

**The secret is their teeth;
Child sponsorship means better health, more opportunities**
By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Guayaquil, Ecuador-- “The secret is in their teeth,” says Victor Maridueña Varela as he jumps out of his 4-wheel drive Vitara. Stepping gingerly to try to keep his feet dry Maridueña moves toward a one room hut balanced on stilts above the flood waters. “How many sponsored children live here?” he questions a mother looking out of the front window.

Maridueña, 59, is the President-Executive Director of the Ecuadorian branch of Kansas City, Missouri-based Children International, a child sponsorship development agency. His organization sponsors over 30,000 children in Guayaquil and Quito, Ecuador, providing health care, school supplies, doses of anti-parasite medicine, nutritional and vocational training for mothers, latrines and other social services.

Drawing two of his sponsored children aside, he asks them to open their mouths and display their healthy teeth. “Our (sponsored) children have four health check-ups a year, including dental,” he said. All sponsored children are required to undergo the physical examinations or they cannot continue to receive other benefits.

“I believe that good health will make these children better students. Better students with good health will be better workers. Better workers will earn more money. They will be good for the job market, and with good jobs, with good training, with good health, they will be able to overcome poverty. What we are working for is a better future for these kids by giving a good base right now,” Maridueña said.

But such work is being severely challenged by the effects of the El Niño weather phenomenon that has brought wide spread flooding to the coastal regions of Ecuador and Peru. More than 245 people have been reported killed because of El Niño related causes in Ecuador while over 300 have died in neighboring Peru, the two countries hardest hit by the weather phenomenon. Nearly 21,000 people are reported homeless in Ecuador from a relentless series of floods, mudslides and torrential rainstorms.

In the Duran community, a squatter settlement just outside Ecuador’s largest city Guayaquil, many houses sit isolated by flood waters. Some residents have had to abandon their homes, but the majority wade through standing, polluted water or straddle makeshift wooden catwalks to come and go.

“Every day their property is underwater,” Maridueña said. “Everyday their mattresses get soaked. Right now, because of the flooding and damp weather, we have a lot of fungus disease on their feet and legs and arms, we have a lot of respiratory diseases and gastrointestinal problems and tuberculosis and malaria.” Cholera is endemic to the area but has not shown a major increase in incidence yet. However, Maridueña says he expects that it and Dengue Fever will increase in time.

To address some of the weather-related problems, Children International has distributed posters advising residents how to avoid problems with water contamination, electrocution from wet appliances and how to reinforce their houses against flooding.

Along the coastal lowlands and high in the Andes mountains near Quito where the organization operates other centers and heavy El Niño rains can wash away whole mountain side communities Children International has provided cement blocks and new

roofing material to protect the mostly one-room houses which are all that poor families have.

“I am trembling thinking about what is going to happen in the month of June when the rains stop. That is when all of our problems are going to come together,” Maridueña said. “There will be a severe lack of food, because you see people cannot grow anything now because of the flooding. The banana plantations are gone, the shrimp factories are closed or destroyed. People have less work now than ever. I have never been pessimistic, but I am worried now thinking about our future once these rains stop. The lack of employment along with diseases and hunger is going to increase problems with criminality in the area.”

But the intense rainy season is not all that the U.S.-trained social worker battles. Pointing to barrels outside each house, Maridueña notes that each of them are labeled with the name of a petroleum or chemical company. Residents of the community can buy them cheaply. “To add insult to injury, these people don’t have running water. Their drinking water is brought in by tank truck and the water is stored in the barrels. These barrels are from chemicals or poisons which were imported to use for agriculture or to manufacture fertilizer or insecticide. This means that every time they drink the water, they are drinking a lot of poison. What they are drinking is just poisoning their life little by little.”

In addition to trying to educate residents about the danger of the contaminated water and helping them to obtain cleaner storage containers, the agency also provides chlorine to area residents for purification and encourages people to boil their water. Maridueña said that the poor of Duran pay more per month to have water hauled to them than city dwellers pay to have running water in their houses.

Maridueña does not despair, however, over the plight of those families with whom he and his employees work. Pointing across a flooded field to a small yet sturdy house he described the woman who lives there as one who once lived in a one-room shack with her nine children. “Back in 1989 when we first started sponsoring three of her children, we brought Christmas presents for all of the family. She cried so hard, a mixture of gratitude and anger. When I asked her why she was crying, she said that she used to hate Christmas. She said she used to hate God because God made Christmas and she couldn’t give anything to her children. Through training and education now she is a foreman in a shrimp factory.”

One area of concentration for development agencies such as Children International is nutrition. The typical diet of squatters in Duran is rice supplemented by a little meat and other vegetables. Children International provides vitamins and other food supplements to each of their sponsored children and their families. In addition, mothers are required to attend seminars led by staff nutritionists. The organization also teaches residents how to garden and gives children fruit trees to plant around their house.

The anti-parasite program is very important for the improved health of the people, Maridueña said. “They get little enough food without the parasites eating some of it.” Children International provides anti-parasite medicine for all the members of a sponsored child’s family twice a year.

Maridueña sees hope and progress even in the midst of working with what he calls the poorest of the poor. When asked by an official from his organization’s Kansas City

headquarters to name one way in which the agency's work had made a difference, Maridueña said he went home and spent a sleepless night trying to come up with an answer.

“I began going to the field to visit all of our projects, looking for something. I didn't know what I was supposed to look for. Visiting the families, I found a common denominator. I found that many of the families told me that the sponsored child was the only person in both the father and mother's families that had finished elementary school. In other instances, in many cases, the father and mother told me 'my child, this sponsored child, is the first child in both of the families who is attending high school.' I was able to call the official and say, I have the answer, we are making a difference, this is an impact that can be measured. We are grateful to God and to our sponsors that we can do this.”

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