

Sopita's Stories*

Issue 6
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We children have rights, too!

I had never felt like a rock star before, but on November 5th, I certainly felt famous. As I walked up and down the aisles in the auditorium, dozens of children called out to me by name, smiling and waving. One of my favorite things about my job has always been the relationships I have formed with the children and the affection that they have shown for me. That day, nearly 200 of the children from my communities were gathered together for the second annual children's forum, and all of them wanted to talk to me, greet me, and hug me. In fact, when the first bus arrived I was nearly knocked over as dozens of boys and girls ran up in an effort to be the first to give me a hug.

This year, the children's project was smaller than last year, and the program has had to make

do with fewer funds. This means that there were no large-scale events like festivals or field trips in the project, simply the workshops in the communities with children and parents. However, I really wanted to have some kind of big event with the kids. First of all, because many rarely have the chance to get out of their communities to do something fun, and secondly because I felt that the kids had learned a lot during the workshops this year and deserved a chance to share it. Moreover, in order to continue building the children's self-confidence and leadership, it was important to me to have them participate in an activity outside of their communities. Thus by using some of the money designated for snacks in the workshops and convincing my coworkers to donate some *(Forum continues on page 4)*

Oleyda's Gift

When she first held it out to me, Oleyda's gift wasn't much to look at, just a hoop of bent and twisted metal. Yet that small token has come to mean very much to me.

Last year, Oleyda was one of our most faithful participants in our workshops in her community of Nueva Esperanza, but this year has only been able to attend a few times because she has been awarded a scholarship to study at a private school in the afternoons. However, that day she was around because of the national emergency declared after heavy rain caused widespread damage throughout the country (see page 6). Although the week-long torrential rains had stopped, classes were still cancelled as many schools were still being used as temporary shelters. As always when she sees me, Oleyda came running up to the car and gave me a hug before I had even managed to get out of the pick-up truck. Despite being quite a handful and having a tendency to fight constantly with the other kids during our workshops, this 9-year-old girl has a special place in my heart because of her kindness, affectionateness, and generosity. *(Oleyda's Gift continues on page 5)*

Josselyn, a nine-year-old girl from the community Emmanuel explains the right to an education while other children from her community hold the posters they created. The children's forum was a huge success this year, with nearly 200 boys and girls from all six of our communities attending the event in which they presented the different rights they have learned about this year.



*In Latin America, there is a brand of soup called "Maggi," which has earned me the nickname "Sopita" among some of my friends in the Dominican Republic and El Salvador!

El Trabajo

Updates on my work at the Passionist Social Service

Children's Committees

I might not be a parent yet, but I have a heck of a lot of kids. Somewhere around 250. It has taken me two years, but I finally know the names of all of the kids and have formed relationships with each one of them, some deeper than others. Although I only see them once or twice a month, I feel a deep affection for my children, both the most obedient, participative ones and the most challenging, difficult-to-control ones. As I have watched them grow and mature over the years, I have felt a certain pride, not because I am responsible for their successes, but rather because they have grown to be the respectful, intelligent, empowered children I knew they were capable of becoming.

This year we held over 90 workshops with the boys and girls in the different communities and 30 workshops for the parents. With the children we have focused mostly on the issue of human rights, although we have also touched on other themes like gender and sexuality, sexual abuse, self-esteem, the environment, and disasters. With the parents we have talked about themes as

wide-ranging as the law for the protection of children, fomenting responsibility in children, how to talk to children about sexuality, and communication within the family.

During the workshops, over 350 children have participated, some only once or twice and others consistently every two weeks. No matter how exhausted I may be or how much work I have to do, going to the communities always fills me with joy. I love the way the children come running out of their houses to give me hugs, the way even the two-year-olds shout my name when they see me, the way five-year-olds start chatting about whatever has happened to them in the last fifteen minutes. In a culture where few people ever stop to really listen to what kids have to say, I feel that one of the most important aspects of my job is just to sit beside the children and listen. Sometimes at the end of the workshops, we'll form a circle and the kids will all share the best and worst parts of their week. It is in accompanying the children in this manner that I truly feel that I am making a difference. □

Youth Groups

Although my primary job is working with the children and their parents, I have also begun to get more involved in the youth groups from the different communities. I've always enjoyed supporting the large-scale youth events like the leadership school, street festivals, forums, sports tournaments, and field trips, but had never been directly involved in the formative workshops.

At the beginning of the year, I offered to accompany one of my coworkers who was trying to start a youth group in the community Raul Rivas Vasquez where I have worked with the children for several years. Since the community is quite violent and is totally controlled by the gang, my coworker was a bit wary of entering, but things went smoothly and we now have a group of approximately 25 young men and women who meet every week. Several of the youth are active gang members, but they are often the ones that participate most and offer the best ideas. The vast majority of the youth in this community are involved to some extent in the gang, but they have expressed a sincere desire to change their reality and to contribute in a meaningful way to the community. I have felt privileged to be able to accompany their process of formation and growth this year. □



This November we took the youth from the community Raul Rivas to the beach to give them a break from the oppressively violent environment in which they live.

Changes at SSPAS

This year we have gone through several significant changes here at the Passionist Social Service (SSPAS for its initials in Spanish). First of all, the personnel has expanded significantly and this year we had 8 different areas functioning, including the five areas we have always had (Youth and Children's Violence Prevention, "Social Cohesion" which organizes adults in the communities, the Women's office, the clinic, and the Formation and Employment office) and three new areas. These areas include "Culture of Peace" which works with teachers to reduce violence in schools, Restorative Justice which works with youth who have been sentenced to community service for committing a non-gang related crime, and Reinsertion which works with youth who are already involved in the gangs. The plethora of projects this year has allowed us to reach more communities and more vulnerable sectors of the population.

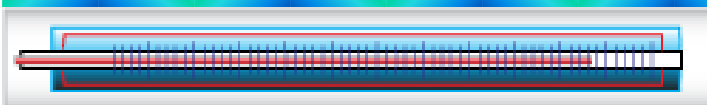
Within the Children's Program, we have also seen changes. Fatima left the position as coordinator of the program to pursue her education and for two months I took over the program as we searched for someone to replace her. At the end of June, SSPAS hired Carolina, a former elementary school teacher, to fill the position. However, the contract was only for three months, at which point the project from which they paid her ended and there were no new projects to cover the position. Thus for the last three months of the year I once more found myself coordinating the program. In January, Carolina will be rehired when the new children's project starts and in the meantime she has been accom-



Parents in the community Chancala Baja participate in an activity during a workshop on gender and sexism.

panying me to the communities when her schedule allows. Although assuming the coordination of the Children's Program has been a lot of work and has been stressful at times, it has also been a great learning experience. I have learned how to manage all the administrative aspects of the program, how to deal with 50 children all by myself, and how to organize large-scale events on my own. Still, I'm looking forward to being a volunteer again! □

Fundraising Update!



\$0

\$6,890
\$8,000

In my last issue, I mentioned that my fundraising goal has been raised to \$8,000 total in order to help cover the costs of my last year here in El Salvador. I am pleased to announce that I have reached **86% of my goal** so far, having raised a **total of \$6,890** to date. Thank you to all of my supporters who have helped me get this far! I only need to raise an additional \$1,110 before June of next year. As you are in the process of making your holiday / end of year donations, please consider supporting my work here in El Salvador. The work that I am doing with the boys and girls from marginalized communities would not be possible without your support!

VMM currently supports four volunteers in El Salvador, four in Nicaragua, and one in Guatemala. The volunteers are from all over the US and work in organizations specializing in many different areas from disaster mitigation to animal husbandry to preschool education to US-Central America solidarity. VMs work as social workers, English teachers, project coordinators, delegation leaders, and much more. Check out the VMM website at www.vmmusa.org to find out about more about the work at the volunteers are doing and consider supporting us! □

What does my money go toward?

During my last year here in El Salvador, I'm hoping to raise \$3,000 on top of the \$5,000 that I managed to raise during my first two years. That money will help cover, among other things, the following costs:

- Health care
- Stipend (which covers housing, food, transportation, etc.)
- Missioner retreats
- Staff support

Missioner fundraising helps cover part of those costs and moreover creates a network of support for the missioner. If you are in a position to support me financially, donations of any size would be greatly appreciated! Donations can be made directly to VMM (which is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit for tax purposes), but make sure that you indicate that the donation is being made on my behalf so that it counts toward my fundraising goal. Donations can be made online at www.vmmusa.org/donatenow.html or by check sent to:

Volunteer Missionary Movement (VMM)
Att: Development Office
5980 W. Loomis Road
Greendale, WI 53129

One quick note on donations: **Please make sure to note that your donation is being made on my behalf so that it counts toward my fundraising goal!** □

(Forum continued from page 1)

funds left over from some of the youth activities, I set about planning a children's forum which we decided to name "We children have rights, too!".

The situation was complicated by the fact that at the end of September, my coworker's contract ended, leaving me as the sole facilitator in the children's program. Thus the vast bulk of the work of organizing the forum fell on me. However, two of my coworkers from the youth program supported me through the process, helping me contact artists, negotiate prices, and coordinate the logistics. My former coworker continued accompanying me to the communities, helping me to prepare the kids, and the day of the forum our whole team and several youth volunteers showed up to help out. Even Father Antonio, the director of SSPAS, attended the event for a while. Still, because I had done most of the preparations, I was awfully nervous the morning of the forum.

The day started out a big rocky because one of the three buses we had hired to pick up the kids in the communities wouldn't start and it took an hour to find another bus to drive the route. Thus the event (like most events in El Salvador) began an hour late. However, from there on, things went smoothly. Every single community showed up – at least 180 children and around 40 adults, although probably more as the process of signing the attendance lists was a bit chaotic and we missed a few of the kids.

The event included a cartoon video about El Salvador's new law that protects the rights of children as well as five different artistic presentations: a puppet show, folkloric dance, modern dance, clowns, and a dance presented by young girls from a community where some of our coworkers have an after-school program. The kids loved



Nearly 200 boys and girls between the ages of 2 and 13 from 7 different communities attended the children's forum this year.

watching the different presentations, participating enthusiastically during the puppet show and the clown's routine.

The best part, from my point of view, was the portion where the children presented and explained their rights. All year, we have been learning about the human rights outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, created by the United Nations in 1989 and signed by every nation except Somalia and the US. In the week before the forum, we visited each community and assigned them 2-5 rights (depending on the number of participants). Each group created a poster illustrating the right and brainstormed ideas of what the right meant and why it was important. During the forum, each group got up and presented their poster and read their explanation.

As I watched the children reading, I was filled with a certain sort of pride. Some of the kids who stepped forward to read had been so shy when I met them that they didn't like to talk even within the workshops in their communities with 25 other kids – and now here they were speaking in front of more than 200 children and adults from different communities. This is the empowerment that we have been seeking to foster in these kids, where they have the knowledge and self-confidence to demand that their rights be respected in front of hundreds of people, including adults from their community.

They spoke of the right to life, food, shelter, clothing, family, health care, education, recreation, an identity, and a clean environment. They explained that the right to life meant they had a right not just to be born, but also to live a dignified life where their basic needs are met. Moreover, they pointed out that they have the right to enjoy life, to be happy, to be respected, and to receive love. They clarified that the right to shelter meant a home with electricity, running water, and a legal title to the land (which many people here lack). They spoke of the need to have adequate school supplies in order to fulfill the right to an education and the need for access to affordable medicine for the right to health care. They talked about the need for recreation because through play children learn to respect one another, to follow rules, to work as a team, and to make friends. They reflected on the need to have communication with family members living in other countries in order to meet their right to a family. They spoke of their right to be protected from drugs and child labor, and their right to express themselves – and to be listened to and taken seriously when they speak. They addressed their right to live in peace, free from guns, drugs, gangs, abuse, and domestic violence. They spoke of the right to be free from discrimination based on age, race, gender, religion, income level, disability, or any *(Forum continued on page 5)*



Diana and Emerita, girls from the community Próceres Oriente share their interpretation of the right to live in peace as other children from the community hold up the poster they made to illustrate peace filled with flags, doves, hearts, and safe communities. For the children in many of my communities, this is one of the rights that they most fervently wish were respected.

(Forum continued from page 4)

other characteristic. They also presented their responsibilities as children such as helping out in the house, going to school, and respecting the rights of others.

After all of the presentations, we ended the event with the kids' favorite part – a batucada, or drum line, from one of our youth groups. By the end of the presentation, over half of the kids and even some of the adults were up on stage dancing to the music. After taking a group picture, we finally sent the kids off to the buses that would take them home. Although I felt totally exhausted as I headed home, I was also very pleased with everything that we had accomplished. The kids had enjoyed themselves immensely, they had shared what they knew, and the adults from the communities and my coworkers got a chance to see just how much my kids are capable of. Although some of them are only 5 or 6 years old, these children from poor, marginalized communities are already able to stand up and defend their rights and the rights of others. Imagine what they will be able to accomplish when they are 15, 25, or 50 years old. □

Oleyda drawing during a game of Pictionary during a workshop on human contributions to natural disasters. Oleyda is one of the most enthusiastic participants in our workshops. One of the things that I love about her community, Nueva Esperanza, is that when I show up all of the kids come running out to greet me. Every one of them pitches in to help set up for the workshops, as well, with even the three-year-olds helping to carry chairs over from the nearby house where they are stored!

(Oleyda's Gift continued from page 1)

It was at the end of our workshop on self esteem, during an activity where the kids walked around writing positive comments about one another on sheets of paper taped to their backs, that Oleyda came up to me with the offering in her hand. "Do you want this?" she asked me shyly, the metal band lying in her outstretched hand. Examining the object, I found it to be a thin, very dented bracelet with a tiny bell attached. I slipped the metal around my wrist, thanking the young girl for her thoughtfulness.

Back in the office, I did my best to form the malleable bracelet back into a more or less circular shape. It's not the prettiest piece of jewelry, but I wear it every day. Its special quality comes not from any inherent beauty or value, but rather in the love and generosity it symbolizes for me. The Nueva Esperanza is perhaps the poorest of the communities that we visit, yet it is the one where I have received the most gifts, from stick-on earrings to candies to handwritten notes. What I love most about the bracelet is the little bell that jingles when I move my wrist. The sound is a reminder for me of why I am here and of the children for whom I am working. In the stressful moments and in the midst of the never-ending institutional drama, I give my wrist a small shake to hear that faint jingle of affection in order to remember that in spite of all of the difficulties and the disappointments, my work is worth it because it brings joy to the boys and girls like Oleyda that I love so much. □



Cuentos: Stories from the communities

This year's disaster

Every year it is the same. September, October, and November are El Salvador's rainy season, and every year for as long as I have been here, torrential rains cause a disaster in the country – and this year was no exception. From October 10 to 19 heavy rains poured down more precipitation on the country than during hurricane Mitch in 1998. This year it wasn't a hurricane. It wasn't even a tropical storm. Its official title was nothing more than "Tropical Depression 12-E", yet it left 34 people dead, 55,000 evacuated, and nearly one in twenty Salvadorans directly affected. Across Central America, the total was 105 dead and nearly a million displaced. The total economic impact in El Salvador in terms of damage to homes, schools, bridges, and other infrastructure; ruined crops; environmental damage; and lost wages has been estimated at between eight hundred million and one billion dollars.

This was the first year that Mejicanos, Ayutuxtepeque, and Cuscatancingo, the three municipalities where SSPAS works, were affected to a large extent. Just in the Montreal, there were 6 temporary shelters open, and 2 more within a few blocks of the parish, mostly in the parish's chapels and in community buildings. Luckily, the area managed to get through the rains without any loss of life or significant property damage. However, in



Bryan, a five-year-old boy from the community Chancala Baja shows off his drawing illustrating his desire to become a police officer when he grows up "in order to help people and to keep them safe."

another part of Mejicanos a 19-year-old woman was killed when a landslide caused the wall of her house to collapse on top of her, and several houses were destroyed in Ayutuxtepeque. Now that the rains have stopped, most of the people in shelters have returned to their homes, but they continue to live in highly vulnerable situations, where another hard rain or a minor earthquake could cause landslides to demolish their houses or even wipe out their entire neighborhood. In some places, the rains *(Rains continues on page 7)*

Another hole in my heart



Children from the community Raul Rivas, where earlier this year a twelve-year-old and a fourteen-year-old were kidnapped in front of their school and killed.

As soon as I heard the news, I felt my heart skip several beats. The music and laughter of the street festival died away as the breath caught in my throat and my brain felt numb. My coordinator repeated the information: Two boys, aged 12 and 14, from the community Raul Rivas had been found dead. My brain raced through the faces of all of the boys of that age that I had met during the two years I had worked in the community with both the children and the youth. Rolando and Ricardo, brothers of 12 and 14, who lived near the community building where we held our workshops and who attended nearly every month. Cesar, 14, who had started out in the children's group but now had passed on to work with the youth and who was now getting more and more involved in the gang. Anthony, Kevin, Emerson, Irvin, and Gerardo, all about that age, who had up until last year been consistent participants in our workshops but whose parents won't *(Hole in my Heart continues on page 9)*

Cuentos: Stories from the communities



Children from the communities Iberia and San Juan play a cooperative game during a workshop on the right of children to recreation. During the rains in October, the community center where we sometimes hold workshops was turned into a temporary shelter, housing several families, including one of the children from the group.

(Rains continued from page 6)

washed out the hillsides by people's houses so that a corner of their home hangs out in thin air with nothing below it.

Other areas of the country were hit much harder. In the Lower Lempa river basin, flooding caused water levels to reach the roofs of the houses and many were forced to evacuate by boat, leaving behind everything. Many houses were left uninhabitable and families have lost eve-

rything – their homes, their crops, and all of their possessions. As much as 70% of the corn and bean crops have been lost, so food costs are expected to skyrocket again this year. Many farmers had been reporting their best crops in years, and now have been left with nothing. For more information about the effects of the rains in various parts of the country, check out my friend's blogs: <http://friendsofsantamaria.blogspot.com/> (Beth Tellman, a fellow VM, Santiago Texacuangos), <http://www.share-elsalvador.org/category/blog> (SHARE foundation, another VMM partner organization), and <http://voiceselsalvador.wordpress.com/> (Voices on the Border, which works in the Lower Lempa region, where my friend Rosie works).

One thing, however, was clear about this year's disaster: it was anything but natural. The general consensus here is that the significant increase in intense weather events in *(Rains continues on page 8)*

Celebrating a Life of Service

After a week of torrential rains that left 34 people dead throughout El Salvador (see page 6), we heard news of another tragic death this time from a different cause. Father Dean Brackley, a Jesuit priest at the UCA (El Salvador's prominent Jesuit university) and co-founder of the Casa de la Solidaridad study abroad program I attended, had died at the age of 65 after a struggle with pancreatic and liver cancer.

Dean Brackley was born in New York and entered the Jesuit order at the age of 18. When the 6 Jesuit priests at the UCA were brutally murdered by the army in 1989, Fr. Brackley volunteered to move to El Salvador to replace one of them. When he came down in 1990, he made El Salvador his new permanent home, even becoming a naturalized Salvadoran citizen. In his 21 years in the country, Fr. Brackley, or "Padre Dean" as he was affectionately known, made his mark on the lives of many Salvadorans and US citizens. He taught classes in philosophy and theology at the UCA, administered the university's School for Religious Education, and began a scholarship program for promising low-income students.

He also served as parish priest, first in the community of Jayaque on the outskirts of San Salvador where one of the murdered Jesuits had served and then in the marginalized urban community of Las Palmas. Along with Kevin and Trena Yonkers-Talz, Fr. Dean founded the Casa de la Solidaridad study abroad program to allow students from the US to experience and be transformed by the reality of the poor of El Salvador. This semester, the Casa has opened their new program in the Philippines. Fr. Dean was also host to countless delegations from the United States, serving as a bridge to communicate the reality of El Salvador to foreigners just catching their first glimpse of the country.

Dean Brackley was the person who gave one of the most important talks during my orientation to El Salvador back in 2007. He talked about opening oneself up to experience the reality of the country and being willing to be broken and changed by that reality. He introduced me to the concept of being "ruined for life" that has since been a central theme of my time here. Moreover, Fr. Dean has *(Dean Brackley continues on page 9)*

Cuentos: Stories from the communities



Wendy, a young girl from Chancala Baja, gives her opinion during the children's forum.

(Rains continued from page 7)

the region in recent years is due at least in part to global warming. While there were fewer deaths this year than in previous years (Hurricane Mitch left over 50 dead), more could have been avoided by mitigation projects in high-risk areas. In many places everyone knows that inhabitants run a serious risk of landslides, but people simply get used to the danger because they have no resources to move somewhere else. The government doesn't have the resources, either, to undertake the necessary risk-management steps or to relocate the tens of thousands of at-risk families. In the Lower Lempa region, many communities point to the hydroelectric dams as a factor in the devastating floods. Because of the increased water pressure, the dams released overflow for up to 12 hours at a time at a rate three times what the levees could hold. Community leaders explain that the dam could have released water at a slower rate but refused to do so because it would have resulted in a loss of profits.

As I visited different communities and talked with people in high-risk situations, I found another highly frustrating obstacle to protecting lives: people's unwillingness to leave their homes. Time after time, we arrived at someone's home with an overhang just waiting to crush their house, and when we offered to take the family to a shelter we received the same reply: I can't leave the house unattended because we'll be robbed. Many of these families live in shacks made of corrugated tin or have doors that don't even lock. They are afraid (with reason) that their homes will be looted of the possessions that they have worked their entire lives to acquire. Over and over we repeated the same argument: possessions can be replaced

– lives cannot. While people agreed, many just were not convinced that the danger was imminent enough to justify risking the little that they had. Here, too, machismo reared its ugly head forcing women to stay in their homes when they were inclined to leave. Many women answered our entreaties with "I'd have to talk to my husband/son/brother/father." Without permission, they couldn't leave the house. The men often wanted to stay in order to take care of their possessions and were more often than not unwilling to let their wives spend the night without them in a shelter, even for their own safety. Many of the victims of this year's storm were precisely those who stayed after being told or even ordered by the authorities to leave.

The US ambassador to El Salvador responded to the situation suggesting that it was useless to look for someone to blame for the disaster and that it would be a better use of time to focus on rebuilding the country. The ambassador's suggestion is like saying that we shouldn't look at the causes of traffic accidents because it is more important to take victims to the hospital. Of course it's important to focus in the moment on saving lives and meeting immediate needs, but if we ignore the root causes we can't hope to prevent more disasters in the future. Since the US is one of the largest contributors to global warming and it profits greatly from the global capitalist system that keeps most people in poverty, it is not surprising that the ambassador was eager to focus on the symptoms rather than the causes of the disaster. However, if we hope to prevent the loss of life in future years, we must come to terms with the human contributions to El Salvador's "natural disasters". □



Girls from the community Próceres Oriente after a workshop about human rights.

Cuentos: Stories from the communities

(Hole in my Heart continued from page 6)

allow them to go to the youth meetings for fear that their spending time with the older boys will end up with their getting mixed up in the gang. Isaías and Samuel, twelve-

The youngest members of the children's committee in the community Nueva Esperanza show off their drawings.



(Dean Brackley continued from page 7)

been an example to me throughout my years here that solidarity *is* possible, not just in words but also in actions. He taught me that being a foreigner in a poor country demands humility but not inaction and that we must develop a new way of looking at the world to identify joy and resurrection as well as injustice and death. That Fr. Dean lived out what he preached was evident at his wake at the UCA chapel: the building was overflowing with people – Salvadorans, gringos, students, professors, community members from Jayaque and Las Palmas – and many who could not fit inside participated in the Mass through the large glass windows. It was a sad occasion as we remembered a man who had made such a large impact on so many of us, but it was also a joyful one as we celebrated a life lived to the fullest. Perhaps the sentiment was best expressed by Kevin and Trena's six-year-old daughter, Hannah, who refers to Fr. Dean as her uncle: "I'm really going to miss Tío Dean but I'm also glad because now his love will just spread all over the world."

Now it is up to all of us who knew Fr. Dean to carry on his work and to pass on his love for El Salvador and for the poor. We must take up the call that Fr. Dean issued to all of us: "Have the courage to lose control. Have the courage to feel useless. Have the courage to listen. Have the courage to receive. Have the courage to let your heart be broken. ... Have the courage to feel. Have the courage to fall in love. Have the courage to get ruined for life." □

year-olds who still faithfully attend each meeting and are always offering to help us set up. What if it were one of them?

I grabbed my phone and hurried away from the noise of the festival, hastily dialing the phone number of Niña Vicky, one of the women from the community who helps us out with the workshops. When she answered, I told her that I had just heard the news and asked if she knew who the victims were. She assured me that the two boys were not part of either the children's group or the youth group. Apparently the two boys, who were cousins, had been kidnapped in front of their school just a few blocks from the community as they headed home at midday. The frantic search for them had ended in the late afternoon when their lifeless bodies had been found lying in a ditch in a neighboring municipality. While neither of the boys was involved in gang activities, the prevalent theory seems to be that they were targeted because their community is controlled by one of the prominent gangs in El Salvador. The supposed perpetrators are gang members from the rival gang from the community Emmanuel, which is located directly in front of the Raul Rivas. However, no one really talks about the motives, because even speculating on who could be responsible puts people at risk of retaliation from the gangs. From early ages in these communities, people learn to "ver, oír, y llamar" – see, hear, and keep quiet.

Although I did not know either of the victims, I was deeply affected by the news. I had spent many hours working with the children of that community and felt a special affection for those boys and girls who live in a situation of pervasive violence that affects nearly every aspect of their lives. Many of my kids had known the victims, and many were afraid, knowing that they could have been the victim – or could be the next one. Numerous children from the community have stopped attending school altogether, as their parents are unwilling to risk sending them out on their own and are unable to drop them off and pick them up because they work. Since it is necessary to cross in front of rival gang territory to get to either of the nearby schools, families have decided that their children's safety must take precedence over their education. The mayor's office, along with the NGOs that work in the area, has been working on a plan to open a satellite school within the community to attend to these children, but it seems unlikely that they will be able to find qualified teachers who are willing and able to enter the Raul Rivas to teach there.

(Hole in my Heart continues on page 10)

Cuentos: Stories from the communities

(Hole in my Heart continued from page 9)

Since that day at the beginning of August, the community has become even more closed and fearful. Several families have decided to stop allowing their kids to attend our workshops, afraid to let them out of the house after dark even within the community. However, the tragedy has highlighted for me the importance of the work that we do with the children both in the community of Raul Rivas and in the rival community of Emmanuel. If we want a different kind of future, then it is vital that we work today with the youth of tomorrow. We must teach kids from

when they are very small that there are alternatives to violence and that conflicts can be managed with words instead of with guns. In our large scale events (festivals, forums, and field trips), the children from these two rival communities have the chance to get to know one another and play together far from their normal, violent environment. I pray that these small connections, along with the lessons we teach about respect, nonviolence, and cooperation, will contribute to a future where these communities will no longer be defined by their gang affiliations, where children are no longer murdered, and where kids can play and study free from fear. □

Noticias: News from El Salvador

A few of the most important news stories from El Salvador:

- **El Salvador's beach soccer team.** This year, Salvadorans went crazy over their beach soccer team which came in fourth place in the World Cup. The team managed to beat host country Italy in a huge 6-5 upset, and Salvadorans for once had something to be proud of in the sports arena. The best part for many Salvadorans was that the team is made up not of professional athletes but mostly of poor fishermen who grew up playing beach soccer in their down time. Half the team is from a tiny island a 20 minute boat ride off the coast and some don't even have running water or electricity. Normal Salvadorans identified deeply with the team and were proud of what their compatriots accomplished.
- **Progress in the Jesuit Case.** In the middle of the night on November 16, 1989, the US-backed Salvadoran army murdered 6 Jesuit priests—five of them from Spain and one Salvadoran—their housekeeper, and her daughter at the Jesuit Central American University (UCA). In El Salvador there has never been any real justice in the case, as is true for the vast majority of war crimes committed during the civil war from 1980-1992. However, Spain has recently asked for the extradition of 15 Salvadoran military officers who it has identified as the physical and intellectual authors of the plot. El Salvador released the men earlier this year, but has not responded to the formal extradition request presented this month. The US, where two of the officers are living, has not yet indicated whether or not it will allow their extradition.
- **Murder of Juan Francisco.** Tragically, there has been another murder of a young man in the Cabañas region of El Salvador tied to environmental activism against proposed mining projects in the region. Juan Francisco Duran, a thirty-year-old volunteer with a water-rights organization opposing mining in the region, disappeared on June 3rd and while his body was found a day later, it was declared

“unrecognizable” and buried in a common grave. It was not until a week and a half later that the body was identified. All signs point to a politically motivated killing. It would be the 10th such murder in the past two years related to mining and other social activism in the region.

- **Extension of military presence.** Last year when President Funes sent the armed forces out to patrol the streets in marginalized communities like the ones in which we work, he declared that it was a temporary measure put in place for a year to fight the wave of violent crime. However, in May Funes declared that he was extending the presence for another year, despite the fact that there is no evidence that the soldiers' presence has decreased crime and that stories of human rights abuses by soldiers, who have not been trained



Children from the community Emmanuel play a game at the beginning of a workshop on the rights of children with disabilities.

Occupy San Salvador!

On Thanksgiving Day, I gathered in front of the US Embassy with nearly 100 other people, including citizens of the US, Europe, and El Salvador, to express solidarity with the Occupy movement in the States and the Indignados movement in Spain and elsewhere. The group decided on the name “Encachimbados”, a Salvadoran slang word for “indignant”, to identify itself. Salvadoran students stood alongside long-time activists and young gringos to protest a global system that puts the profits of the richest 1% above the basic needs of the other 99%. The effects of that divide is felt even more sharply in El Salvador, and many more Salvadorans expressed support for the protest even though they were afraid to attend (supposedly the embassy takes pictures of anyone protesting and uses that information to subsequently deny them visas to the US).

Organizers (many of them my close friends) issued a press release stating the objective of the protest. They identified three major issues: global capitalism, increased militarization in Central America, and environmental degradation. Here is an excerpt from the press release:

“We specifically demand an end to the following transnational policies in Central America:

- **The Free Trade Model** that destroys local economies, vic-

timizes workers and the poor, and protects corporate interests over national sovereignty. For example, in El Salvador, Pacific Rim, a Canadian mining company, is using a World Bank tribunal to sue the the Salvadoran government for protecting their own environment and communities.

- **Regional Militarization Strategies** that criminalize social protest, subject national security systems to intervention and supervision by the U.S. government and facilitate violent repression of activities that jeopardize the interests of global capital, exemplified by the collusion between U.S. and Honduran political-military forces in the 2009 ousting of President Manuel Zelaya in Honduras. Since the coup in Honduras, farmers, women, youth, the LGBTQ community and activists have been the victims of increasing state repression and human rights violations.
- **Environmental Destruction and Climate Change** that has largely been caused by greenhouse gas emissions of the U.S. and other highly industrialized countries. Central America recently suffered Tropical Depression 12 `E, whose devastating intensity is widely considered to have been a result of climate change. In El Salvador, this storm caused 34 deaths, the evacuation of 50,000 people from their homes and losses in infrastructure and agriculture estimated at 850 million dollars. Meanwhile the U.S. continues to increase its emissions and block meaningful national and international action on global warming.” □

More News from El Salvador

to patrol or interact with the civilian population, are quite common. Worryingly, this seems to set a new precedent of indefinite militarization of poor neighborhoods.

- **New minister of public security.** A couple of weeks ago the Minister of Public Security resigned suddenly (many say under pressure from the US government) and President Funes’s choice for his replacement has caused quite a stir in the region. The new minister, David Mungía Payés, is a former military general. Many citizens and NGOs have decried the appointment as a violation of the spirit, if not the letter, of the peace accords which removed the army from the tasks of public security. People fear that the appointment will lead to increased militarization of marginalized communities and it sets a dangerous precedent of electing military officials to ranking positions in the government.
- **Obligatory military service.** President Funes has introduced a new public security proposal that has become quite controversial—obligatory military service for youth who are at risk of falling into gangs. The program would allow police to identify youth between the ages of 16 and 18 at risk of being recruited or targeted by the gangs and force them—with or without their parents’ permission—to undergo two years of military training (without weapons), civil protection training, rehabilitation and vocational training. However, after the two years, they will return to their same neighborhoods with the same poverty, unemployment, crime, and pressures from the gangs. Many youth are worried that the new proposal could affect them, as most young people from

marginalized communities could be identified as being at risk of falling into the gangs. □



Girls from the community Nueva Esperanza look at a drawing made by a girl in Costa Rica. This year the children participated in an international art exchange program. During the workshop on a right to a name and nationality, the children drew why they were proud to be Salvadoran and then sent off the drawings to a US-based NGO. In return, they received drawings made by students from around the world, including China, Uganda, Haiti, the US, Colombia, and Peru.