



Fall 2003

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

## Exciting Successes Realized in 2003

by Jonathan Roise



**I**t has been an incredible year! Thirteen of the 14 boys in school at our project in Altagracia successfully completed the school year at the end of November. **This success rate is considerably higher than the national average in Nicaragua**, which is between 70

and 80%, and is attributable to the dedicated support efforts of the staff. The one boy who did not pass is studying to take make-up exams before the new school year starts in February.

During 2003, 16 kids “graduated” from Sí a la Vida in Managua and on Ometepe, and were reunited with their families. In two cases the reintegration was not successful and the boys returned to the project.

Both houses are completely full of kids as we near the end of 2003. There is much need for more residential capacity. Horrible social and economic conditions continue to dominate life in Nicaragua, where the average person lives on \$2 a day.

With an ever-increasing number of “graduates” in their homes, the staff has initiated an amplified program of follow-up care with the intention of keeping them home, away from drugs and the street, and providing education and job training [see page 2]. Elements also include psychological care when needed, regular family visits, monthly meetings, and activities for those living again with their families in or near Managua.

### Future dreams and plans include:

- **Construction of a second house on Ometepe as a home for 15 additional boys.**
- **Construction of training workshops on Ometepe to teach trades to Sí a la Vida residents as well as to local children from the community.**
- **Obtaining a piece of land near Managua as a recreational and garden site for the boys living at Casa Nuevo Amanecer.**

This year, Sí a la Vida has been fortunate to host a number of enthusiastic and dedicated international volunteers from the U.S., Spain, Germany, and Japan. The U.S. Peace Corps and its Japanese equivalent have each assigned a volunteer for a two-year commitment. Four other volunteers have made commitments of six months or more.

Thank you for your support! We couldn't do it without your generosity.

*Boys of Casa José María on Ometepe proudly display the portrait of the late José María Salvado i Urpi of Spain, a tireless support of SALV.*



From the World of the Streets—To a World of Respect

# A Support Group for Parents

**A**vital part of the rehabilitation program at Sí a la Vida is the Support Group for Parents, coordinated by Juanita Gutiérrez, the project's social worker in the Managua Center.

**When a youngster first comes from the streets into the Project, Juanita does an informal baseline investigation** to understand his background and what caused the child to leave home.

Juanita locates and interviews the boy's family, "being careful not to ask about sensitive areas," she explains. She tries to develop a friendly relationship with family members, not always an easy task, as some families may be reticent or belligerent. "We start by observing the family, listening to them. After a while we become aware of their situation." At first only basic information is gathered, birth records (important for school registration, etc.) and the parent's view of why the boy has left home. If there appears a need for psychological counseling, Juanita asks the project's psychologist to meet the family and gather a more detailed behavioral history. During the first meeting with the family, Juanita presents the project and its program, seeks parental agreement for the child to stay in the residential rehabilitation center, and invites the parent to visit the Managua center and participate in monthly Parent Support Meetings.

The Project has been limited by lack of funds which prevents Juanita and other staff from providing follow-up support and counseling at the homes of boys living at a distance from the Project.

Children leave their homes for the street life for many reasons. All homes of street kids are poor, often crowded,

and many youngsters have experienced abuse in the home. They are sometimes hyperactive, have an attention deficit or other psycho-emotional problem that need the psychologist's help in making a training plan. Some cases may call for a psychiatrist's help to plan treatment and possibly prescribe psychotropic medicines. On Ometepe, the staff manages all psychological problems under the supervision of a psychiatrist who makes regular visits to the center.

**The second part of the Support Program involves the actual parent-training sessions**

**at the Managua Center**, usually with the entire staff attending. In these monthly meetings, the parents learn more about the treatment process in both residential centers. Through lectures, discussions,

and peer-support workshops under the psychologist's leadership, parents discuss their struggles in guiding and disciplining their children and learn new parenting skills. In these sessions they are helped to realize that the work of rehabilitation can best succeed when it involves the understanding and cooperation of family members.

While some parents cannot attend the monthly sessions because of work or lack of money for travel, others are simply not committed to the meeting schedule. However, about 75% of those living fairly close to the Managua project attend



regularly. Most others come three or four times a year. Parents of boys in the Managua center who attend the monthly meeting visit with their children at this time. Those with a child on Ometepe Island can speak by phone from the Managua office to the Ometepe office where their sons are gathered for this monthly event. One staff person from Ometepe Island usually attends the Managua center's meeting to report on the advanced kids' progress in school and their general behavior.

**The third aspect of the Parent Support Group is preparation for actual reintegration** of the child back into the home. The Parent Support program has recently initiated short-term home-stays for the boys, when they may go home over a weekend or during a school vacation. Juanita says: "We are implementing home visits that don't involve lectures or discussions, but just bring together kids and their families—not only parents, but siblings, grandparents, uncles and aunts. Activities can include games, such as breaking a piñata or having a meal together."

During their rehabilitation the boys undergo many changes as they grow and learn, and some have trouble fitting back into the family setting, and may experience a relapse into past behaviors. The occasional brief home-stay helps staff, family, and the youngster to identify problems that need further attention in the rehab process and extra support from the project after the child goes home.

**The final part of the Support Group for Parents is follow-up with those who "graduated"** and are living with their families again. This entails staff visits to the family with suggestions of way to handle problems. Juanita says, "It's important that we observe the whole situation to be sure that the youngster is making use of the behavioral skills and tools he learned during his rehabilitation." Enrolling the youngster in the public schools is an important first step in

The progress of many of the children who have been in the project is remarkable, thanks to Juanita and a dedicated and competent staff.

reintegration. When the school principals see records of academic work done by youngsters in the Project, they will usually respond by giving priority to former street kids.

The Project has been limited by lack of funds which prevents Juanita and other staff from providing follow-up support and counseling at the homes of boys living at a distance from the Project. Additional funding is also needed to develop a program for training the older adolescents in vocational skills, which would make re-entry into community life even more successful.

A major challenge to successful reintegration is when parents fail to give their youngster firm support and guidance. Another challenge is simply the general level of poverty. Imagine a boy returning home where his mother, siblings, and stepfather live on a noisy major thoroughfare in a one-room house with an earthen floor and walls made of tin roofing materials. There is no place to study, no privacy, and perhaps abuse of drugs and alcohol in the family. There are no easy solutions to these situations, nevertheless, the progress of many of the children who have been in the project is remarkable, thanks to Juanita Gutiérrez and a dedicated and competent staff.

For the full interview, see our Web site at: [http://www.asalv.org/sv\\_interview\\_11-30-03](http://www.asalv.org/sv_interview_11-30-03)



# Biographies of Our Special Stars

## María de los Angeles

María de los Angeles Pérez is the new coordinator of Casa Nuevo Amanecer since April 2003. She brings to the job 22 years of experience as a schoolteacher at the primary and secondary levels, and has a degree in psychology. She has a wonderful relationship with the kids and staff, and is doing a great job organizing and improving the work with the kids recently arrived from the streets.



## Nelson Javier Martinez Rojas

Nelson Javier Martinez Rojas received his elementary school diploma in a ceremony November 28, 2002. After more than two years in Si a la Vida, Nelson returned home to live with his adoptive grandfather in Managua earlier this year. Aside from his studies, Nelson works part time to help support the family and plays basketball in a local youth league.

PROYECTO	ING. MARVIN O'CONNOR	PLANTA	-
PROYECTANTE	ING. MARVIN O'CONNOR	ESCALA	INDICADA
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**ELEVACION NORTE**  
ESC \_\_\_\_\_ 1:100

*Architect's depiction of the proposed second house on Ometepe. The new center would double our capacity on the Island and be used to support the older boys. The new center will require its own staff of educators and counselors.*



# Notes on the Reintegration of Juan Ramón

**P**roviding support to *Sí a la Vida* (SALV) program “graduates” is a critical element in trying to ensure successful reintegration of the boys back into their homes. The following are brief notes describing visits made by Jonathan Roise to Juan Ramón Maldonado, 17, who returned to live with his family in January 2003 after about four years in the program.

**History:** Alcoholic father working in Costa Rica, mother raising three boys all of whom went onto the street addicted to poly-substances. Her physically and verbally abusive way of managing the sons’ problems seemed to exacerbate the lack of parental authority. SALV social worker provides monthly meetings for parents to discuss parenting issues but Juan Ramón’s mother attended meetings very sporadically, probably because she was so poor that she was always working. Family consists of 3 boys and one girl. Oldest brother tried program but dropped out various times, middle brother rejected program, Juan Ramón (youngest male) struggled with the initial phase in the Managua residential center, was finally stabilized enough to enter the intensive phase at the Ometepe residential center, was suspended once for violence, spent time in Managua living with the family of the Board president. Matured considerably at Ometepe, got into special primary school program at Catholic orphanage allowing him to complete fifth and sixth grades in one year, and required him to get up at 4 AM weekdays to get bus at 5 AM to his school. A motivated and responsible student!

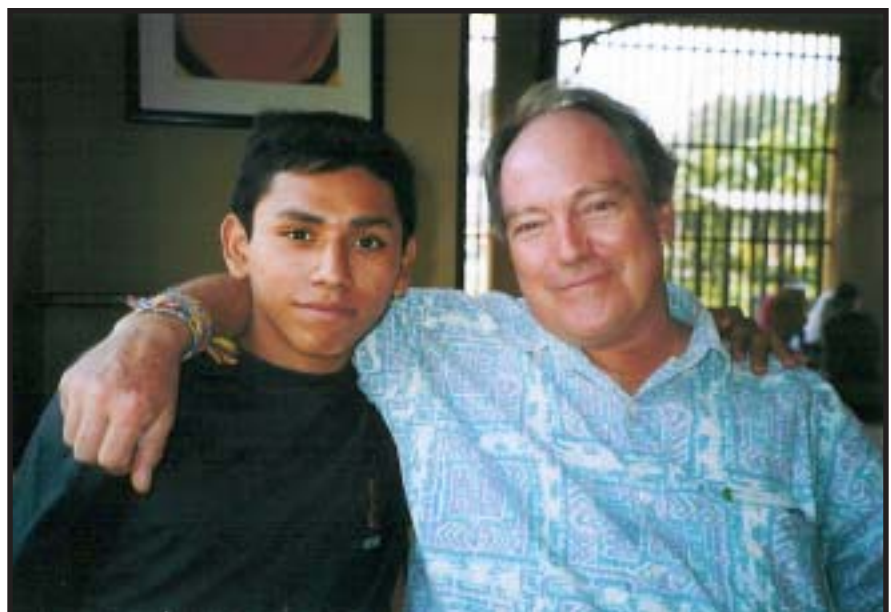
**Timing:** Reintegrated in January 2003, went to live with aunt up north (Matagalpa), attended school 6-9 PM and hoped his father in Costa Rica

would visit. Father never visited, seems disinterested in seeing son, a painful experience for Juan Ramón.

**Follow-up:** Jonathan planned to visit Juan Ramón 3.5 months after “graduation” because he was somewhat unstable throughout his time with program, has two brothers with addictions, which puts Juan Ramón at serious risk for relapse, and situation in Matagalpa was untested. Before leaving for Matagalpa, Jonathan drove to mother’s house in poor Managua neighborhood. House for the five of them and grandmother made of scrap tin roof, scrap wood, and scrap plastic sheets with one 10x10 room, but set in pretty yard with flowers, fruit trees, and banana

Juan Ramón matured considerably at Ometepe, got into a special primary school program at a Catholic orphanage allowing him to complete fifth and sixth grades in one year. This required him to get up at 4 AM.

plants. Learned from grandmother that Juan Ramón had just left aunt in Matagalpa and was living here with family in Managua. Mom and Juan Ramón out on streets peddling



*Juan Ramón and Jonathan share a heart-warming moment*

lottery tickets and home made taffy (unsuccessfully).

Next day, revisited home, took Ramón out for lunch at Pizza Hut and a movie, learned that he had been doing well in the first year of high school but was bored during the day. He got robbed at one point and had returned to family in Managua. Jonathan listened patiently to stories from up north, got the name of the school staff to talk to about the robbery incident and reenrolling Juan Ramón. Convinced Juan Ramón to return to school and discussed the risk of staying in Managua in a house with two glue-sniffing brothers. Tried to get a commitment from Juan Ramón not to use glue. We shared perceptions of his strengths and issues. Returned him to his house and had long, frank discussion with mother and brothers about the risks of Juan Ramón's staying in the Managua house, and tried to reinforce Juan Ramón's apparent decision to return to school in Matagalpa. The following day arranged to get him new school shoes, notebooks, pencils and pens so he has the necessary supplies to continue his education. Juan Ramón and sister walk across city next morning and arrive at Jonathan's door for breakfast and shopping expedition. Jon gives Juan Ramón a reassuring hug and

the graduate marches off to return to his house and hopefully continue with his education.

It was fortuitous to find Juan Ramón in Managua. A good opportunity to listen to his tales and talk with him about his life. A feeling that things are back on track. But a difficult family situation and an unstable environment still exist. It seems the human touch, the counseling, the support worked this time. It will be needed again and it will be delivered. Sí a la Vida is dedicated to this boy and so many like him.

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*The boys at Casa José María on Ometepe—Feb. 03*

*Michael at the Managua center proudly displays his new student card after entering his carpentry apprenticeship.*



*Roberto makes a keychain from indigenous woods at the Ometepe center.*

