis, who is himself a single

father, has strong experience working with highly disadvantaged kids and brings a lot of dedication and initiative to his new position.

At a staff retreat, the *Sí a la Vida* team was faced with a difficult decision of where to head next with development of the Ometepe site. The choice was whether to begin work toward the construction of a workshop where the boys will be able to learn carpentry and mechanics, or to prioritize construction of a second residential house to accommodate another 15 ex-street kids. The staff considered that our two centers are always at capacity and that there are still many, many children in the streets waiting for an opportunity to change their lives. The conclusion was that additional space for more resident kids was more critical. With this decision we can begin planning for a new house. A site has been selected, but at present we have no funds either to construct or staff it.

Please Help!

See the reply coupon
on page 7.



The boys don't win every game, but they've learned the meaning of focus, dedication, and good sportsmanship.

The faces of hope that keep us going...

Alejandro Antonio Reyes Pineda

Born into extreme poverty, son of an alcoholic father and an inattentive mother, and the younger brother of two drug addicts, Alejandro took to the streets and glue sniffing when he was ten. After two years in Sí a la Vida, Alejandro, now 14, has overcome his addiction to glue and his tendency to go to the streets, although he remains hyperactive and manipulative. He is now in fourth grade, where he is successful as a student but often has behavior problems in the classroom. He loves to dance, is an avid fisherman, and likes to roller skate.



Bismarck Saúl Altamirano Tercero

Abandoned by his mother at age 7, Bismarck and his older brother left their home in Ocotal to live on the streets of Estelí, sniffing glue and stealing. On May 12, 1999, after seven years of living on the street, Bismarck entered Casa Nuevo Amanecer in Managua and in January came to Ometepe. He is attending combined fifth and sixth grade where he is a whiz in mathematics, and would like to continue studying to someday be a mechanic. At 15 Bismarck is the oldest of the residents, and one of the quietest.

Nelson Javier Martínez Rojas

Abandoned at an early age by an alcoholic mother and an absent father, Nelson, now 12, has spent his life without parental affection and control. Physical and verbal abuse and forced labor have left a legacy of anxiety, sleep disturbance, bed-wetting and cerebral symptoms that at one point were thought to be caused by epilepsy or brain damage. He entered Casa Nuevo Amanecer from the streets of Managua in September of 1999 and transferred to the Island in January of 2000, where he has stabilized and where most of his nervous symptoms have disappeared. Nelson is studying fourth grade and is one of the best students in the project. He has an "adoptive grandfather" (actually his mother's stepfather) in Managua, Don Alfonso Sotelo, who has continued to give Nelson support and affection. He is an avid pulsera-maker and has successfully taught the art to Panchito, a blind neighborhood boy. Nelson would like to be a doctor.



Santos Ramón Castellón Talavera



Santos, 10, is the smallest of the chavalos on Ometepe, giving him, in effect, fourteen older brothers to defend himself against, a sometimes frustrating task. Santos was born in Mulukukú, famous during the 80's as the Sandinista Army's "boot camp" for new recruits. His biological father died before his birth. Santos entered Casa Nuevo Amanecer from the streets of Managua in July of 1999 and came to the Island in January, 2000.

During his first year in Sí a la Vida he stayed completely closed about his family and origins, apparently out of fear of being sent back home, as had happened to him the first time he ran away. In July of 2000 he broke his silence, and traveled to Estelí to visit his family accompanied by our psychologist Karla Varela. Santos is in third grade. Among his favorite activities are planting avocado and coffee trees on the land, going to the beach and roller skating. Someday he wants to work in construction and build houses.

Challenges and Joys of Working with the SALV Boys

—by Katie Jo Slaughter, *Sí a la Vida* Volunteer

Saying that my experience living on the island of Ometepe for four months this year was incredibly eye-opening does little to capture the enormity of my experience. I was so caught in teaching English in the indigenous community, living with my host families, and being a part of the *Sí a la Vida* community that I scarcely recognized how bizarre each of my days were in comparison to my life in the United States.

I worked closely with Jonathan Roise and found him to be tirelessly dedicated, self-sacrificing and boundlessly compassionate. Working with *huelepegas* (glue-inhalants) taxes you to the core of your being, yet Jonathan withstood these tests as if they were minor trials. He is the type of activist whom I would like to emulate in my practice of fighting for social justice, but I know that I don't have his special spirit. He is able to treat each precocious, special needs boy with love and respect even when they refuse to treat him the same. He is able to adopt each of the *chavalos* (boys) as if they were his own children.

From their lives on the streets of Managua, the boys of *Sí a la Vida* have

learned to lie, manipulate, and prey upon people's weaknesses to control their environment. The critical work of *Sí a la Vida* is to teach these boys that those skills are useless if they want to be a part of a community of people that really love them, trust them and respect them. This process of their consciousness-raising is long and difficult, and requires that each *chavalito* receive constant support and attention.

A major part of a volunteer's work with *Sí a la Vida* is to pay attention to *los chavalos*, to just be with them in their environment without imposing your worldview on them. This was a major challenge for me when a *chavalito* would be angry at me, rude to me or treat me like an object. I had many moments where I gave my heart to the *chavalos*, and I had many moments in which I felt like I had never been so angry in my entire life. Sometimes, I felt a mixture of both.

Santito (see opposite page), who was the youngest *chavalito* on the island when I was there, had a habit of selling all of his possessions in hopes of using the money to travel to Managua. One Saturday, I accompanied the *chavalos* to the construction site so that they could plant baby coconut trees. I noticed that Santito was wearing an old pair of pants that had no zipper and barely stayed on. Exasperated, I asked him where his other pants were. He had sold them. Adri, another volunteer, and I searched through our backpacks and found a safety pin. The pants stayed on with the safety pin and Santito seemed happier. Adri and I felt relieved to have helped him. Jonathan, who was trying to prove a point to Santito by not allowing him to have new clothes every time he sold the old

pair, seemed relieved too.

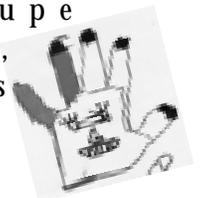
The next day, I went with the *chavalos* on their weekly paseo. Santito was running to the truck wrapped in an old towel. I asked him, at this point completely exasperated, where were his pants.

"Kati," he said, "I sold the safety pin. And the pants."

In spite of this minor setback, afternoons on la isla de Ometepe are so beautiful that I often couldn't remember my life in the United States. On this afternoon, I felt the enchantment as I talked with Adri about the *chavalos*, the Sandanistas, and how everyone stared at us as we walked by. Suddenly, Adri grabbed my arm. "Listen," she said. And for about five minutes, we stood transfixed as we listened to a song on the radio that a woman was singing soulfully in English. Images from my life in the United States, so different from my life on la isla de Ometepe, came rushing back. Adri and I gave each other a big hug, each caught in the same feelings. The *chavalos* all turned around and ran back to us when they noticed we weren't following them. They grabbed our arms and said, "*No ingles, solamente espanol. Estas aqui en Nicaragua.*"

"No English, only Spanish. You are in Nicaragua."

Adri and I smiled at each other and ran up the street, Sandanistas marching by, people staring and a troupe of screaming, laughing *chavalos* following us.



A Day in the Life of SALV ...continued from page 1

the streets, begin their arduous transition from street addicts to a better life.

The most powerful experience I had during my stay in Nicaragua was the time I spent observing the street outreach.

Hopping a bus in the early morning, I joined Rosario and Omar—one of two outreach teams—as they visited the markets and street corners where the kids congregate.

The kids range from about 8 to 16 years-old and almost all grip glue-filled baby food jars in their hands, inhaling the fumes that are so strong I begin to get intoxicated by them even from a distance!

Barefoot, dressed in tattered clothes, and with dirty hands and faces, these kids are a strong contrast to the rest of the city's population that seemed quite fastidious about hygiene and dress. Involved in this ritualized addictive behavior, the kids apparently achieve some sense of escape and suppression of their hunger pains.

Because they often don't have shoes, often get in fights, and are frequently victimized, the kids usually have cuts, sores, and infections. To attend to these medical needs Rosario and Omar carry a first aid kit with them and offer to clean, sterilize, and bandage the common minor wounds. This attention provides the outreach staff with an opportunity to engage the kids in a conversation about their struggles of living homeless on the street.

Over weeks and sometimes months, they attempt to develop a friendship with the kids. As they gain their confidence, the outreach team will introduce the program and explain how a bed, meals, clothes and bathing facilities are all part of the package. Finally, they offer to take anyone interested for a visit to the

Managua house. This is no easy "sell," as the life of the street can be very appealing to someone who was abused or abandoned—a common theme. But at times, the filth, fighting, and famine are just so intolerable that the program's offering resonates.

The most powerful experience I had during my stay in Nicaragua was the time I spent observing the street outreach.

As we move about during the day from one market to another, I get an eye-opening view into the horrors of the street life. I see young girls and boys who are working as prostitutes and kids living in dirt lots in cardboard "houses." I see one girl who has mutilated herself in a drug-induced fury and another boy with shaking limbs and stuttering speech—probably the result of irreversible drug damage to the nerves.

During the course of our travels, three boys stand out in my memory.

One boy, still sniffing glue, approached us and asked to write a note to one of the staff members thanking him for his help with an acute medical problem. Another was a boy, no longer using glue, who was about to graduate from school and had turned his life around with help from the outreach staff. The third was a boy who was crawling down the bus aisle when we arrived at the market. He begged for money, apparently unable to walk, but as the bus neared the next stop, he ran off, out rear exit. He was a kid who had entered the program but decided to return to the streets.

I began to appreciate where the kids came from, what it takes to get them interested in the program, and the intense effort required to keep them engaged in the rescue, rehabilitation, and reintegration offered at the residential centers.

My month in Nicaragua left me with a tremendous appreciation of the challenges faced by the staff as well as the kids. I gained a genuine respect for the pro-

gram teachers, psychologists, peer counselors and coordinators who have encouraged the kids to leave the world of the streets and begin a healthier life.

The Si a la Vida centers have reached out to more than 1000 kids on the street and over 300 kids have entered the residential centers since the project began in 1994. Many successfully graduated and either returned to their families, entered another program, or have begun living independently.

—John Riess is a Board Member and Treasurer of the Partners for Health/Amigos de Sí a la Vida support group in Seattle.

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New Legal Aid Office Advocates Justice for Street Kids

A few years ago, Nicaragua adopted a new juvenile code, delineating the legal rights and responsibilities of children and establishing a separate judicial and penal system for minors. This new legislation joined other Nicaraguan laws which are surprisingly progressive in their recognition of human rights. Unfortunately, in this very poor country, there is often a large discrepancy between what is on the books and what exists in practice.

Sí a la Vida's response to this situation has been to establish a legal aid office in Managua to provide advocacy for street kids and other children in extreme poverty situations. The office would guarantee that their rights are protected, and that they receive a proper defense and due process when they run afoul of the law.

This project, our newest undertaking, opened its doors this year in a small rented house near *Casa Nuevo Amanecer* in *Barrio Villa Austria* in Managua.

Another task of the legal aid office is to petition the courts to issue replacement birth documentation for *Sí a la Vida* kids. Most street kids, like many other children born into severe poverty in Nicaragua, were never registered at birth due to the expense. Without a birth certificate, one cannot obtain the necessary identification papers to be recognized as a Nicaraguan citizen nor are they able to vote or to hold a formal job.

The office also assists *Asociación Sí a la Vida* to fulfill the myriad reporting requirements imposed on us as a registered Nicaraguan non-profit organization, and to defend the

organization against an often-unfriendly government.

The program is run by Mercedes Palacios, who realized a life-long dream by studying law at night and on weekends. She taught public school for several years in Managua before joining *Sí a la Vida* in 1998, and served a term as coordinator of *Casa Nuevo Amanecer* in 1999. In addition to her new duties, she currently serves as President of *Sí a la Vida's* Board of Directors.

A \$5000 gift from donors in Spain is covering salaries, rent, and other expenses, making this program possible for the current year. We are seeking funding for next year, hoping that some person or organization with a special interest in human rights and the law will step forward to help us continue this valuable undertaking.

Please be Generous! We count on your support!!

Yes, I'm proud to support *Sí a La Vida!*

Please make checks payable to Partners for Health: "PFH/*Sí a la Vida*."

___\$36 supports 1 boy for 6 weeks; ___\$72 supports 1 boy for 3 months;

___\$150 pays for the psychologist for 1 month; ___\$260 pays for 5 days of food;

___\$1000 will help begin construction on the second dormitory (see page 3).

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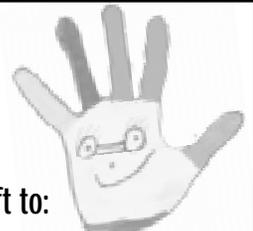
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newsletter
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See Page 7

Photo by John Crossman



*Doña Yolanda assisting Edwin
with his homework*

The first dormitory on Ometepe houses 15 boys, thanks to your support!



Now we want to double the number of boys we serve, but construction has been stopped on the second building due to lack of funds.

Please help us get construction started again!

See page 3 for a progress report and page 7 for where to send your gift!

Muchas Gracias from the SALV boys!