



“I was, I am, I will be ... ”

by Brian Vaughn, Peace Corps Volunteer

This was a simple assignment. During our class I asked the boys to make a list beginning with the title “I was, I am, I will be....” The intent was to get them to reflect on their lives and to think about their futures, something not normally done in Nicaragua’s fatalist culture.

I was a street kid. A drug addict. I was begging for food. I was homeless.

I am older now. I am a resident of Sí a la Vida. I am a student. I am able to read and write. I am stronger now. I am a good person.

I will be better. I will be a teacher. An educator at Sí a la Vida. I will be a baseball player. A doctor. I will be a mechanic. A computer technician.

I had worked with these kids for months and they seemed like all the other children I know in Nicaragua. They go to school, interact with others, throw tantrums and then move on, and dance and sing. They act like the children they are.

The tricky thing about life at *Sí a la Vida* is that life for the kids seems so normal. Then they tell you,

I used to sniff glue. I had to steal food.

For a second they expose a tiny bit of what their lives were like before they came to *Sí a la Vida*.

I am left thinking that a child’s ability to adapt to the best and worst of situations is infinite.

I have been with the project for over a year and am constantly amazed at what this place has meant to the kids fortunate enough to come here.

One of my favorite things is introducing new kids to computers. Most have never seen one. Most younger kids can’t even write when they come here, let alone type. I see them grow before my eyes. They begin copying words out of books, not knowing what letters on the keyboard correspond to the ones on the page. After months of work here and at the local school, they learn to read and write. They gain confidence and access to a whole new dimension of communication and possibility.

This gift of reading and writing is one of the greatest things the *Sí a la Vida* project does. Without the project, I’m certain these kids would never have learned. And now they write things like:

*I will be a teacher.
I will be a good father to my kids.
I will be a great person.*

Los Chavalos (The kids)

Meet a few of the boys of *Sí a la Vida* —



José Manuel Miranda Rodríguez — Manuel is our newest, youngest (10) and smallest resident. He spent five months in our Managua center before coming to *Casa José María* in August 2005. His brother, Ariel, is also at the project. Manuel is in first grade and a whiz at

math. He loves to make *pulseras* and has a larger bank account than many of the older boys. Though he's the smallest, he holds his own well. He's bright and has endeared himself to the project. Manuel wants to be a policeman when he grows up. He says there's too much violence in his Managua *barrio*.

César Iván Narváez Navarrete — César, 13, lived with an alcoholic, unstable and inattentive mother and abusive father before escaping to a city park. He lived there eight months before entering *Sí a la Vida* in March 2004.



He misses his mother but when with her is full of resentment. Reluctantly he is accepting that she is unable to care for him. César is one of our best-behaved kids. In second grade he does OK with math but struggles with Spanish. His prize possession is a mountain bike, earned for completing his first school year with *Sí a la Vida*. The bike gets a daily washing and is festooned with stickers, baubles and reflectors. When he grows up, César wants to be a taxi driver.

Lester Antonio Castro García — Lester, 13, is one of *Casa José María*'s most temperate and well-adjusted residents — despite being a casualty of a stormy and alcoholic marriage. In the streets he



avoided drugs but became addicted to playing slot machines in Managua's stores. On Ometepe Island, he is a conscientious student. Now in fifth grade, he loves math and the challenge of solving multiplication problems in his head. He also likes learning English from our Peace

Corps volunteer and playing soccer. Lester hopes to become an automobile mechanic.

Marvin José Alguera Ayala — Marvin, 15, is one of our brightest students. Through a special program he is completing 5th and 6th grades in one school year. This requires getting up at 4:30 every morning to take a 40-minute bus ride to a distant school. He does this to make up for years out of school as a child, part of a life where education was



not a priority. Academics are one of the few activities that hold his attention — Marvin has attention deficit disorder and is treated for it at *Sí a la Vida*. Before he joined us, his broken family life included mistreatment and neglect because of his disorder. Marvin is on track to

finish primary school this year and hopes to become a computer engineer when he is older. ✨

Martín: The mystery kid who made it

When he came to us in 2001, he said his name was Martín José Orozco Tinoco. Emotionally disturbed and clearly delayed in his development, Martín was from the northern mountains (he didn't know where) and had run away because his adoptive family exploited him for heavy labor and denied him food if he didn't work. His biological mother, he said, was *loca* (crazy) and gave him away as an infant. Martín didn't know his age, but he looked to be about 10 years old.

He had the motor skills of a five-year-old and a mental age of four. Martín was physically awkward and had a speech impediment. Kids made fun of him, and he easily became angry and upset. But he made an effort and didn't return to the streets. When he transferred to *Casa José María* on Ometepe Island in 2002, the plan was to teach him a simple trade as he likely couldn't learn to read or write.

But Martín surprised us all. He attended the local school, receiving special attention from the wonderful teachers and our staff. First grade was onerous; he passed only by taking a make-up exam. Ditto for second grade. But he was motivated, and proudly learned to read and write. As his confidence grew, his speech became clear. People looked kindly on this spunky kid and he blossomed socially. By third grade, he had more friendships in the community than any kid in the project. At the end of the 2004 school year there was no make-up exam: he passed the first time around. At *Sí a la Vida's* 11th anniversary celebration in February, Martín organized and choreographed a spiffy performance number with several students from the community, and ended giving an extemporaneous speech on community relations to an enraptured audience.

At last ready to reconcile with his family, Martín traveled north in March.

After two days of false leads, Martín and educator Santiago Ortiz arrived at Labú, a wide spot in a dirt road in the northern region. Then it was four hours on foot through mountains and across rivers to the family homestead. The family received Martín with open arms and tears, and asked him to stay. We learned his real name, José Martín Torres Sáenz, and that he is now 17 years old.



suitcase with all his worldly possessions awkwardly balanced in front of him, and headed up into the hills. ✨

Martín returned to Ometepe Island to finish his semester and say his goodbyes. In June, with Santiago and Jonathan, he made the journey home. This time his papa, Don Teofilo, was waiting in Labú with a burro.

Martín mounted, a

New coordinator at *Casa José María*



Luis Mariano Lorío Monge assumed the role of Coordinator of *Casa José María* on Ometepe Island on September 16. Mariano was born and raised on Ometepe and received his primary education at the same grade school our kids attend. He completed high school in Altagracia and technical training in industrial electronics in Granada. Since 2002 he has been an educator and assistant coordinator at *Casa José María*, demonstrating great rapport with the kids and fine administrative abilities.

Mariano, 36, is a member of *Alcohólicos Anónimos* and in October proudly celebrated 10 years of sobriety. His own experience with addiction brings a personal touch to his work with the kids. When not with *los chavalos*, he spends time with his girlfriend Jessica, and on Saturdays travels off-island to Rivas where he is pursuing a university degree in systems engineering.

Jonathan Roise, co-founder of *Sí a la Vida* in 1994 and coordinator of the Ometepe center since its beginnings in 1999, has a new role as General Coordinator of *Sí a la Vida*. In addition to taking life a little easier, his new priorities include construction of a second *casa* on the Ometepe site to house 15 more boys, and creation of new educational and job-training opportunities for older kids. He will continue to reside on Ometepe Island. ✨

Natural phenomena on the loose



Mother Nature dished out a full menu of natural phenomena to jittery residents and staff at *Sí a la Vida*'s center on Ometepe Island, and in October to our Managua center as well.

On July 28 Concepción Volcano on Ometepe spewed columns of ash, beginning its most active eruptive period since 1957. Periodic ash eruptions continue as we go to press, but there are no clear signs of an imminent larger eruption.

Casa José María is within four miles of the crater but on the leeward side of the volcano, and has received only light dustings of ash. The Altagracia community, which includes *Sí a la Vida*, has made plans and preparations to deal with a major threat, should it come.

On August 3 a major earthquake (magnitude of 6.3 on the Richter scale) occurred in Lake Nicaragua, just off the south end of Ometepe Island. The major jolt at 6 a.m. got everybody out of bed and out the door. It was felt throughout Central America but because it was offshore, there were no deaths or major damage. Aftershocks — more than 1,000 and many of them severe — went on for weeks. Meanwhile, the kids learned a lot about seismographs, slip faults, continental plates, etc.

At the end of October, Hurricane Beta struck Nicaragua from the Caribbean, hitting the center of the country's Atlantic coast and heading straight for Managua. Fortunately, it dissipated before reaching the populous western side of the country, but not before sensationalistic TV coverage made nervous wrecks of everyone. ✨

— Articles and photos in this newsletter provided by Jonathan Roise and Brian Vaughn.



Scholarships for staff and kids = success

A stable and well-qualified staff is essential to the success of our work with street kids. To encourage staff members to continue their education and to stay with the project, *Si a la Vida* created the John Dunn Scholarship Fund. It honors John Dunn, a friend and supporter. After his death in 2001, his family established a small foundation that donates to projects he valued. *Si a la Vida* is grateful to be a recipient of this support.

Since the scholarship program began, seven staff members and the son of another have benefited: Mercedes Palacios prepared for and passed her bar exam. Social worker Juanita Gutiérrez received her bachelor's degree in teaching and school administration. Educator Yolanda Gutiérrez took a computer course. And her son Reynaldo García received his bachelor's degree in civil engineering.

Current scholarship recipients include Ometepe coordinator Mariano Lorío, who is studying systems engineering. Psychologist María Eugénia Cisneros and Managua coordinator María de los Angeles Pérez are studying toward law degrees, and Juanita Gutiérrez is studying international relations.

Usually recipients attend Saturday university classes oriented for mature working students. Our fund provides a monthly stipend covering 75 - 90% of costs, including tuition, books and transportation. The average monthly stipend is about \$40.

In addition to being a very attractive employee benefit, scholarships allow staff members to continue growing and developing as individuals, benefiting *Si a la Vida* and our resident kids.

The program began with a donation of \$5,000 in 2002. Existing funds will be exhausted in 2006. We are hoping for earmarked donations to continue this popular and successful program for staff scholarships.

The kids of *Si a la Vida* benefit from the Jim Parker Scholarship Fund, which supports technical training and higher education for former residents. The fund is named in honor of the late grandfather of Adriana Vanbianchi, a former project volunteer.

Computers are the current rage, and three *Si a la Vida* graduates are receiving tuition for computer courses in their hometowns, all in northern Nicaragua. Two of the three — Marvin Molina and Henry García — are also in the third year of high school and thinking seriously of going on to university after graduation.

We welcome donations to help Marvin, Henry and others make their dreams become reality. Donations to *Si a la Vida* earmarked for kids' scholarships would make a big difference in a child's future. ☼

Preparing kids for life after *Sí a la Vida*

by Jonathan Roise, General Coordinator of *Sí a la Vida*

We have to do more so that kids leave the project better prepared to manage the challenging life in Nicaragua.

What awaits kids after leaving *Sí a la Vida*? Many successfully continue their education or learn a trade. However, some boys reintegrated with their families have had serious problems — dropping out of school, stealing, using drugs, and going back to the streets. In Managua, violence is common. For older boys without families they can return to, there are no residential institutions anywhere in Nicaragua.

Sí a la Vida's focus has been to rehabilitate street kids and return them to the community and their families. In reality we often must choose between two bad alternatives: return boys to families where we know they will fail due to lack of support — or keep them, institutionalizing them and turning *Sí a la Vida* into an orphanage.

Offering boys the opportunity to learn a marketable trade is not the first step.

Vocational training is valuable but it's not the first step to help *Sí a la Vida* graduates thrive. Consider that:

- Nearly all the boys in our project lack the basic educational skills required for any vocational training. Such courses require completion of primary school at a minimum, and often one to three years of high school.
- Many of the boys are not interested in a technical career.
- Our boys are, on average, five years behind their age level. This isn't due to lack of intelligence. Nearly all come from poverty where education is not valued, so most are illiterate when they enter *Sí a la Vida*.

Every year, with tutoring, these boys perform better than the average at the public school. In larger towns, Nicaragua has a good program that allows older students to complete primary school in three years rather than six. On Ometepe Island, this program is not offered. We negotiated with the public school for accelerated achievement for some boys, and this worked well for two years. Now the Ministry of Education has decided this doesn't fit with its rules, and cannot continue. So why not create our own school? Aside from cost, it would eliminate the daily socialization that is part of public school and essential to our program. It helps replace the self-image of being a rejected street kid with the image of being a legitimate member of the community.

We must develop an option to accelerate the public grade-school education so older boys can rapidly get the educational skills required for vocational training.

Sí a la Vida must ensure that each boy who leaves the program after a long-term stay has graduated from primary school. We will continue to negotiate with the Ministry of Education so that an accelerated program for older students is offered in the local primary school by the end of the 2006 school year.

Once that is in place, we should develop options for technical training for those seeking it — for example, provide resources in Managua to help kids take advantage of the many training centers there, and/or establish a vocational training center on Ometepe (which currently has no such resources for anybody).

What do the boys aspire to be? They're about equally divided between wanting to be policemen, tradesmen (mechanics or masons), or professionals (doctor, lawyer or engineer) — along with one aspiring taxi driver. Requirements for these occupations vary. Our challenge is to develop options, including scholarships, so that each boy has the opportunity to fulfill his dreams. ✨

About *Sí a la Vida*

Sí a la Vida was founded in 1994 to rescue kids living on the streets of Managua. Many are runaways from very poor and troubled homes. Many are addicted to sniffing glue, which banishes hunger pangs.

The project strives to rescue, rehabilitate and reintegrate kids into their communities. *Sí a la Vida* has two centers: At *Casa Nuevo Amanecer* in Managua, about 30 boys receive care each year, with about 12 in residence at any time. After they unlearn the habits of street life, the boys go to our center on Ometepe Island, *Casa José María*, where the focus is on public schooling.

Sí a la Vida also provides the basics for survival (shelter, food, clothes, health care),

teaches responsibility, and offers opportunities to earn money.

The kids range in age from 8 to 16. The average stay is about 2.5 years. Each of our two centers has about six staff members as well as long-term volunteers. Annual expenses for *Sí a la Vida* total about \$85,000.

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Please be generous. We depend on your support.

Your donations make a huge difference in changing lives for the better —

- \$54 supports one boy for a week . . . \$550 pays for three staff members for a month
- \$100 buys two bicycles \$1000 buys uniforms and school books for a year

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

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News From the Nicaragua Street Kids Project

Fall 2005

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