



The Nicaragua Street Kids Project– Managua & Ometepe Island, Nicaragua

“Bob Royce, co-founder of the U.S.-based support group Amigos de Sí a la Vida, describes his most recent visit to the project in Nicaragua” – editor

On December 1st of 2008 I arrived in Nicaragua with my friend Jonathan Roise, Co-founder of *Sí a la Vida* and Coordinator of the project’s center on Ometepe Island. This was my third trip to visit *Sí a la Vida*. I found Managua every bit as poverty ridden and desperate as it had been ten years before. I had no doubt that the number of street kids was greater than ever. Later, I found my guess was correct – more kids on the streets and in the big markets than ever, with addition of gangs involved in increasingly serious crime. I visited our *Sí a la Vida* center the next day and came away with a profound respect for our dedicated staff. They live and work in this difficult place day after day. Without them there would be no way to take boys from Managua’s chaotic streets to Ometepe Island and give them a chance for a decent life.

“Jonathan! Jonathan!” shouted two or three boys from the Project as they ran to his little one-room house in town the first evening we were back on Ometepe. “Otto and Lucas were playing and hit their heads and Otto’s head is bleeding and he won’t go to the clinic to get it fixed.” Jonathan and half a dozen of the Project boys were having cups of hot Maruchan (ramen) and playing card games; their usual evening activity. It took a few minutes for us to get the full story and be in the pickup on our way to *Casa José María*, *Sí a la Vida*’s center on Ometepe. The project is about one kilometer down an impossible “road.” We soon arrived at the center, and Jonathan spent the next couple of hours convincing Otto to go to the clinic and get the gash in his scalp stitched up.

Daily “crises” are almost routine for Jonathan. The boys regard him as their real father; most of them have never had a father, or not had a father who did not abuse them. Jonathan accepts this important role readily and treats the boys with affection and understanding. He and his staff are like good parents. They expect the boys to be responsible, go to school, exercise self-discipline and be considerate of others. I never saw a real fight or serious anger among the 18 boys resident in the two months I was there. Considering the brutal and degrading environment all of these boys came from, this is truly remarkable. Like all boys between 10 to 17 years old, they tease and hassle one another, but they are close friends and hold no grudges. It is this pervasive family feeling that makes this project so successful.

A few days after I arrived one of the boys graduated from sixth grade. In Central American communities this is a red-letter day; it is often the highest grade most students will ever reach. There was a Mass attended by the whole town honoring the graduates, and a celebration in the evening for them and their parents. Most of the boys coming into *Sí a la Vida* are illiterate and have had little or no schooling. For a former street kid to finish sixth grade was regarded as a near miracle. But over the past 15 years *Sí a la Vida* can even boast of several of its alumni attending university and technical colleges. Others are now on the *Sí a la Vida* staff.



Bob Royce