

News from the Nicaraguan Street Kids Project – Managua & Ometepe Island – Fall 2008



This year *Sí a la Vida* celebrated its 14th anniversary. Since its founding, the project has grown but the focus has remained steady: to rescue glue-sniffing kids living on the streets of Managua and – if possible – help them rehabilitate and then reintegrate with their families. *Sí a la Vida* has now helped hundreds of boys and young men from poor and troubled homes to turn around their lives. While many are illiterate when they join *Sí a la Vida*, graduates of the project's second phase on Ometepe Island now include high-school and even college-level students. In this annual newsletter, *Sí a la Vida* co-founder Jonathan Roise (at left) shares stories of a few of *los chavalos* (the kids) and some of the highlights and the challenges of the past year, and volunteer project treasurer John Riess provides an update about project funding.

One of *los chavalos*: William Velásquez

William, 14, does things in a responsible, thoughtful way. He didn't go to the streets of



Managua to escape a dysfunctional home, but rather to earn money for his impoverished mother and stepfather, starting when he was 11.

Soon he was living in a public market and, due to the influence of other kids, within a year was living

in the streets and sniffing glue – but only after work, he says. (He says when he is 19, he will decide what vice to have as an adult. One option he mentions is to drink one beer every year; another is smoking.)

Meanwhile, he loves school and was the outstanding student of *Sí a la Vida* in the 2007 school year. Illiterate when he came to us, he is now finishing fourth grade of accelerated primary. He wants to take advantage of what the project offers, and would like to complete a couple years of high school and then learn the carpentry trade. In *Casa José María* he likes computer classes and folkloric dancing, but he isn't a fanatic about weaving *pulseras* like most of the kids are. William has a girlfriend his age who is in her second year of high school; he often walks her home after school, but he hasn't yet met her parents.

When he is ready to leave the project, William could live with his responsible and caring father, who manages and lives in a billiard hall in a northern town – but William is concerned he might fall into vagrancy in that environment. More likely he will live with his paternal grandmother Ortilia in Managua, with whom he is in almost daily contact by telephone.

Another *chavalo*: Miguel Angel Mendoza Vivas

Miguel Angel, 16, was referred to *Sí a la Vida* three years ago by Nicaragua's social welfare ministry after neighbors saw the maltreatment he was receiving at home. Mother and stepfather were drug addicts, constantly fighting with Miguel. It was no surprise that he developed an insolent and violent character.

After two weeks at *Casa Nuevo Amanecer* he left for the streets, but came back on his own. Transferred to our Ometepe Center in 2006, his first year was marked by emotional turmoil, violence and bad behavior, and he flunked school. In 2007 he passed fourth grade but still had conflicts and violent episodes.

This year Miguel Angel turned around and is becoming a considerate and centered young adult, responsible with his schoolwork and his duties at the center, respectful of others and always willing to lend a hand. In April 2008 he decided he was ready to go home but in two months was back, leaving a situation where the mother is now selling cocaine and marijuana.

It is common for *Sí a la Vida* boys to express love for their mothers in spite of the maltreatment they have received.

What is unusual in Miguel's case is that his mother expresses openly that she hates her son. Miguel now realizes that she is not a normal

person. He still tries to maintain a relationship, but knows she will probably not be able to give him what he needs from her. Meanwhile, Miguel finished accelerated primary school in November 2008. He wants to begin high school in 2009, and eventually would like to become an educator at *Sí a la Vida*.



Remembering Millie Royce, 1929 - 2008

Mildred Royce died January 8, 2008. Millie and her husband Bob were the founders of our support group in the U.S., *Amigos de Sí a la Vida*. I met Bob and Millie through University Friends Meeting in Seattle in 1993, after I returned from directing the Quaker Center in Managua. I talked in the meeting about what I felt as a calling to return to Nicaragua to work with street kids. I hardly knew Millie and Bob, but they invited me to dinner at their apartment. Though they had little money themselves, they wanted to support my calling and offered to raise funds for my personal support. Amazed at this gentle, good-hearted couple, I thankfully accepted.



Once I started working in the streets of Nicaragua, Millie and Bob began producing a newsletter. As the project evolved and the work grew, instead of feeling overwhelmed, they intensified their efforts and brought in other volunteers. And when the *Sí a la Vida* boys began to weave beautiful friendship bracelets, Millie, a gifted artist, threw her talents into promoting sales. She created inspiring displays featuring the boys and the project. The masthead of this newsletter is another of her creations. With Bob, she twice visited Nicaragua, teaching art to the boys. Millie's art, gentle poetic temperament and fluid writing inspired us, helped make *Sí a la Vida* successful, and helped turn many young lives around. Thank you, Millie, for touching our lives. — Jonathan Roise, co-founder of *Sí a la Vida*

Sí a la Vida 2008 highlights

- **Volunteer Dortje Treiber and family formalized a new support group in Germany for *Sí a la Vida*.** *SiembraFutura* (Sowing the Future) has been supporting us through sale of *pulseras* in German schools, and this year financed the pilot residence program in Managua (for graduates seeking technical training or higher education) and two new computers, and sent volunteers to our centers in Managua and Ometepe for one-year stays.
- **Sales of *pulseras* topped \$4,500 for the year.** Profits from sales (internationally and in Nicaragua) of friendship bracelets were used to cover most educational expenses of residents and graduates (school supplies, backpacks, uniforms, shoes, etc.), purchase of bicycles for boys who successfully complete a school year with *Sí a la Vida* for the first time, costs of celebrating our 14th anniversary, and a five-day field trip down the historic Rio San Juan for 11 kids. Creating beautiful *pulseras* helps the boys gain skills and self-esteem, as well as earn pocket money – several bought clothes and shoes with their money, and one bought his own cell phone.
- **Production and sale of plantains netted \$3,300 in past year.** These profits generated at our Ometepe Island center support our general operating budget. The *chavalos* of *Casa José María* contribute major labor to this self-support effort by planting and fertilizing, clearing underbrush, and harvesting the crop.
- **Tomie Hamada began a two-year commitment in Managua.** Tomie is our third volunteer at *Casa Nuevo Amanecer* from the Japan International Cooperation Agency, the group that coordinates development assistance for the government of Japan. Another Japanese volunteer, with training in the area of health, will be assigned to *Casa José María* in January 2009. Ty Wilson, the third Peace Corps volunteer at CJM, completed his service in April.
- **Use of cell phones is helping reunite kids with their families.** Use of cell phones has blossomed in Nicaragua, even among the poor, and this makes it much easier for *Sí a la Vida* kids to contact their families. On Ometepe, on most evenings the kids can go into town after dinner for an hour or two. They play games, visit friends and girlfriends, and “call home” using the project’s office phone. This frequent communication helps the kids stay in touch with families and helps families understand and track their kids’ progress. Previously, contact was limited to visits to Managua during school holidays, and occasional visits by parents to the Island.
- **Computer classes at *Casa José María* are still highly popular.** International volunteers teach basic computer skills and use of the Internet four times a week. Almost all the boys have e-mail addresses and exchange messages with friends in Spain and the U.S. Computer skills are a big advantage for future employment and, as the boys gain computer skills, they also improve their reading and writing. In September we replaced older computers (damaged by an electrical problem and the severe climate) with three new ones. This year the *Red Libre* (free network) initiated by folk from Bainbridge Island, Washington, sister island to Ometepe, moved its antenna to the roof of the boys’ dorm after vandalism and theft at its previous location at the high school. Our boys now have an improved, stable Internet connection.

Juvenile violence grows in Nicaragua, impacts *Sí a la Vida* vocational goals for project graduates

Nicaragua, like other Central American countries, is being battered by waves of juvenile violence. Although less intense than the notorious trans-national gang problems of El Salvador and Guatemala, it is a serious concern. This year violence in Managua caused two deaths that deeply affected us, and also forced redesign of our goals for vocational training for boys who have completed the rescue and rehab programs offered at our residential centers.

Two former residents of *Si a la Vida* killed in Managua



Alcides José Rosales Mendoza was one of the first residents of *Casa Nuevo Amanecer* (the project's center in Managua) when *Sí a la Vida* began working with street kids in 1994. He was taught to read and write, learned carpentry, demonstrated responsibility, leadership and an exceptional work ethic, but also earned the nickname "Rambo" for his (nonphysical) aggressiveness and loud voice. After graduating from the project he worked as a painter and responsibly sired a son, Jason. In 2003 a youth gang wielding machetes attacked him. Alcides recovered, but was left with heavily scarred arms and limited use of his right hand. Then, on January 27, 2008 he was shot in the face and killed by a private policeman during a community confrontation over land ownership.



Nelson Antonio Aburto Rodríguez entered *Casa Nuevo Amanecer* in October 2007 with a history of drug abuse and street violence, and transferred to *Casa José María* on Ometepe Island in January 2008. Nelson demonstrated interest and creativity in making *pulseras* but otherwise was in a constant state of anxiety. He was permanently in conflict with other kids as well as staff, always denigrating and cursing almost everybody. He didn't want to go to school. We couldn't reach him, and after four months he decided on his own to return to his mother's house in Managua. Four months later, on July 26, he was shot in the back during a confrontation between two gangs in Managua, and died on the way to hospital. He was 13 years old.

Home for *Si a la Vida* "graduates" fails due to juvenile violence in Managua

In February we undertook a pilot project to provide a Managua residence to enable graduates of *Sí a la Vida* to take advantage of technical training and higher education which are not available on Ometepe.



Four youth, 17 to 20 years old, moved into a house near *Casa Nuevo Amanecer*:

- Michael Antonio Corrales (photo at left) who, after five successful years of turning his life around, enrolled in an architectural drafting course by day in addition to second year of high school at night
- Marvin Joel Molina, in his first year of university (photo next page, upper left)
- Michael Sánchez (photo next page, upper right, with his mother), who enrolled in computer classes and night high school with Michael Corrales, and
- Roberto Fenley, who worked days in a car wash and took high school classes on Saturdays.



For a few weeks all went well for the four – but then the problems of life in Managua began. First, Michael Sánchez and a friend were assaulted in the streets and robbed of cash and cellular phones. Delinquents tried to rob Michael Corrales of his bike as he went to school one evening. He escaped, but a week later the same kids stole the bike. On a later evening, as three of the residents returned home from a visit to nearby *Casa Nuevo Amanecer*, they were assaulted and robbed by a gang. Michael Sánchez was injured (photo at right). He subsequently quit night school and left the house to seek work outside of Managua.



The delinquents continued to threaten Michael Corrales; he decided to also drop night school rather than go alone. He tried to transfer to Saturday classes, but there was no room. One afternoon he visited his sister near the Managua airport and, at 6 p.m., went to a nearby bus stop to return home. He was assaulted by a gang that robbed him (taking money that was the house's food budget) and beat him with clubs until he fainted. He came to and staggered to a nearby gas station where the group again attacked and beat him until he lost consciousness, his eyes open but glazed over, and with no response to external stimuli.

At 7:30 neighborhood kids carried Michael to his sister's house and told her he was dead. The sister called Jonathan Roise by cell phone, not knowing he was on Ometepe. Jonathan called *Casa Nuevo Amanecer* in Managua and with luck contacted Mauricio, the only staff member there who could drive and, as well, knew the location of the sister's house. Mauricio and Juanita, the social worker, rushed to the sister's house, detected a pulse, and careened to the hospital. At 10:30 Michael regained consciousness. Fortunately the attackers had used clubs rather than machetes, and Michael's injuries were not fatal or permanent. Within a month he recovered, and soon was back to playing soccer, his favorite sport.

The day after the assault we closed the pilot project, not wanting to further risk the lives of our kids. Marvin got a spot at a university dormitory, Roberto returned to his aunt's on the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua, and Michael returned to *Casa José María*, where he is now the *promoter*, a highly sought junior staff position for successful graduates of the program.

***Si a la Vida* now focused on training and housing on Ometepe for project graduates**

From this experience *Si a la Vida* learned we cannot safely operate this type of program in Managua with a group of older adolescents living a semi-independent life and going out into the city every day to attend classes. Fortunately, thanks to efforts by the mayor of Altagracia, technical training classes will probably come to Ometepe in 2009. Our thinking at this time is to find a house in the small, safe and peaceful town of Altagracia to house vocational students so our graduates may finish their life preparation in a secure environment, away from the violence of the big city.

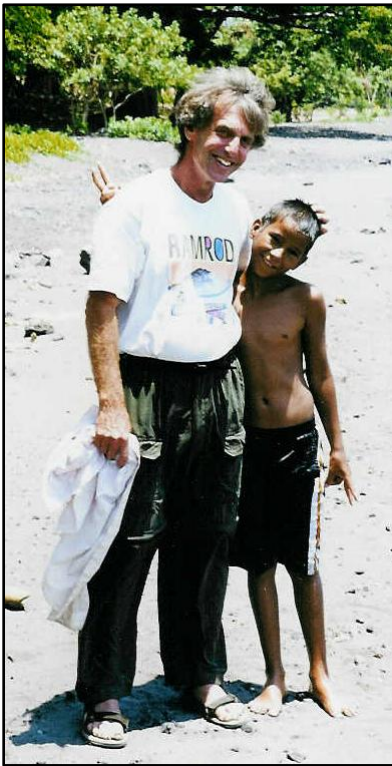
The larger and more diverse training opportunities available in Managua would have been an advantage in responding to the diverse occupational aspirations of the young men – but the need for a non-threatening and non-violent living situation comes first.

– Jonathan Roise, *Si a la Vida* co-founder

International financial aid makes *Sí a la Vida* possible

Asociación Sí a la Vida, the official name for the street kids project in Nicaragua, is incorporated in Nicaragua as a not-for-profit non-governmental organization. Although some of the troubled and at-risk kids in the project are referred by the government's social welfare agency (*Ministerio de la Familia*), the Nicaraguan government does not contribute financially to offset the project's costs to support the referred kids. Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the western hemisphere (after Haiti) and its poverty is the root of the problem of the kids and their families. Government revenues are inadequate to fund basic services such as water and electricity, and even less is available to fund social services such as *Sí a la Vida*.

Sí a la Vida receives its funding almost exclusively from international aid. The five principal sources of support are a German project (*Siembra Futura*), a Spanish organization in Barcelona focused on street kids (*Associació MOSAIC*, a Catalan name), a Canadian organization (OGIFA or Ometepe Gulf Islands Friendship Association), and two groups in the U.S. (*Amigos de Sí a la Vida/Partners for Health*, and our sister-organization BOSIA or Bainbridge Ometepe Sister Islands Association).



The *Sí a la Vida* staff and kids in Nicaragua generate about \$8,000 annually through the sale of hand-woven friendship bracelets called *pulseras* and the sale of plantains (*platanos*) cultivated on the grounds of the center on Ometepe. Those funds pay for extra-ordinary educational costs and are not included in the annual operating budget. The operating budget also does not cover scholarships for kids and staff, which cost about \$2,000 annually and are paid from a separate scholarship fund.

The project's operating budget is approximately \$85,000 (USD), all of which comes from international donations. With this relatively small sum, the project provides street outreach, intake, stabilization, health treatment, counseling, educational tutoring and support, computer and foreign language instruction, supervised recreation, agricultural education, support groups for parents and graduates, and more – all within the context of rescue, rehabilitation, and reintegration. Project costs include:

43%	staffing (salaries, benefits, taxes, professional services)
31%	kids' supplies (clothes, food, health and hygiene, recreation, school)
12%	facilities (water, electricity, phones, repairs/maintenance)
10%	transport (gas, auto repair/maintenance, public transport, parking)
4%	administration (accounting, bookkeeping)
100%	total operating costs

All five of the international aid organizations supporting *Sí a la Vida* are non-profit corporations staffed exclusively by volunteers, with very low overhead. *Amigos de Sí a la Vida*, for example, delivers financial aid, recruits and screens long-term volunteers, gathers and transports clothing, and offers technical assistance – and its overhead (postage, printing, and bank fees) is just 3%. In short, 97 cents of every dollar donated goes to the project in Nicaragua and 96 cents of those dollars received goes to direct services.

– John Riess, treasurer, *Amigos de Sí a la Vida* (in photo with Marvin Joel Molina in Nicaragua in 2001)

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 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 10 in residence at any time. After they unlearn the habits of street life, the boys go to *Casa José María* on Ometepe Island, where the focus is on public schooling. SALV provides shelter, food, clothes and health care; teaches responsibility and offers opportunities to earn

money. The kids range in age from 8 to 17. Average stay is 2.5 years. Each of our two centers has about six staff members plus long-term volunteers. Total annual expenses are about \$85,000.

Contacts for *Sí a la Vida*:

In the U.S.:

Bob Royce
513 Madrona Way NE
Bainbridge Island WA 98110
(206) 842-8517
bomiki@bainbridge.net

John Riess
2823 - 4th Avenue West
Seattle WA 98119
(206) 282-3858
johnriess@comcast.net

In Canada:

Ometepe-Gulf Islands Friendship
Association, c/o Janice Finnemore
2681 Fulford-Ganges Road
Salt Spring Island, B.C. V8K 1Z3
bifnn@shaw.ca

In Germany:

Siembra Futura
Dortje Treiber, President
Münstertalstrasse 34
77955 Ettenheimmünster
Germany
Tel +49 7822 5464
info@siembrafutura.de

In Spain:

Asociación MOSAIC
Amparo Alvarez, Presidente
Tel 93-284-37-98
mosaic@mosaic.org.es

In Nicaragua:

Jonathan Roise
Apartado OR-16
Sucursal Oscar Robelo
Managua 15, Nicaragua
From the U.S.: 011-505-
289-0998 — Managua Center
552-8754 — Ometepe Center
jonathanroise@hotmail.com

<http://www.asalv.org>

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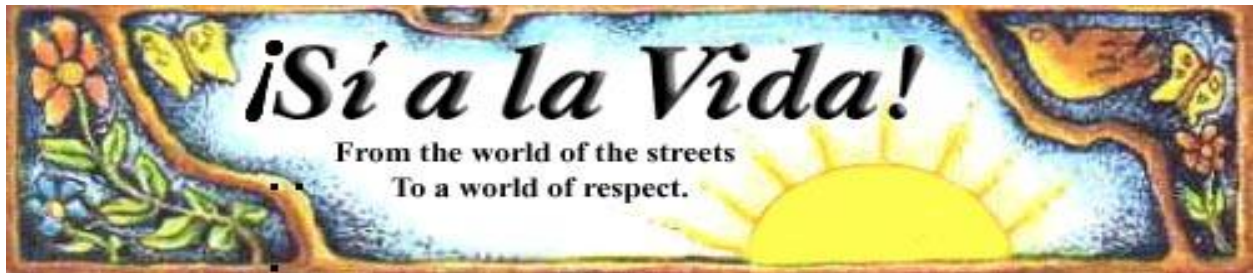
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Inside:

- Stories of some of *los chavalos*, the kids of *Sí a la Vida*
- Remembering Millie Royce, co-founder of our first support group
- 2008 *Sí a la Vida* highlights
- Juvenile violence grows in Nicaragua, impacts *Sí a la Vida* goals
- International financial aid makes *Sí a la Vida* possible