

the school are bilingual Shipibo. "[The students] have to learn to appreciate their culture and to overcome their fears. Some children are reluctant to reveal they are Shipibo," says the head teacher Rosario Amasifúen, also a Shipibo. Having teachers with the same culture and language makes the students feel safe and comfortable and keeps them in school.

In Bolivia, aggressive educational reform that began in 1994 has opened up schools to the indigenous populations. The government created a bilingual education program in the Andean nation's three main indigenous languages: Aymara, Guarani, and Quechua. Instead of translating Spanish language textbooks, teachers have created new textbooks in indigenous languages based on the customs and traditions of the people who speak those languages. In the first year of school, students who speak only Aymara, Guarani, or Quechua will learn to read and write in their native language. They learn Spanish in second grade, and by the third grade, they are expected to read and write at an equal level in both languages.

Another barrier to receiving an education is purely economical. With the added cost of supplies, uniforms, and lunches, many families simply can't afford to send their children to school. Conditional Cash Transfer programs in Mexico, Nicaragua, and Brazil have helped increase enrollment in schools. *Oportunidades*, the most well-known of these programs, began in Mexico in 1997. In this program, the government gives grants to families who keep their children enrolled in school. The grant covers the cost of supplies and any lost income the child could have earned. Brazil's Conditional Cash Transfer program *Bolsa Família* provides money for the

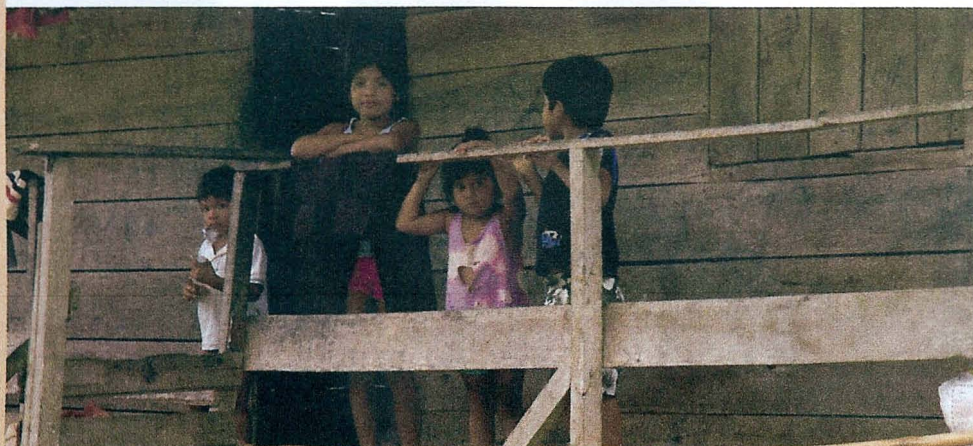
poorest of the poor. According to the World Bank, a supporter of the program, 94 percent of the *Bolsa Família* funds reach the poorest 40 percent of the population. Most of the money is used to buy food, school supplies, and clothes for the children, and the family continues to receive the money only if their children stay in school.

Although Latin America and the Caribbean lead other developing regions in their progress toward the MDGs in child health and primary education, the advances are inconsistent across the region. According to UNICEF, in 2007 child mortality rates were lower in Latin America and the Caribbean than in any other developing region. But progress varied tremendously, ranging from Chile, which had child mortality rates that were similar to those of Europe (less than 9 deaths per 1,000) to Haiti, with some of the world's highest rates (76 deaths per 1,000).

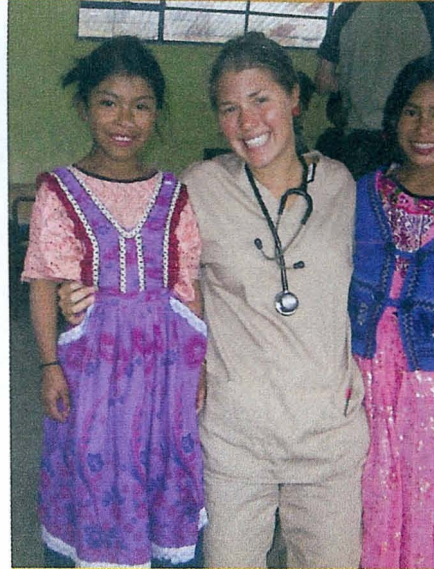
With only five years left to achieve the UN Millennium Development Goals, the heads of state of all participating nations will reconvene in New York this September to assess the progress made thus far and make plans for the future. "We have made important progress in this effort and have many successes on which to build. But we have been moving too slowly to meet our goals," wrote UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. "Today, we face a global economic crisis whose full repercussions have yet to be felt. Rather than retreat, now is the time to accelerate progress toward the MDGs and to strengthen the global partnership for development."

Chris Hardman is a regular contributor to Américas.

Poverty denies children their most basic needs,
decreases their life span, and prevents them from
receiving an education



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Trekking for a Better World

by Michael Ward

The lightning slammed into the ground 50 feet from our campsite on Volcán Tajumulco with a flash and a boom, rattling the tent and shaking our guides. John, a senior guide with Quetzaltrekkers, clenched his fists, covered his ears, and released what surely was some sort of obscenity. But the reverberating, rifle-like crack that followed swallowed his oral assault on Mother Nature. With our campsite located at 12,467 feet above sea level, we waited for the next bolt to hit.

Quetzaltrekkers, an all volunteer, non-profit trekking company, supplies guides to lead different hikes through the beautiful highlands and volcanoes of Guatemala. The company engages volunteer guides, most of them foreigners, and donates all profits to Escuela de la Calle (EDELAC), an organization that provides education and medical care for impoverished local children and shelter for youths at risk of abuse or neglect.

Quetzaltrekkers has been leading treks up Tajumulco—or “TJ” as they call it—for years. The hike is one of the most popular given the status afforded the volcano. This was John’s sixth time up, Chris’s second trip, and his first as lead guide. Neither had seen weather like this. John and Chris are volunteers. No one pays them for this. They set up tents, cook, and manage the logistics of each multi-day hike with only one thought in mind, that their work on—in this case—the highest point in Central America, is helping kids who would otherwise be living in the lowest point in Central America, the streets of Quetzaltenango.

The laughter of children floods the small courtyard of Escuela de la Calle, a school for some of the poorest children in Quetzaltenango. Inside one classroom, volunteer Rose Morgan is busy teaching an English lesson. Rose is a student at Aberystwyth University in Wales who is studying Spanish and art. She stumbled across a volunteer opportunity with Asociación EDELAC when she was searching for a country where she could work on her Spanish for a month.

“We have children who are fourteen years old and working at a first grade level,” says Guadalupe Pos, director of EDELAC. He desperately wants to bring in fulltime counselors and professional support staff to work with these students, but the school simply does not have the resources. The parents of students here need only pay 80 quetzales (US\$10) per year. Currently, they are running a calendar campaign to help raise funds. 20 quetzales buys a black and white calendar featuring some of the kids from the school.

The school bell rings, and the playground in the courtyard is crowded with children. Two young girls grab Rose, and the three start twirling around in a circle, ponytails flying. Rose is nearly twice their size, and her giant steps keep the girls moving quickly. Afterwards, one young girl demands a photo. The two pose against one of the colorful murals that border the basketball court.

Rose’s work is not done. Each day she has at least two charges—José and Alvaro. In reality, José is nine, but malnutrition caused by years of fending largely for himself has given him a tiny frame and small stature. He looks more like five.

Both children come from broken homes, and they now live together in Hogar Abierto (Open Home), an orphanage that is part of Asociación EDELAC and located near the center of Quetzaltenango. Rose walks them home each day.

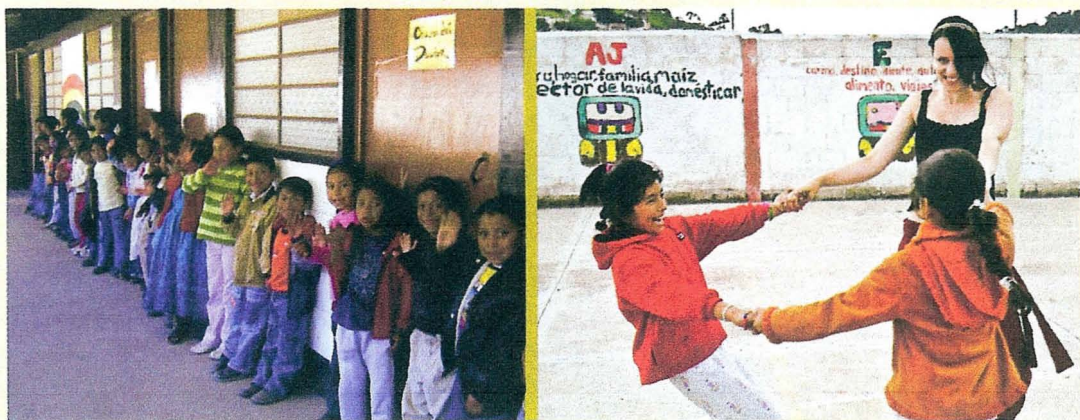
Hogar Abierto, located several blocks from downtown Quetzaltenango, houses up to seventeen orphans. Half of the children are without any parents. The other half has a parent who for one reason or another is incapable of raising them due to alcoholism, drug abuse, or similar circumstances. The home relies 100 percent on proceeds from Quetzaltrekkers and some additional support from local restaurants and bakeries.

Once a week the Quetzaltrekkers have dinner with the children. They rotate between their office in Casa Argentina and the dining room of Hogar. The kids help manage the household chores. Many of these children have been plucked right off the streets and suffer from alcohol and drug abuse problems themselves. Hogar Abierto is able to provide some support to these kids through programs like Alcoholics Anonymous. The Quetzaltrekkers help not only by putting food on the table and getting the children

necessary to make sure that Quetzaltrekkers remains in good hands and that the children at Hogar Abierto are taken care of.

Brendan, who describes himself as a gringo with strong Irish roots, is gregarious and his red beard is neatly trimmed. Before arriving at the Quetzaltrekker office, he spent a year surfing and scuba-diving his way through Central America. He has been a volunteer for four months. “I’m going to stay here awhile,” he says, “because I’ve never done anything this beautiful. No one is losing. No one’s giving anything up.”

I leave Casa Argentina for the last time and head home. Even in mid-summer, the streets of Quetzaltenango can be chilly. The soft, warm glow of bars and cafes attracts tourists and a few locals tonight. But for countless orphans in Quetzaltenango, this night will be spent like every other night, somewhere among the shadows cast by street lamps. In its nearly fifteen years, Hogar Abierto has helped more than 100 of these kids get off the streets, get clean, and learn a professional trade. When they turn eighteen, these children will become adults and start a new life. Volunteers with Quetzaltrekkers are here for what amounts to



Quetzaltrekkers donates all profits to an organization that provides education and medical care for impoverished local children and shelter for youths at risk of abuse or neglect

off the streets, but also by serving as role models for the children.

For Quetzaltrekkers, the minimum volunteer commitment is three months. According to Brendan, a volunteer for several months already, they need the first month to train new guides. Sometimes the volunteer roster is full and they have to turn away potential guides, but at other times, they desperately need the help. None of the guides is willing to leave the organization flailing, however. Their commitment is to spend whatever time is

a relatively short time, but the experience seems to affect them just as much.

“When I go to sleep at night,” Brandon says, “there’s a smile on my face and my heart is glowing, because I know I’m doing exactly the best thing I could be doing in the world.”

Freelance writer and photographer Michael Ward received his master's degree in Latin American development from the University of Texas at Dallas.