

PROJECT: Generating Citizenship in
Grota da Alegria

PARTNERS: Rainbow of Hope for Children
The Call of the Poor
CEPEC (Centre of Popular Education
& Citizenship *Centro de Educação
Popular e Cidadania*)

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ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT:

Maceio, the capital of Alagoas in Northeastern Brazil, has 900,000 inhabitants of which 52.64% live in absolute poverty, catch-as-catch-can, according to the Federal University of Alagoas (FUAL). Women especially suffer and are the first victims of social-economic exclusion. Children and youth too are severely impacted by this “miséria absoluta” and public authorities have yet to find any solution. Thus Maceio shows this high index of poverty where conditions of life and of education are extremely low by any measure of human development. High concentration of wealth in few hands, low rate of engagement in the productive sector, high unemployment and high rate of illiteracy – these touch the 50 plus percent of the population. The exodus of people displaced in rural Alagoas has risen to 40% of Maceio’s population. The median income of a family “economically active” is about \$300 Reais (\$180 Canadian) a month. But the many families that are totally outside the economy have no such income, including those expelled from the land and those newly arrived in the city.

Maceio has a dormitory satellite called Benedito Bentes. It has 12 organized areas and 15 Grotas (unorganized communities). The population of Benedito Bentes is 140,000 of which 12,000 live in Grota da Alegria near the centre. In this “Grotto of Joy”, in virtual squalor, live 2755 families. The children and youth are mostly un-schooled and, because youth and adults are mostly unemployed, many spending their days in idleness. Youth and adults are subjected to all the vices and problems that follow displacement and unemployment - drugs, child prostitution, hunger, lack of human dignity and violence. Women and adolescent girls are subject to much domestic violence.

PURPOSE OF PROGRAM:

The purpose of the project is to continue the rescue and restoration of human and cultural values of Grota da Alegria in Benedito Bentes, the dumping ground for disposed people on the peripheral of Maceio, Alagoas, Brazil.

METHODOLOGY:

The project (2006-2009) will strengthen programs already in progress through meetings, courses, research, rallies, and educational talks, with a special focus on generating citizenship and responsibility.

OBJECTIVES:

1. To create an organization of citizenship to lobby police, the courts, the tutelary councils, politicians, and government for the protection of Grota da Alegria children and youth whose rights are violated
2. To further the work of rescuing, reviving and restoring the cultural and human values of the community through education for life programs, income generation training, culture and popular entertainment, gender issues, and youth sports and leisure activities.

GROTOA DA ALEGRIA PROJECT ACTIVITY REPORT

EDUCATION

Grota da Alegria now has 5 classrooms for youth and adults education, one of which is a small lab for courses in computer technology. See letters below indicating the success of their endeavors:

Greetings Friends

A few days ago I received a phone call from Vando, Grota de Alegria, inviting me to represent the "candenses" at the inauguration of their classroom for computers. It was wonderful to see what they had done in such short a time. They build on quite an addition to the centre and made a regular classroom and the computer room. They purchased 6 computers. The teacher is a young fellow from the community, a volunteer who will teach 2 days a week. The class of students were all there. I was asked to say a few words and told them that I was absolutely sure that you would be very happy and proud to see how well and how quickly they were able to establish such a fine program. -Claire



Sr. Claire Novecosky (above left) was invited to the inauguration of the computer lab. She wrote us a very positive letter about the success the Grota project team is having..

Mid photos are the tech students busy at their tasks and the first graduates of computer technology receiving their certificates. Bottom photos we see students in the one-year literacy and articulation [program initiated at Grota da Alegria.



Bom Dia,
How are things doing? I hope everything is ok. I'm the secretary from CEPEC. We are doing our jobs in the Grota da Alegria. Nowadays, we are organizing some new activities with the teenagers and adolescents from the community. Actually I am writing because we are organizing an internet page called "Friends" to put the NGOs, groups, and people who help us in our community. Could you send your trademark (logo) to fix in the site? It is so important for us to show that Rainbow of Hope for Children and your friend, the Call of the Poor, are like FRIENDS of CEPEC. We will be thankful for it. -Ednaldo Farias



DIVERSIFIED EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES

The aim of CEPEC is to provide youth and adolescents with diversified educational activities, namely cultural, educational, recreational, political and social, as developed by the NGO. In spite of drug use, violence and prostitution, CEPEC has succeeded in keeping youth informed and aware of the risks and consequences of these activities. The educational work is conducted through meetings and daily character building, often using role playing activities.



GENDER EQUALITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The workshops on gender and human rights show participants the nature of their rights and how to attain them through utilizing laws, such as the Maria da Penha Law. The workshops emphasize mediation to solve domestic conflicts by dialogue within the family to develop a culture without violence. On the right is a friendship circle. CEPEC recognizes the importance to teach gender equality, human dignity and human rights to men and women. Already in 2005, Rainbow of Hope's monitoring team could detect pride in the advances made in curbing domestic violence and in building support groups when reporting abuse to municipal authorities such as the police. The team leaders encourage group meetings with men and women to learn to treat each other with dignity and respect. They often use theatre and role playing.



After several meetings, most women begin to feel at ease and are prepared to give testimonies which are an important part of the program.

SPORTS

In the community, soccer is the main sport activity organized by CEPEC. They use this activity as a means of development of children and youth. Sporting activity not only fills idle time, but also teaches young people how to work together and comprehend the value of collective team work as a means to overcome the difficulties of daily life and to turn their minds away from marginality, crime, and violence.

CEPEC purchased two soccer team uniforms for about R\$2400 and five quality Soccer balls x R\$ 250.00, which have added much to the spirit of the children and games. Soccer is the most common and prized sport in Brazil, so occasionally bringing a well known soccer player to teach the local players is a very special event in the Grota da Alegria and provides good role models for the youth.

CULTURE

CEPEC uses cultural activities like capoeira, folkloric dances, theatre, and the musical band as a means to attract youth, children, women, and the elderly to participate in a process of social, cultural and political development within the community. They are taught by a professional band instructor using tin cans and other makeshift instruments. We must say we are not the only people impressed, they have been asked to play on television several times, as reported by them as well as Srs. Claire Novecosky and Louise Hinz who noticed them performing on an evening news special in Maceio. Capoeira is an art form warrior dance with African slave roots. To see the pride and joy of the children beating their instruments and dancing in their folk dancing costumes is nothing less than tear jerking. We captured these activities on film during our monitoring visit and some were sent to us in their reports. Pictures speak louder than words, so we provide little commentary.







THEATRE AND ROLE PLAYING

Like Fr. Shay Cullen at the PREDA in the Philippines, the CEPEC leaders at Grota da Alegria in Brazil find that the use of theatre and role playing are excellent methods to teach youth about the issues of social injustice affecting their lives and to seek solutions to their problems. Theatre and role playing are also used to teach youth responsibility and stewardship to mother earth, the environment, and all creation and to make young girls astute and courageous not to be taken advantage of by older boys and men in their communities.



Here young thespians show a money map and act out a scene about sugar cane, plantation workers and sweatshop workers being exploited by unbridled profiteering. This play depicted the reality of these workers today little better off than the slaves of yesteryear with low wages and few benefits.



In this play, a mother counsels her daughters about the serious danger of promiscuity and to be prudent and strong when enticed by social pressure sexual exploiters.

INCOME AND JOB GENERATION

According to research conducted by CEPEC, in the Grota da Alegria, 92% (11,960) of its population of 13,000 citizens are under-employed and live in absolute misery. One way to overcome this problem are courses in crafts, but it is a very modest alternative for the economic and social exclusion experienced by families of the community. The project enables women to learn crafts using local products such as banana fibers and also teaches them marketing techniques to earn income.





ALCOHOL AND DRUG ABUSE PROGRAM

CEPEC is helping a good number of men to give up alcohol and drugs. On our visit in 2005, we met this proud man, Rainaldo, who told us that he has not had a drink for over several months and was so happy to be resuming his fishing occupation. He showed us a bucket full of fresh fish that he had caught and was bringing to market, and he gave us permission to share his story of recovery with those helping his community. Accompanying him are three equally proud CEPEC leaders.



Most of the homes are on steep hillsides. Below is a large sewage canal running through the valley. On our first visit in 2004, the canal and trail was a mess, suffering from excessive rain, mud slides and neglect. As a direct result of this project citizens were empowered to approach the municipality to improve the situation. In this picture a year or so later, we see labourers paid by the municipality to refurbish the sewage canal and pave the street with cobblestone, giving the people a huge lift of spirit.



The road and sewage system in Grota before the municipality paved the street and improved the sewage canal. These homes on level land are still highly susceptible to natural disasters.



Dominoes is a mid-afternoon pastime at Grota da Alegria, often not much else to do. The game and comradeship helps to alleviate the pain of neglect. While hot afternoons still gathers men folk under a cool tree, more men now are eager to seek jobs.



OVERALL ASSESSMENT AND COMMENTS

The community has encountered an array of social problems such as drug use, youth and domestic violence, and prostitution of the very young. There is a lack of public policies in areas of health, education, housing, leisure, security and employment for the poor. In the face of these problems, the direct and indirect results of the project have been of great human and social value to the 287 families and indirectly to hundred more. These immediate families can assume a different role, in becoming social agents capable of helping other families to cope with their own difficulties. Seeing the hope in the families stimulates our partners, CEPEC, to continue to their work, because they believe that they are a means to generate opportunities for better days. But the real actors for social change are the families of Grota da Alegria associated with this project of Rainbow of Hope and The Call of the Poor.



The late Al Gerwing saw a dire need in and acted upon it. Thanks Rainbow of Hope for Children and the Call of the poor supporters. Well done.