

Giving Opportunity for Peru Street Children

Today, five thousand (5,000) children live on the streets in Cuzco, a small city in the Andean highlands of Peru. In Cuzco, you can find the ancient treasures of the Incan Empire alongside extreme poverty and exploitation, especially of the city's children. Twenty-five years ago, children did not live and earn a livelihood -- meager as it may be -- in the streets of Cuzco. This is a recently lived human tragedy, one that reflects larger trends in Peruvian society, though also one that can be addressed.

Over the past 50 years, failed agrarian reform efforts created strong incentives for peasants from the Andean highlands around Cuzco to migrate to the city in search of work and a higher standard of living. However, Cuzco does not have an economic base that would provide these kind of jobs. Instead of good paying jobs, these peasants were forced to eek out an existence in the informal sector as street vendors and day laborers. Precarious dwellings began to appear in the hills around Cuzco as these working families invaded unoccupied land for a place to live. Even the relatively recent tourist boom has not brought solid jobs to Cusceños, the name in Spanish for people from Cusco. Tourism has created more low-paying jobs that fail to lift most families out of poverty.

At the same time, childhood changed for thousands of kids who otherwise would have grown up in the open spaces of the Peruvian countryside. With mom and dad both working from dawn to dusk to make ends meet, formerly rural children, unaccustomed to the confinement of the four walls of a house, started to play in public spaces. Soon these kids learned that without a lot of effort, well-heeled tourists would give them some spare change, enough income however to make a difference in the family's budget. Today, in addition to the new economy of the street, these children are victims of the social disintegration of the family. Divorce, alcohol and drugs, spouse and child abuse, and sexual exploitation break up these very poor families and make home a place many kids wanted to stay far away from.

Once on the street, these kids are preyed upon by drug dealers and pimps who use children to spur the tourist trade in these vices, causing them serious, lifelong harm. Some kids take up the drug habit themselves after an introduction from an adult. Glue-sniffing is cheap and makes the kids feel powerful and invincible. During the years the Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso) was active in Cuzco, they gave the streets kids something to sell as a way of enticing them into this terrorist organization as young fighters.

Huch Uy Runa is a non-governmental organization that since 1983 has taken kids ages 5-17 off the street, offered them food and shelter, and along with a lot of love and affection, has given them the opportunity to get an education and learn a trade. Huch Uy Runa is Quechua (ancient Incan language still spoken by many in the Andean highlands) for "small worker who carries the community forward." The name undergirds the philosophy of this organization: that inside every "little one" there is someone very "big" and important that is yet to be... but will be.

Every weekday 190 kids come through the doors of Huch Uy Runa for a meal, primary education and training in carpentry, metallurgy, ceramics, music, drawing and painting, dance, baking, and gardening and horticulture. Some are already there, having slept in one of the beds in Casa Huch Uy Runa. Services are not provided in a vacuum, rather Huych Uy Runa has a psychologist, dentist, teachers, dietician, and a nurse that provide necessary support services to these at-risk kids.

These services are provided at very low cost in terms of the United States. However, they are necessary and cannot be continued without support from outside of Peru. For example:

For \$50, Huch Uy Runa can provide three meals a day to five children for an entire month.
For \$16, a child can attend workshops in carpentry, metallurgy and horticulture for 3 months.
Health and dental care can be provided to a child for a year for \$11.