

Casa Alianza and Children on the Streets of Latin America

An interview with Bruce Harris conducted by Kelly Mannix

Bruce Harris is a renowned human rights activist and tireless advocate for Latin American street children. He is the executive director of Casa Alianza, affiliated with Covenant House, which provides counseling, education, rehabilitation, legal intervention, and a safe, loving environment to Latin American street children. Currently, Mr. Harris is embroiled in a legal battle concerning his role in exposing a baby trafficking ring in Guatemala. Mr. Harris asserted in the investigation report of the Procurator-General's Office that one of the country's powerful lawyers, married to a former President of the Supreme Court of Justice, used her "influence" to facilitate illegal adoptions. She responded by suing Mr. Harris for perjury, defamation and slander. If convicted, Mr. Harris could face up to five years in one of Guatemala's most notorious prisons. In addition, Casa Alianza is currently bringing a case against the Guatemalan state before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, concerning the brutal torture and murder of five street children.

We took a few minutes of Mr. Harris's time to ask him about the work of Casa Alianza.

Kelly Mannix for Refuge: Describe the mandate of Casa Alianza.

Bruce Harris: Casa Alianza works to assist the street children of Latin America, whose numbers have been estimated at 40 million (for all of Latin America). Last year, we assisted some 4,000 children. Our mandate involves helping them, through a four-tier program, to leave the streets and get back on the road to a meaningful and productive life. We try to offer them stability and restore hope. Children trying to leave

the streets are fearful, mistrusting everything and everyone. Casa Alianza gives them the protection and love that they could never find on the streets. Children of any social environment can only grow and mature when they feel secure and protected, and street children are no exception.

Refuge: In the context of Casa Alianza's work, how do you define "refugees"?

Bruce Harris: Many of our children have been internally displaced by civil wars but we don't identify them as "refugees."

Refuge: Which factors contribute to the trafficking of women and children in Latin America?

Bruce Harris: As with many poor countries under economic pressure to develop a tourist industry, Latin American governments tolerate sex tourism, seeing it as an unwanted but unavoidable part of such an industry. That's one factor. Of course for the children and women involved it means that they continue to be seen and treated as commodities. There are also personal factors such as poverty, driving women and girls to prostitution, and parents who will exploit their own children and put them to work as prostitutes.

Refuge: What are the highest priorities of Casa Alianza?

Bruce Harris: One top priority of Casa Alianza is to provide street children with a secure environment in which they can learn to leave life on the streets behind. We teach the kids the value of interpersonal relationships, based on love, trust, respect and honesty. We have to meet their needs, in order to give them a space in which they can focus on their hopes for the future. Our success lies in offering the children the option to leave the streets of their own free will, to reshape their futures.

Our other top priority is to change public opinion about street children, both within their countries and around the world. While uniformed police officers

are often the murderers of street children, they are not solely responsible for their deaths. The biggest killer of these neglected children is indifference.

Refuge: What do you perceive as the most formidable obstacle to Casa Alianza's goals?

Bruce Harris: Indifference! As I said, while it may be an individual or a group of individuals who carry out an act resulting in the death of a child, if as societies we do nothing, we all have our finger on the trigger. We have to fight attitudes that define these children as vermin and use them as scapegoats for all of society's ills.

Refuge: Which Casa Alianza programs have had the most positive impact? To what do you attribute their success?

Bruce Harris: I think all of our programs have had an impact, in that for every child who leaves the streets, their life has been changed forever. Maybe you could look at Guatemala and say we've had more impact there, in terms of time, as it was the first country in which we opened a program (in 1981). When I speak about impact, it's not only the work done within our programs, but also in out-reach work which our teams of educators do on a daily basis. Walking the streets of Guatemala and the other capitals where we have programs, these educators provide the children with emergency medical care, counseling and informal education. To be more specific about concrete achievements, I would have to mention two. First, in the first eight months of this year, no children have been killed by uniformed officers in Guatemala City. Second, in Honduras, as of two years ago, there are no longer children being detained illegally with adults in prisons, a practise which we fought very hard to bring to an end.

Refuge: In addition to an update on the case against you, what are the current legal initiatives of Casa Alianza?

Kelly Mannix holds a Master of Information Studies from the University of Toronto and is responsible for electronic communication and research for the International Women's Rights Project of the Centre for Feminist Research, York University, Toronto.

Bruce Harris: If you would like a detailed update of the case directed at me, please visit our home page at <www.casa-alianza.org> to find an overview of the case. We would appreciate support letters by email to the Guatemalan Embassy at <embaguar@sysnet.net>.

The first case against a state on behalf of children who were the victims of dreadful violations of their human rights by a state will be brought before the Inter-American Court on Human Rights in Costa Rica in January 1999. The case, against the State of Guatemala, clearly documents with horrific photographs, the tortured and murdered bodies of five street children and youths in Guatemala City in 1990.

After four arduous years of fighting to resolve the case within Guatemala's judicial system, and after death threats and the murder of two key witnesses,

Casa Alianza worked with the Centre for Justice and International Law (CEJIL), to bring this case to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which forms part of the Organization of American States. The Commission concluded that Guatemala had violated articles of the American Convention on Human Rights. Guatemala rejected the possibility of a settlement with the co-petitioners and the Commission sent the case to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, where it was accepted last year.

When speaking of torture, normally one thinks of the victims as being adults. But many cases of torture involve street children in Guatemala and Honduras, and there are at least two cases of torture of street children in Costa Rica. With this case, we set a historic precedent that children are also the victims of barbaric acts. It is really shameful that these type

of acts take place and that instead of trying to come to an agreement the State of Guatemala wants to fight.

Since 1977, Casa Alianza has been raising a red flag of concern regarding the growing sexual exploitation of Central American street children by the millions of tourists in the region.

During the past year, sex tourists from the United States, Australia, Germany, Switzerland, and Chile have been arrested in Central America and accused of the sexual abuse or corruption of the region's children. Casa Alianza has legal aid offices in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, where the perpetrators of violence, in any form, against street children are investigated. Where sufficient evidence exists, formal criminal accusations are placed. We have more than 550 criminal cases to date in the region. ■

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