

UFER newsletter; www.ufer-international.org

[International Movement for Fraternal Union among Races and Peoples]

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RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IN CALI, COLOMBIA

By Monica Maher

In June 2008, I had the wonderful opportunity to spend a week in Colombia at the invitation of the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana of Cali. In addition to academic exchanges with the theological faculty of this Jesuit University, I was very grateful to have a chance to get to know the work of the Fundación Paz y Bien, run by Franciscan Sister Alba Stella Barreto Caro. Located in the Aguablanca District, one of the poorest and most violent barrios of the city, the work of Foundation for Peace and Well-being is incredibly inspiring. I am indebted to Political Science Professor Diana Britto Ruiz of Bogotá for having introduced me to Alba Stella and the work of her foundation.

An innovative project

Sister Alba Stella, herself Colombian, has been living in Aguablanca for over 20 years, training many leaders in a variety of community development projects, economic and social. Most recently, she began a "**Restorative Justice**" project, after educating herself in this peacemaking model through first hand study in Northern Ireland. This is a model which works with victims, victimizers and the whole community. Rather than traditional justice models which seek solely to punish the victimizer, this approach focuses on restoration to the victim, rehabilitation of the victimizer and social repair of the community. The Foundation now runs a two-year program for young men who want to leave behind gangs and violence. The program is based on a process of local mentoring by "consejeras," women who are trained in direct non-violent interventions in violent situations. The program has created neighborhood centers every few blocks in the barrio where young and old can go to rest, receive instruction and interact in safe spaces off the streets.

Gang members who choose to go through the two-year training program often graduate into a new peaceful and productive way of life beyond violence. I was so moved by the young men who spoke about their experiences of their personal/social transformation during my visit. I was fortunate to coincide with the visit of funders from the regional office of the World Bank who were interested to learn about successful community models for peace and security in zones of conflict and post-conflict, like Colombia; they

asked the young men what had made the most difference in their decisions to leave the gangs. Ex-gang members responded that the key factor catalyzing their change had been the presence in their lives of someone who believed in them when they did not believe in themselves. No matter how many times they fell, the mentor was there supporting them to move forward, encouraging them a better future was possible.

One young man after graduating from the two-year program was mistaken as someone still belonging to the gang and shot right outside one of the centers. He is now paralyzed. Sister Alba Stella has found him a wheel chair so can be mobile. How unfair it seems that he was the target of violence, mistaken as the person he once was, violent and aggressive, after he had embraced a life of peace and service. Despite this tragedy, he shows no signs of self-pity but displays a very positive and joyful spirit.

A success-story

Community trust in Alba Stella in the neighborhood is overwhelming. Once, when the police came to pick up some young men who were hanging out in the streets outside her house, Alba Stella protested on the grounds that they were not doing anything wrong. The police clarified that they themselves were only doing their job to round up those who posed danger to civil society and that she was thus interfering with public security. She insisted that the young men were not a danger to the community, that it was unfair to round them up and take them into jail. The police told her if she did not get out of the way, they would arrest her for obstructing justice. She held her ground. So, the police placed her in the truck with the young men being arrested. Word swept swiftly through the streets, "They have Sister in the truck. The police are taking Sister away..." Soon, folks from the neighborhood were surrounding the police truck refusing to let the vehicle leave until they set Sister free. The police, unable to budge, responded to the people's plea and released everyone. This is a wonderful example of spontaneous non-violent action for justice, a success story based on years of dedication by one woman who has trained many others, all of whom work day and night to keep their community safe.

The process of restoration

For me personally and professionally, it was incredibly inspiring to get to know Alba Stella, the consejeras, the ex-gang members and the community's vibrant commitment. After years of working on violence against women in Latin America, particularly femicide, it was deeply hopeful to listen to the process of human/social restoration through the voices of former perpetrators of violence. It was very clear how much they too are victims of a violent system, caught in a cycle of destruction which harms all. My heart went out to the young men in the program struggling to overcome their conditioning to respond to everyday conflicts with violence. Reportedly, even 8 year olds might resort to using guns to settle even the most minor problem, like a dispute over a candy bar.

The women who work as consejeras (counselors/mentors) are incredible, filled with energy, strength and faith. Sister Alba Stella's other Franciscan sisters have left the barrio. Yet she has an amazing community of sister workers in the consejeras. I facilitated two workshops for these women before I left. They sang and danced freely in the church around the altar. They were so full of life and joy, happiness and hope. In one workshop, we discussed the nature of freedom and truth. Sister Alba Stella drew a picture of an open roof where

butterflies emerge, a symbol of courage, change, transformation, indeed the official symbol of the foundation.

Where is freedom? How does it happen? It happens through and in ordinary folks with extraordinary courage and hope. In their process of restorative justice, the women are seeking the truth, creating the conditions to allow truth-telling to emerge from victims, victimizers and whole community toward personal and social healing. The spirit of life is blowing strongly through the community of Aguablanca, setting many free. This is a spirit of renewal and peace, of trust in humanity and in the present, a present where all can live together in harmony building a new future filled with justice and joy.