



SÍ a la Vida

*From a World of the Streets,
to a World of Respect*

Winter
2004-05
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News From Amigos de Sí a La Vida — U.S. Friends of the Nicaraguan Street Kids Project

THE SEARCH FOR JUSTO PASTOR & HIS PAST

Working with at-risk youth is challenging in every way. Getting these boys to open-up about their background is no easy feat.



*Project
Co-founder
Jonathan Roise*

FOR most of the boys who enter Sí a la Vida from the streets, we attempt to make contact with their families within a week or two of their arrival, using information from the boys themselves. At times contact is delayed because the family is far away, or occasionally a child simply has no living family. But once in awhile a boy arrives who refuses to talk about his family.

Juan Navarrete was one such kid.

He first came to Casa Nuevo Amanecer on January 14, 2003 when Rosario Poveda, one of our outreach workers, convinced him to abandon his life in the alleys of the Ivan Montenegro market. He seemed to like the project, but like many first-timers he soon escaped back to the streets. Rosario again brought him in and again he did well, made friends with everybody, and in June was offered the opportunity to transfer to our project on Ometepe Island. There he could continue his rehabilitation and go to school with other more advanced ex-street kids.

Before he could be transferred a conflict arose with another boy and again, his solution was to leave the project. Then a third entrance in October; another chance to go to the Island; and another disappearance under similar circumstances. For him the attraction

of the street was not drugs—he was not a glue-sniffer—but rather a haven from his confused emotions. There, nobody asked him who he was, where was his family, what he felt, what he wanted.

Then one day in December he showed up at the project on his own and asked if he could go directly to the Island because, he said, if he stayed in the Managua house the temptation of the streets might prove too great. The coordinators of both houses agreed and two days later he was on Ometepe.

O n t h e island he quickly became a solid and popular member of the resident group. Slowly, without the draw of the street, he

Juan Navarrete, focus of our featured story, came to the project with a lost past.



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

THE SEARCH FOR JUSTO PASTOR, CONT.

began to learn to handle emotional situations and to trust the adults and kids who comprised his daily life. By May he started to open up about his past, but the information was confusing. He almost seemed to be guessing to try to satisfy our gentle probing and really seemed not to remember much, including the location of his house in Managua. He thought his mother's name was Nidia and that his father drove a taxi. The one thing he seemed definite about was an older brother—the member of the family to whom he had been most attached—who lived in Masaya, a town 30 kilometers south of Managua.

At the end of June, we took the majority of the kids into Managua for family visits during the semester break. Juan came too—toothbrush and spare clothes in hand—with the expectation of spending a week with his long-lost brother.

With Juan's perfect directions, he and I arrived at a ramshackle house in Masaya where Juan had stayed many times with his brother.

Although several years had passed, the woman of the house, Doña Mercedes Amador, recognized him.

She bluntly informed us that his brother had been shot and killed by gangs in Managua a year before.

Juan had said that his brother's name was Augusto or Justo, but we discovered that the folks in Masaya knew him as Pedro. They said he, too, was a gang member. Doña Mercedes said her son David might know where the family was, but that he wasn't home. She advised that it would be better to keep the boy in the project, as his family has nothing to offer him.

The following day, a Sunday morning, Juan and I returned to Masaya and encountered David, who also confirmed what we



Juan Navarrete & his friend Carlitos

learned the day before. He added that another brother, Pablo, was in the penitentiary. David gave us an approximate address for the family in Managua.

That afternoon Juan and I drove up and down all the streets and alleys of the run-down neighborhood to which David had directed us. We even traversed adjoining barrios, but didn't find the house.

The only time Juan expressed a hint of animation was at the entrance of a dark and narrow alleyway, bordered on both sides by high walls, through which the car barely passed. The alley opened up into an area of run-down houses with a narrow turn, which matched David's description, but Juan recognized nothing. We were given threatening stares by teenagers hanging out in the alleyway, became nervous for the only time that afternoon, and exited as quickly as possible. The other end of the alley corresponded approximately with the entrance as described by David.

I sent Juan back to the Island to spend his remaining vacation in the project. Four days later our psychologist Karla Varela and I returned to the alleyway on foot, asking for his mother "Doña Nidia" and for the last name "Navarrete." The residents said they knew their neighbors, but nobody recognized the names.

Doña Mercedes bluntly informed us that his brother had been shot and killed by gangs in Managua a year before.

I again contacted David and in early August he supplied me with additional information—more detailed directions, a family name of “Lara,” and that the house was adjacent to a truck lot.

On a visit to Managua one Friday in late August, I went looking again, accompanied by Juanita Gutiérrez, our social worker. The directions turned out to be another bust, but I did remember a truck lot and we went to its entrance. I asked directions at a house across the street, and the ladies of the house immediately recognized the “Lara” name and proceeded to inform us that it was a huge extended family living in a nearby compound and that they were a pack of thieves.

With their directions and with no little trepidation we walked to the compound, which turned out to be at the same narrow bend in the same alley Juan and I had nervously driven through two months earlier.

At the entrance the threatening looks were replaced by whoops and shouts as we explained our mission. From some eight little hovels on a quarter acre of land a crowd of people emerged, surrounded us, and led us to a shack from which emerged an 80-year-old woman, Doña Paula García de Lara, matriarch of the family and grandmother of Juan Navarette.

We were seated in their best (albeit broken)



Our baseball team—Juan/Justo is our star left-handed pitcher!

chairs, and learned that Juan’s real name was Justo Pastor Boza Garcia, that he was 13 years old (as we had surmised), and that he had followed an older sister to the bus stop six years before but had jumped on the wrong bus and disappeared. We also learned that a stepfather, separated from the family a few months before Justo’s disappearance, had been assassinated.

The mother was out selling clothes on the street, but would be back later. Two cousins accompanied Juanita and me back to *Casa Nuevo Amanecer* to attend the monthly parents’ meeting scheduled for that afternoon.

She told us of her long search, showing us a yellowed newspaper clipping with his picture, and said she had never given up hope of finding her son.

The next morning I returned to the compound, this time accompanied by Maria de los Angeles Pérez,

coordinator of our house in Managua. Justo’s mother, Gloria de los Angeles García, was there with tears streaming down her cheeks. She told us of her long search, showing us a yellowed newspaper clipping with his picture, and said she had never given up hope of finding her son. She and her mother, devout evangelical Christians, had prayed every day.

Since I was returning to the island the next day, I suggested they accompany me. They agreed. That evening I phoned ahead with the news, so that it wouldn’t be a complete shock to Juan/Justo. In the back of my mind I thought he might not even recognize them. I asked that Geovani bring him to the port.

And so it was that on the last Sunday in August, Justo was introduced to his mother on the dock in Moyogalpa. He said nothing at first and rode to the project in the back of the pickup while his mother sat up front. But outside of the public eye they soon were conversing, and the relationship was reborn. The mother and grandmother became stars of *Casa José María* for a few days and the rest of the kids—who knew all about the search—became enthralled with these two very animated women and the happy connection that had been made.

During a mid-September school break Justo made his first visit home since he was 7. When he arrived, he was surrounded by a huge throng

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FAVORITE SUCCESS STORIES

Marvin Joel Molina Herrera (left) and Henry Manuel García Briceño ...

...were best of friends when they were together in Sí a la Vida. Since then they have continued on good paths in their individual lives and each has just completed his second year of high school.

Marvin, 15, lives with his mother, grandmother, sisters, and brother in the northern town of Estelí. He is taking computer

classes every day after school, on a scholarship provided by Sí a la Vida's Jim Parker Scholarship Fund. He was in Sí a la Vida 1999-2001.

Henry, 17, lives with his grandmother and two sisters in San Pedro del Norte, a tiny pueblo near the Honduran border. He was in Sí a la Vida 2000-2002. The above photo was taken a year ago when both returned for a visit to Casa José María on Ometepe.



SEARCH FOR JUSTO PASTOR, CONT.

... *Continued from Page 3*

of aunts and cousins. Being a shy child by nature, he initially sat still and unresponsive with his head bowed. But after five days he was again a member of the family, and once back at the project, casually exchanged vacation stories with the other kids as though he had never been a lost orphan.

His mother is conscious of the risk if he returns to live in the family compound, and agrees he should stay with Sí a la Vida until she can find a safer home. The grandmother has the land up for sale, with the goal of dividing up the proceeds among her kids so that each can find another place to live. She has six living children (out of 15), 35 grandchildren and 8 great grandchildren, almost all of whom live there. To accommodate such

a huge family, she is asking \$40,000, a price unrealistically high for Nicaragua, but hoping that the adjoining truck lot might want to expand.

We may never know why Justo was so long in the streets, or what he did during all those years. He seems to have erased or suppressed much of his memory.

But now he can be like the other kids. No longer an orphan, he has a connection to his family and to his past. And like many of the other kids, his future is uncertain. He is doing well in Sí a la Vida—he can now read and write. He has a girlfriend and is a star left-handed pitcher for our baseball team—but whether he will ever be able to reintegrate with his family, and what will happen to him if he does, is still evolving.

—**Jonathan Roise**

2004—YEAR OF EXPANDED SERVICES

We are pleased to report that the past year has been a time of stability and progress in the *Sí a La Vida* program and at both of the residential centers. The boys who participate have shown growth as they learn new values, new habits and skills, and develop self-esteem, all of which will guide them into their new role as responsible citizens and decent human beings. To help them reach these goals, SALV offers health assistance, educational support, psychological and social work intervention, work training for future employment, and a follow-up structure to give assistance when a boy is ready to leave the project.

Enrollment

At *Casa Nuevo Amanecer* (CNA)—the Managua center where the boys first go after leaving the streets—about 30 boys received care during the past year, with the number in residence averaging 12. In the second phase of the program the boys go to the Ometepe Island center, *Casa José María* (CJM) where they receive intensive support after stabilizing. About 25 boys were participants last year, with an average of 14 at any one time. At *Casa José María*, there are currently a record number of 17 boys. The numbers change as new boys enter the program when current CNA Managua residents move on to the second phase on Ometepe Island or when boys leave CJM on Ometepe to return to their families. Last year's range in age was 8-16, with a median of 11 years. The average length of time a

boy is a resident in the two phases of the program is about 2.5 years. We recruit 50% of those enrolled in the program directly from Managua's streets and markets. The other half of our entrants are typically referred by family members,

At the close of last school year, all but one boy advanced academically to the next grade—a 93% success rate compared to the national average of 70-80%.

by Nicaragua's Child Protective Services, or other social justice programs.

Educational Activities

At *Casa Nuevo Amanecer* in Managua (the first phase of the program), the primary goals are to help boys "unlearn" the habits of street life, develop new patterns in social behavior, and begin to understand the importance of education as they learn how to read and write. At *Casa José María* the educational focus is on helping the boys to advance in the public school system. Here, the program is closely coordinated with the public primary school, where teachers report weekly to *Sí a la Vida* about each boy's attendance, punctuality, dress appearance, behavior, discipline, and completion of homework. This report permits program staff to tailor tutoring to each boy's needs. A teacher from the public school serves as an afternoon tutor at *Casa José María*, further strengthening this coordination.

At the close of the school year, all but one boy advanced to the

next grade—a 93% promotion rate—compared to the national average in Nicaragua of 70-80%. This success was due largely to the tutoring by SALV staff educators and the interest and efforts of the Ometepe public school teachers. The average score of the boys' weekly reports was 96%—an impressive accomplishment for any

group, but especially for boys who have little or no classroom learning. These boys have overcome multiple behavior problems associated with living on the street—they come from very poor, often troubled homes. Because they are usually older and bigger than others in their grade, it can be difficult to adapt.

In 2004, at *Casa José María*, we began lecture/discussion groups led by various adult educators. Topics include violence, mediation, feelings, bad habits, addictions, peer pressure, puberty, and sex education. For these boys who may never have had a strong adult male role model, discussions on the meaning of "becoming a man" hold considerable importance.

In April, "Clowns without Borders" visited *Casa José María* on Ometepe and enthralled the boys, the staff, and sixty townspeople with their colorful mime and puppet shows. The "clowns" were an exceptionally talented Argentine couple of great

2004—YEAR OF EXPANDED SERVICES, CONT.

skill and sparkling good humor, who present a strong message on preservation of the environment. This rare, educational entertainment was free to all!

Health

By promoting vaccinations and offering educational discussion groups (on sexual activity, for example), *Sí a la Vida's* program stresses preventive care. But kids often **come** from the streets with serious health problems that interfere with their lives. During the year, a number of boys were treated by medical specialists for skin diseases as well as dental, intestinal, and surgical needs. The program has been fortunate not only in finding expert care, but also in securing the financial resources to cover what are often very costly procedures.

Follow-up for Boys Reintegrated with Their Families

Wherever possible, the staff psychologist and social worker meet and talk with families to understand the environments from which the boys come—and to which we hope they will be able to return. They also routinely provide group and individual therapy sessions, crisis management, relaxation techniques, and a skilled response to the emotional upheavals that inevitably occur as boys struggle to adapt after leaving the street life to live in *Sí a la Vida's* residential centers.

With an increasing number of boys returning to their families, the program has strengthened its follow-up activities this year, focusing attention on reintegrated boys to assure their continued development. Monthly meetings by staff with the parents help them prepare for the return of their sons. They discuss such topics as exercising parental authority, building self-respect, administering discipline, and the question of corporal punishment. An average of 11 parents attended those meetings monthly in 2004.

Family therapy sessions with the parents and sons help prepare both for reintegration. Parents are encouraged to visit

kids on Ometepe, participate in therapy and other programs, stay with their kids in the guest room, and develop ties to the rehabilitation program. During school breaks, the program makes arrangements for the boys to go for home-stays. Eight parents visited and stayed at the Ometepe center last December and about 12 boys made home visits during school vacation.

With an increasing number of boys returning to their families, the program has strengthened its follow-up activities this year...

Last year the program also began holding a monthly meeting of boys who had rejoined their families. This serves to involve the boys in group discussions about their transition experiences and encourages them to share how they are coping. One critical topic is the value of education and staying in school. Other support for those recently reintegrated include home visits by staff, family therapy, materials support for education-related costs, legal support for securing birth records and citizenship documents so, eventually, the boys can work.

Work and Handicrafts

An important part of the learning experience for all the boys in the *Sí a la Vida* centers is sharing the work of twice-daily household cleanup, sweeping and mopping public



Pulseras continue to be a source of income for the boys and a means of focusing their attention.

areas, washing their own clothes, and—on Ometepe Island—working in the plantain (a type of banana) fields with planting, fertilizing, and harvesting. By their participation in these and other work projects, the boys develop habits of responsibility and learn marketable skills. With their help, the plantain crop yields about \$2,000 net income, which the program needs to sustain itself. The handicraft component, mostly the production of beautiful finger-woven Pulseras (friendship bracelets) allows the boys to earn income and develop pride in their artistry. The \$2,000 generated by the sale of Pulseras during the year goes directly to the boys to pay for field trips and special purchases of school supplies or for other needs on which they can decide.

Staffing

The staff has remained stable at both residential centers. *Casa Nuevo Amanecer* employs four educators/street outreach staff, a social worker, a psychologist, and a coordinator. *Casa José María* employs six educators, two cooks, one watchman/athletic coach, and a coordinator. Long-term volunteers from overseas—U.S., Australia, Germany, Spain, and Japan—have significantly strengthened the program’s effectiveness.

Budget

With annual operating expenses for both centers totaling slightly under \$85,000, many activities must be “shoe-horned” into the schedule and tightly-controlled costs often require staff members to serve dual roles. The boys themselves learn to do their part in helping to “keep the ship afloat.” Willing cooperation and commitment from all participants, high levels of tolerance for basic levels of comfort, and deep appreciation for the goals of *Sí a la Vida’s* program contribute to making all ends meet. Of course, we couldn’t do it without your continued support. **Deepest thanks to all of our generous donors!**

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*Students become teachers of other students
in the Casa José María computer lab*

A new truck arrives at Sí a la Vida!



After careful cost-benefit analysis of buying a much-needed vehicle for the project, we purchased a new truck in Managua for \$21,000—\$15,000 was donated by a generous U.S. supporter for this purchase and \$6,000 came from other Amigos de Sí a La Vida donors.

The old truck has a remaining life expectancy (without overhaul) of about three months, and will remain on the Island as a work truck and for teaching driving to staff & others. Although it has great sentimental value, it is not worth fixing—even in the Nicaraguan economy.

The new one is white and looks and feels just like the old one, but young and vigorous (truck shown is similar to one purchased).

Special thanks to all who gave so generously this year!