



# HEALTHWRIGHTS

Workgroup for People's Health and Rights

Newsletter from the Sierra Madre #67  
December 2010



## Children of the Moon

### A Haven for Children of Sex Workers in Oaxaca, Mexico

By David Werner

After the close of the 2nd Continental Congress on Community Based Rehabilitation, in Oaxaca, Mexico, last March\*, a friend took me to visit “Casa Hogar – Hijos de la Luna” (Home Shelter – Children of the Moon), in a poorer barrio of the city. What I had the privilege of observing there was so elevating and heartwarming that I wish to share it in this newsletter.

Casa Hogar – which has the welcome feeling of an easygoing child-centered family home – is run by a middle-aged woman named Socorro, who is from a modest, working class family. Her name, which means Rescue or Succor, is most appropriate. She is called “Coco” for short, but her full name is María del Socorro Ramirez Gonzalez.

Like so many good ventures, Casa Hogar began in an unplanned, spontaneous way, as a visceral response to dire need. Four years ago Doña Coco was asked by a down-and-out local sex-worker to care temporarily for her child. Socorro, who likes children and whose own three kids are now grown, agreed.

Doña Coco did such a good job with the child, and was so non-judgmental of the mother, that the word spread. More sex workers in difficult situations began to bring their children. Currently Coco is caring for almost 30 such children, ages 6 months to 12 years.

Doña Coco – who has been through distressing times herself – has a lot of understanding and respect for the children’s mothers. She realizes that their shortcomings as caretakers derive in large part from the demeaning social environment within which they work, and (usually) not from a lack of love for their children. The sex-workers who ask Coco to take in their children are usually impoverished, chronically abused, and sometimes homeless. Many are older and unattractive, and have trouble finding clients. Others are young – perhaps only 14 or 15. They are often “illegal aliens” from Guatemala or other Central American countries, who cross the border looking for jobs, or with dreams of making it to “El Norte” (the US). But they run out of money or are tricked or robbed. Hungry and destitute, they end up selling their bodies – and perhaps getting pregnant. Often they have been beaten or denigrated – or thrown onto the street after being used – sometimes without a peso for their services. But they dare not go to the police – especially if undocumented.

Moreover, too often the police also take advantage of them. Increasing the risks, condoms are seldom used: most men prefer it “flesh on flesh.” And of course, when these women get pregnant and have children, their problems multiply.



The children at the Casa Hogar, despite their stressful backgrounds, show a lot of love and caring for each other.

Coco doesn’t blame these women, even those who have been neglectful or harsh to their children. Rather she blames the institutionalized injustices that marginalize the downtrodden so that they must resort to desperate measures to survive.

“In some ways these women have more dignity – and more love – than most of us” explains Coco. She pointed to one of the girls. “That youngster’s mother was servicing her customers in her one room hut while her daughter slept in a corner. But when the girl reached 11 years old, her mother felt she shouldn’t be exposed to such things. She doesn’t want to give her daughter ideas. She wants her to grow up to see other possibilities. So she brought her here.”

\*See Newsletter from the Sierra Madre #66

The Casa Hogar is located on a large plot of land that had belonged to Coco's father. He donated it for his daughter's project when she began to take in more children. It is a big, run-down house that has gradually been converted into the communal shelter. It is decorated with colorful paintings and toys as cheerfully as are most child care centers, but in a much more homey, haphazard way. The extensive yard outside is decked with plastic slides, junglegyms and other

Amazed, I asked Coco how she managed to care for so many young kids. She shrugged and said, "They take care of each other." And – wonder of wonders – to an amazing extent, they do!

Peter and I arrived fairly early in the morning. Some of the children were bathing or getting dressed, older ones helping the younger ones. One girl of about ten was proudly changing the diaper of a baby. Children as young as 5 or 6 were serving food or feeding those who needed help.



Even preschool children help care for and serve the younger ones.



Doña Coco with some of the Children of the Moon at breakfast time. She guides them by her good example in an encouraging, kind-hearted way.

Most of the children living in the Casa Hogar were brought voluntarily by their mothers. The twins are an exception. These two three-year-old girls are physically and developmentally stunted. They were in very poor health when they arrived. Their mother was alcoholic and depressed. When she went out at night to sell her body, she would leave the twins locked in her shack. To keep them



The bigger children care for the smaller ones, not because they're required to, but because they enjoy helping.

playthings. However, the jacaranda and other trees are clearly the most popular playthings for the children.

quiet she drugged them with beer or mescal. Eventually social workers found

The Home Shelter is located on a large lot in a poor neighborhood. A broken-down bus – on which someone has painted "SOY FEO" (I'm ugly) – serves as a grand toy for the children.



The twins, who were physically and developmentally stunted when they arrived, have blossomed under the nurturing support of Doña Coco and the other children.

On weekdays the children of school age go to school, and only the younger children remain in the shelter – so things are a bit less chaotic. However,

when my friend Peter and I arrived at the Hogar on a Saturday morning, there were children everywhere: all 29 of them. And Doña Coco was the only adult visibly present.

out and the police took the children away. Their mother was incarcerated in a drug rehab center, and the twins were taken to Doña Coco. After 6 months in the rehab program the mother was

released. Now she is a member of a AA group. As far as anyone knows, she's not using alcohol or drugs. She visits Hijos de la Luna fairly often to spend time with her twins, and she enjoys helping out in the shelter. She deeply appreciates the way Coco and the children take such loving care of her two little girls. The twin's mother, like so many others who sell their bodies to make ends meet, longs for the day when she can find other work, pull her life together, and take her young ones home again. Several mothers, after leaving their children for months or years at the Hogar, have managed to do just that. But most remain trapped in such humiliating circumstances that they deem it best to leave their children with Coco.

## Loaves and fishes.

How does Doña Coco cover the costs of sheltering and feeding so many children? Clearly she runs the place on a shoestring. The children are remarkably clean, adequately clothed and well fed. But there are no frills or luxuries. The furnishings are basic. Coco's husband and their three children – all of whom are committed to her mission – have jobs and help out as best they can.

Another source of assistance is the sex-workers. Coco maintains a good relationship with the children's mothers, many of whom contribute in different ways. They are welcome to visit, and some come regularly to help care for the children or with housekeeping. Everything is very informal, in some ways like a big extended family, or a commune. Everyone pitches in good-naturedly, without fixed expectations or requirements.

Additionally, Doña Coco has developed a small, dedicated network of friends, both local and international. Some donate money or equipment. Some volunteer in helping to care for or teach the children. My 80-year-old friend, Peter, helps out in many ways – and finds deep satisfaction in doing so.



A young girl changes the diapers of a recent arrival at the Shelter.

## Child-to-Child at its best

Although Doña Coco gets help from a range of sources, there are times when she is the only adult present with over two dozen active children, many of whom have a history of trauma and deprivation. Yet somehow she manages. As the good woman points out: Those who help out most with the care-giving,

and making sure each child's needs are met, are the children themselves.

## Benigno



Benigno, a thin boy about 10, whose face showed signs of past trauma, was exceptionally good with the children who needed assistance, and in particular with a vulnerable child named Luis. I wondered if he had been taught some his skills by a visiting therapist. In any case, he would very gently help Luis get to his feet, and begin to walk, always providing the minimum of assistance to help the younger children do the maximum for himself.



Patiently Benigno helps feed one of the youngest children.

After breakfast it was playtime – which was also therapy time for those who needed it. With children playing the role of therapists, the lines between play and therapy – and between provider and recipient of therapy – were blurred, and everyone had a good time. I was astounded how lovingly some of the slightly older children assisted the younger ones. Never did I get a sense that the child who was teaching or caring for another was doing it because he or she was obliged to. Rather, they

appeared to find joy in reaching out to those who had greater needs.

I had to remind myself that these were the children of mothers whose lives were so distraught they had to entrust their children to this care center. Most of these children came from backgrounds of trauma, dysfunction, and neglect. For months or even years after some of the children had been in the supportive environment of the Casa Hogar, many were plagued by frequent nightmares.

## The example of Luis

One small four-year-old boy, Luis, seemed notably different from the rest. He was very quiet and kept to himself. He appeared more bewildered than unhappy, as if his soul had wandered off and become lost. When his mother had left him at the Casa Hogar a few months earlier, he took no interest in anything. He couldn't walk or talk, or feed himself. His mother blamed his condition on a fall, but a doctor diagnosed him as autistic. When his mother went to work on the streets, having no one to care for him, she'd leave him tied to a bedpost.

At Hijos de la Luna Luis was visibly improving – in large part thanks to the friendly assistance of the other children – especially Benigno.

For example, in encouraging Luis to walk, the 10-year-old would hold the back of his sweatshirt, providing no support but assuring his friend that he would be held up if he began to fall. What impressed me most about this



The children help one another with therapy and exercise. Here Benigno helps Luis prepare for walking, while two of the girls practice their exercises.

Luis, whose mother had tied him to a bedpost when she went out at night, had been diagnosed as autistic.



When he arrived at the Home Shelter at age 3, Luis could not speak, walk or feed himself. Here Coco's daughter feeds him.



With the willing help of Benigno and the other children, Luis is learning to walk.



Benigno has learned how to provide the minimum amount of assistance to help his young friend do the maximum amount for himself. Here he holds Luis' hood to give the timid boy assurance that if he begins to fall he won't be hurt.

young assistant was the very gentle, amiable way he related to the child he was helping. He was encouraging but in no way demanding. It so clearly came from his heart.

And this same spirit was characteristic of the other children. A little later, in the courtyard, another little boy took Luis' hand and patiently led him back and forth.

As result of all this loving attention, Luis has been making real progress, both physically and mentally. He can take hold of and eat crackers by himself, shows a lot more curiosity in what is happening around him, and has begun to say a few words. It seems his soul is finding its way back to his body and mind. I doubt if anyone could have made this happen more lovingly and naturally then the warm-hearted children who surround him.



Visitors to Hijos de la Luna fall into the communal spirit and find joy in helping out where they can. Here my friend Peter Morris, who introduced me to Hijos de la Luna, helps feed an infant.

On visiting Casa Hogar – Hijos de la Luna, it struck me that this was one of the most happy, caring, and loving groups of children I've seen anywhere. The love and goodwill are contagious. Much of it comes from the liberating example of Doña Socorro. She doesn't order the children about. She leads and teaches them by example.

### Are we intrinsically good or evil?

I will remember my visit to the Hijos de la Luna as long as my clock keeps ticking. The last time I was so deeply inspired by a similarly liberating

environment for disadvantaged children was nearly 50 years ago in my mid-20s, in Southern India. It was then I visited a Nai Talim (New Education) school for Dalit (untouchable) children in India. They provided an alternative approach to learning. This was a "pedagogy of the oppressed" long before that of Paulo Freire. Founded on the principles of caring and sharing, and working together for the common good – it was started by Mahatma Gandhi in his struggle to liberate his people not only from the yoke of colonial rule, but from the cruel inequities of the traditional caste system.

Visiting an island of sharing and compassion like Hijos de la Luna in this age of global dysfunction – is a real eye-opener. It is an oasis in a troubled desert, where humanity is dying of thirst for social justice. It gives us a glimpse of what kind of a world we could live in, if there were a little less guilt and greed, and a little more kindness and love.

There are two fundamental theories of human behavior. One is that people are intrinsically good, and learn evil. The other is that people are intrinsically evil or brutish, and must be trained and constrained to behave well.

Judaism and Christianity, which teach the tale of man's disobedience to God's commands (Original Sin) and his expulsion from the Garden of Eden, have fostered the idea that human beings are intrinsically evil – and basically selfish.



The children help each other responsibly and naturally, following Doña Coco's loving example.

From early childhood, people are taught to feel shame for their own bodies and guilt for their desires. Their "bestial" feelings must be disciplined, or sublimated, for them to become responsible and caring members of a civilized society. From this perspective, life is an endless treadmill where we strive to overcome the evil in ourselves and others. A sense of self as a low and worthless being is inculcated from the day we're born. This demeaning self image may account for our predominant culture of domination, aggression, acquisitiveness, and violence. With the escalation of exploitive technology, this impulse toward domination rather than cooperation has put life on our planet in danger.



In the yard of the Shelter there are lots of playthings, slides and junglegyms. But what draws the children most are the trees, where they climb and test their skills, and develop together their own free will.



Different children took turns being Luis' "junior therapist."

By contrast, people like Gandhi, Buddha, and Christ, believed in the power of love. They believed in the intrinsic goodness of people: that kindness begets kindness and love begets love. Selfishness, greed, and aggression – like shame in one's body and some of its natural functions -- are not something we are born with, but have learned. And they can be unlearned through love, which is the most basic and natural human feeling.

But it seems that in today's troubled world, it is the darker theory that currently prevails. If our human nature is essentially self-centered and evil, we must be policed. We must be trained to suppress our desires and sublimate our nastiness and wickedness. This view of human reality leads us to believe that we need our punitive legal systems and social hierarchies. The resulting struggle for dominance within and between the hierarchies fuels the vicious cycle of

warfare and hate, acquisitive material-ism, sociopolitical stratification, ecological imbalance, escalating repression, demonization of deviance, and increasingly authoritarian social control that are today leading humanity to the brink of extinction. It is time we woke up – individually and collectively.

But is there really hope for humanity? Or is our basic nature convivial and benign. Do we truly have the potential to love our neighbor as ourselves?

Witnessing what is happening in the Hijos de la Luna Shelter renews my hope for humanity. Here are a group of children who have come from very difficult circumstances: the "collateral damage" of a society that marginalizes and exploits those who are most vulnerable. Yet, when placed in a



loving, nonjudgmental environment, with a mentor who is a kind and caring role model, the real nature and goodness of the children comes to the fore. They discover joy in giving of themselves -- in reaching out and helping others. They tap into that instinctive substrate of a gregarious social creature which deep inside knows that we are all connected, and that giving is receiving.

This, after all, is what love is all about. If only humanity can rediscover the spirit of oneness and kindness that is intrinsic to our collective nature, which resides in our body and soul from the day we are born, maybe we can look beyond the authoritarian, hierarchical structures that artificially divide us, and find a balanced, inclusive, and sustainable way forward. Hooray for the Children of the Moon!

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*Children of the Moon is an inspiring example of Child-to-Child as a liberating process. It shows us that when children are brought up shamelessly, with trust and love and freedom to be themselves, their natural kind-hearted spirit blossoms. In such an environment they are more likely meet their potential as agents of change for a fairer, kinder world.*

Donations to Casa Hogar Hijos de la Luna can be made through PayPal to the email address: [contacto@hijosdelaluna.org](mailto:contacto@hijosdelaluna.org), or bank transfer directed to:  
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# HEALTHWRIGHTS

Workgroup for People's Health and Rights

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**We encourage you to make an end-of-year donation to help support the continuing work of HealthWrights**

**Empowerment of those in need:** For many years HealthWrights (Workgroup for People's Health and Rights) has helped promote the well-being and inclusion of people and groups who are marginalized, denigrated, or not given a fair chance. Through personal involvement in such people's lives and communities, we have developed and easy-to-understand health and disability-related educational materials, some of which have had worldwide impact. In addition to providing critically important information to millions of people, these materials have had a major influence on the concept and practice of Primary Health Care, Community Based Rehabilitation, and other global strategies now promoted by WHO and UNICEF – helping to make them more participatory, more empowering, and more committed to changing the underlying socio-political determinants of health.

**Scaling up of enabling methods and materials:** Having been immersed in small grassroots health and disability initiatives for decades, we at HealthWrights are now focusing on disseminating our experiences and resources. We have been facilitating hands-on workshops in many countries, and are producing new tools of communication, such as educational videos and DVDs. We are digitalizing the sets of teaching slides we developed earlier, so as to greatly reduce the costs of distribution. Likewise, all our books and learning material have an "Open Copyright Policy" allowing anyone to freely copy, translate, or adapt them.

**Renovated websites:** With the help of dedicated volunteers, HealthWrights has just redesigned and updated our Politics of Health website ([www.politicsofhealth.org](http://www.politicsofhealth.org)), making it more attractive, searchable, and interactive. We invite all of you concerned for the long-term health and survival of humanity and life on the planet to explore our site, and to take action. We are also looking for volunteers to help maintain the site or contribute relevant articles. Our HealthWrights website ([www.healthwrights.org](http://www.healthwrights.org)) is also being renovated. All our books are now freely accessible online, as are our newsletters, which can now be searched by topic.

**Volunteer:** Recent changes to the way we are using technology to manage Healthwrights have made it more possible than ever for you to volunteer your time from where ever you might live. All you'll need is time and an internet connection. We need folks skilled in graphic arts, accounting, page layout, writing and editing, publication, website administration, website development, web programming and more. It's a great way to help us become more sustainable and continue the good works we do long into the future. Don't have those skills but have talent and heart? We can train you! Just email [volunteer@healthwrights.org](mailto:volunteer@healthwrights.org).

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**Growing needs in hard times:** In these difficult times, HealthWrights and the community programs it collaborates with in Mexico are having a hard time making ends meet. The recession – with deepening poverty, joblessness, and hunger – has hit the poor in Mexico much harder than in the US. High costs of medical care devastates many families.

One example is Moises, an adolescent with spina bifida who stays at PROJIMO and goes to school in Coyotitan (see his photo on the cover page). The Stichting Liliane Fonds, a charitable NGO in Holland, has helped with his many medical emergencies, but now his mother has a non-malignant yet invasive facial tumor that requires costly surgery. Since Liliane Fonds only helps the young, HealthWrights is trying to find ways to cover the cost. ***If you are able to make a donation to help Moises' mother get life-saving surgery, please earmark your donation accordingly.*** Moises' family is only one of many we are close to who are struggling to manage in these difficult times.

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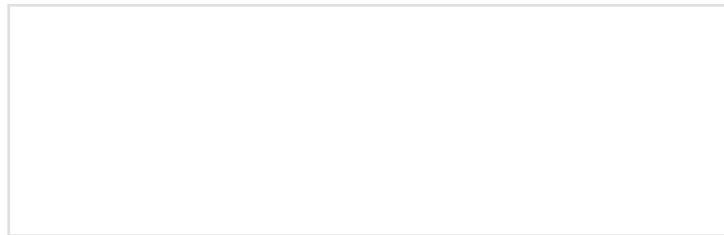
Workgroup for People's Health and Rights

P.O. Box 1344  
Palo Alto CA 94302 USA  
[www.healthwrights.org](http://www.healthwrights.org)  
[contact@healthwrights.org](mailto:contact@healthwrights.org)

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Moises (on right) – a youth with spina bifida at PROJIMO – helps build a standing frame for Jesus (on left), while Jesus and his mother assist. Moises has had a lot medical crises, and now his mother is in need of potentially life-saving surgery. See page 7.

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A Haven for Children of Sex  
Workers in Oaxaca, Mexico

By David Werner

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**HealthWrights Need Your Help**

and on the enclosed Order Form  
Announcement of an exciting new  
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*"If we are to reach real peace in this world, we shall have to begin with children."*

*-- Mahatma Gandhi*