

**A year-round VBS;
Bible Studies, classes, counseling works to reach youth in crisis**

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San José, Costa Rica—“I’ll get it,” shouts the boy of about 12 as he scrambles down the steep side of a gully that runs smack through the center of his community.

Barefooted, he jumps from rock to rock across the heavily polluted stream as he reaches out for the soccer ball bobbing in the swift-running current.



A few minutes later, the ball is being wiped off by a Christ for the City International (CFCI) volunteer who is spending a few minutes in an impromptu game before beginning a Bible class for area children.

Across the wide space that serves as the center point of the squatter community of La Cuenca, in Heredia, northwest of San José, the CFCI team is setting up for the morning’s program at a community center that was funded by Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in Menlo Park, California.

“This is like an all-year Vacation Bible School,” explains Kim Barker of St. Paul, Minnesota, who has served with CFCI in Costa Rica for five years. “It’s actually a prevention program for the children. Nobody works with them, but we are trying to gain their confidence and friendship so that we can talk to them about the love of God.”

La Cuenca, where the class is taking place, is part of the sprawling low-income community Guarari where gangs, drug consumption and trafficking and prostitution are widespread.

The homes in La Cuenca are made of scrap tin, cardboard, and wood--often old billboards. They have dirt floors, no glass in the windows and, for the most part, no flush toilets. Many families share outhouses, and the few who have toilets,

have poor septic systems at best; most simply flush out into gutters that run between or into the homes.

The population is made up primarily of illegal Nicaraguan immigrants seeking a better life than they had back in their own country.

“Believe it or not, they are better off here, no matter how bad their situation, than they were in Nicaragua,” Kim explains. “However, many of the children do not go to school, even though education is free. The problem is that they don’t have the mandatory uniforms, the shoes or the supplies that they need to enter.”

Kim says that the majority of families in La Cuenca survive on less than \$80 dollars a month per family. “The cost of entering school is nearly \$100 dollars per child.”

The ministry here is called, “Transformations” and works to prevent young people from drifting into the evils of drugs and selling their bodies that can destroy their lives.



Its founder, Ronald Villalobos, a Costa Rican missionary with CFCI, knows all too well what those destructive lifestyles involve. “I started with drugs at seven years old,” he says. “And, I lived on the streets, in the downtown ‘red zone,’ (red light district) eating from trash piles, hanging out with gangs. I spent 15 years in the red zone.”

“Eventually, I began to consume drugs in order to kill myself. Nobody wanted to be around me. I would wrap 25 packets of marijuana into one cigarette and smoke it all at once.”

“Finally, I went into an Evangelical church because there were a lot of pretty girls there,” Ronald explains; “But they weren’t interested in me. I hadn’t cut my hair in 13 years, I was very skinny, not very appealing. But, I was interested in the pastor’s

daughter!”

Ronald fell under the influence of a missionary from the Latin America Mission who led him to the Lord. From there, he began to visit addicts in their derelict shelters throughout downtown San José and to reach them because he knew what they were going through.

Later, after marrying that pastor's daughter, he began CFCI's Renecer (Rebirth) program designed to rehabilitate adolescent girls who were living on the streets.

Then, two years ago, he saw the need to develop a program to prevent young people from becoming addicted. Thus, he began CFCI's Transformation project, a program designed to transform individuals, families, communities and churches.

"Many of the churches in these communities are small and not open to working together," Ronald explains. "They need to unite to work for the common good of the community."

Ronald reports that in the La Cuenca community, churches have seen a sharp increase in attendance when they started working with small groups of women to improve community life.

"We provide something almost every day here," Kim says. "We teach English as a Second Language and literacy classes for adults, as well as sewing and arts classes."

The ministry also provides free meals in this and other communities one day a week. "Some of those who eat with us haven't had a full meal all week. They exist on crackers and water," Kim explains.

Now, CFCI missionaries want to expand their ministry in La Cuenca by opening a soup kitchen to feed 500 children at least three times a week. But, to do that, they need funds to purchase kitchen equipment and stock sufficient food to develop a long-term program. The start-up costs would be around \$1,700 with a daily expense of nearly \$130.

For now, the ministry provides the "year-round Bible school" and meets other needs as resources are available.

"I know that I'm gifted to work here and I love serving this way," says Kimy Booher of Lexington, Kentucky who is volunteering here for a year. "What we do brings hope to a place that seems hopeless and in desperate need."

Outside the community center, some older boys have picked up the soccer game while a few younger ones trade marbles. Inside, Ronald, Kim and their team guide nearly 30 students through a craft project related to the Bible lesson taught

by Molly McKinney of Trout Lake, Washington who is a student at Scripps College in Claremont, California.

“I hope that what we do will get them into a better life,” explains Molly who served as a volunteer during the summer. “Maybe it’s a bridge out of poverty for them.”

More information about Christ for the City International can be obtained on line at www.cfc.org or by writing to Christ For the City International, P.O. Box 241827, Omaha, NE 68124-5827

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