Callescuela — A school in a street

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After being ordained in Canada in 1988, I received my appointment to the Spiritan international team working in Paraguay. I joined fifteen other missionaries and began my work in the 'campo', the countryside, about 200 km north of the capital Asunción. During my four years there, I visited the communities of native indigenous people, building relationships, learning the Guarani languages as well as the life and culture of these subsistence farmers.

So much to learn

I had to learn about the events that governed their lives, while trying to forget the concerns, priorities and outlook which I had as a typical Canadian. I had to learn about climate, the seasons for preparing the land, for sowing, for weeding, for fighting insects, for reaping, for selling produce. I had to understand the market factors which kept prices low and the people poor.

And I had to understand how these peasants could be so happy and religious in such difficult circumstances. I began to appreciate the security and support which an extended family can provide and how each village was a social entity serving its individual members.

Another assignment

And then in the year 2000, I was given a totally different assignment in a totally different environment. I was put in charge of the formation program for young Paraguayan men interested in training to become Spiritan missionaries. The student residence was in the heart of bustling metropolitan Asunción, quite near the central market. What a difference from the quiet rural province I was accustomed to!

Night and day big trucks from the interior passed along our street. I often met old friends from the up-country accompanying their produce to the market. The market was a teeming city of its own. This Mercado Central de Abasto was where all produce, local and international, was brought for distribution to local retailers. Here was a mix of urban and rural, legal and illegal, rich and poor, virtue and crime, Guarani and Spanish. I decided that this would be my new mission.

Callescuela

Close to our Spiritan residence I found a unique foundation. Callescuela was a street school, as its name implied, where a Sacred Heart sister and a group of volunteers used the street as a school to serve the local street-kids. Our seminarians began to serve as volunteers and we opened our backyard for football and our house for programs for the street boys and girls.

The program grew and grew and soon our community and its facilities were fully integrated into the Callescuela. Volunteer cooks and food servers took over our kitchen, boys were playing organized football on the street and in our yard, and girls were dancing in our living room. Arts and crafts were being taught in every room in...
the house. Soon street celebrations were organized. What joyful occasions they were, especially the annual fiesta for San Juan!

Meeting the needs of street kids

The volunteer group was now a real community and we began to meet for two hours each week to pray and reflect and plan. By 2003 the Callescuela had expanded in size and diversity. Our bathroom was expanded to provide shower facilities for the children, space was found to provide hair cutting and styling. Embroidery, drawing, painting, model building were taught in available nooks and crannies on the street. Space was made for volleyball and basketball.

We at Callescuela were becoming more and more important in the lives of the preadolescents and teenagers we served. We got to know them as individuals and what it was like to be a street-kid.

Many of the volunteers, realizing the terrible conditions in which these young people lived, wished to bring in doctors, social workers, government educational and career services into our program. But rather than bring in professionals and specialists, the volunteer group, now called ‘Gotas de Amor,’ decided to continue to provide food, community, recreation and fun. We realized that we were not social workers or special educators. We were volunteers with a few hours to spare each week.

The best we could do was build a significant relationship of trust with each boy and girl. They came to us not to see a doctor for their illness, not to earn academic credits to enter university. They came to play, to have fun, to be safe, to celebrate. I stress with our volunteers that the street kids we serve are children; they are persons and not problems to be solved.

Poverty exploits them

Their world is the market where they can do odd jobs for the merchants selling fruit, vegetables, bingo cards, lottery tickets. They collect the discarded, over-ripe and spoiled products using it for food and selling some to people poorer than themselves. They gather waste plastic, cardboard, metal and other junk for sale. Many are vital to the family economy especially if their mother is single, as most are, and has younger children to support, as most do.

Paraguay has adopted the international accords that condemn child labour. But this is not the problem of our street children. It is poverty which exploits them. Poverty denies them an opportunity to lead a normal life of school and leisure. It limits greatly their opportunity to grow, to develop their talents, to enjoy the love of caring parents.

Into the market area

In 2006 a significant change began to happen on the street and in the Callescuela facilities. Now that between seventy and eighty youngsters were availing of the programs, older drug-addicted youths began to appear and take over. The atmosphere on the street had changed.