

The New Brigadistas

*From street kids to international
cultural ambassadors.*

by Sophie Watson

The Lights of the Future strut on stage one by one in their cream-coloured jeans, chocolate-coloured shirts and fancy running shoes - nine boys and one girl. They might have been a bit more nervous had it not been their 30th gig in five weeks. The Lights take their places; the girl joins three guys on centre stage. And the meringue begins. Smiling wide, all ten of them dancing instantly; no warm up necessary, the stage is taken over. The lightman does his magic; hues of red, blue, green and white lights bounce in a spiralling fiesta. Caliente rhythms, people in the audience can't help but wiggle in their seats - it won't be a sit-down gig for long. The girl moves so well with the lead singers, they have sort of a jog-shuffle-to-the-right-leg-up-smile-all-the-way and then a jog-shuffle-to-the-left-leg-up thing going on, all perfectly synchronized. Song after song, the energy pours; you can't watch people smile that big and not find yourself doing an ear-to-ear one.

Full standing ovation.

"None of them had any musical training at all," says Angel as he dices a plantain.

I have to lean quite close to him because of all the noise from people circulating around the house; the Latin music blaring, the clanging pots, and the noises of a fiesta being prepared. A volunteer for the Institute of Human

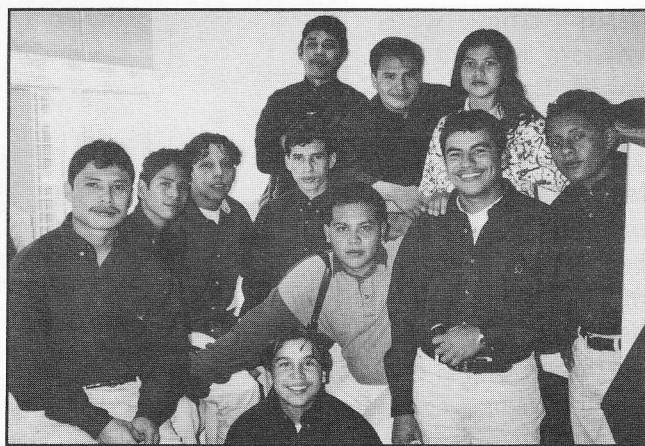
Promotion (INPRHU) in Nicaragua for five years, Angel has seen a lot.

"In Nicaragua, there are lots of kids on the street; out of four million people, two million are under the age of 16. So the poverty is so much; there are a lot of problems, especially drugs. Lots of kids they... uh... glue?" Angel says, leaving it unfinished, not knowing the right English term.

"Glue sniffing?" I say because I've heard that glue sniffing is rampant in Nicaragua. Many kids are seen with glue on their faces and zombieness in their eyes; they stash the bottles or tubes in their armpits and walk the streets hunched on one side.

"Ya that's it, so this project was first for them - to get them interested in something else. But these kids are so difficult; the glue makes them moody and very difficult to work with, but not all of the street kids do the glue, so now we try to get them before they start. That's my job - to keep them busy.

"These guys they come from one of the poorest, roughest barrios in Managua, Los Torres. They were street working kids; they're all ex-



The Lights of the Future backstage at the Arden Theatre in St. Albert, Alberta.

photo: Ed Carson

tremely poor. Nobody knows music before. Six years ago the project moved there and did an investigation, a survey of the area. We started a baseball team; these guys used to be the team - we did really good, we won two championships!"

Angel chops up an egg and puts it with the sliced avocado and onions. On top he squeezes some lime juice.

"So ya my job was to help teach baseball, and the boys they loved it - it was something different. The kids they work so hard; work is the principal thing, they have to support their families. There are no jobs for the adults, unemployment all over. Their life is really difficult, really tough. It's like they can't be kids; so this is good - they play, they have fun."

Unemployment in Nicaragua is currently at 60 percent. Nicaragua's

standard of living is dropping the fastest in Central America, and it has been recognized as the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, next to Haiti.

"So the project went well. A few years later, the organization got some more funding. It's a non-government organization, a non-profit institution. They got some more money and now they want to do something else. There are many different programs in the project; this money was for a cultural program - so it was decided to do music, start a band because the baseball team did so well," Angel says.

"This government now, is very, very capitalistic. You see, in our constitution it says that all kids have the right to go to school and have free health care - this government doesn't stick to that. One million kids have no access to education and health care because you have to pay, and no one can afford it."

The Lights of the Future arrived in Edmonton in late January 1998, during the middle of winter. The ten kids, along with their instruments, some donated winter clothing and their life stories were packed into a school bus - destination: small town Alberta. The band played everywhere from rural schools, to urban community centres, to suburban churches - a total of 32 gigs from January 27 until March 1. They sang songs about life on the street and held discussion sessions about the problem of poverty and its numerous ramifications for children. Their mission: to empower other kids and spread a message of social justice.

Instruments of Change is a project that evolved out of two travel seminars from Alberta to Nicaragua in the summers of 1996 and 1997. Teachers, musicians, artists and social workers went south to learn of conditions in post-revolutionary Nicaragua as well as to make links for future collaboration. Edmonton's Centre for International Alternatives and Change

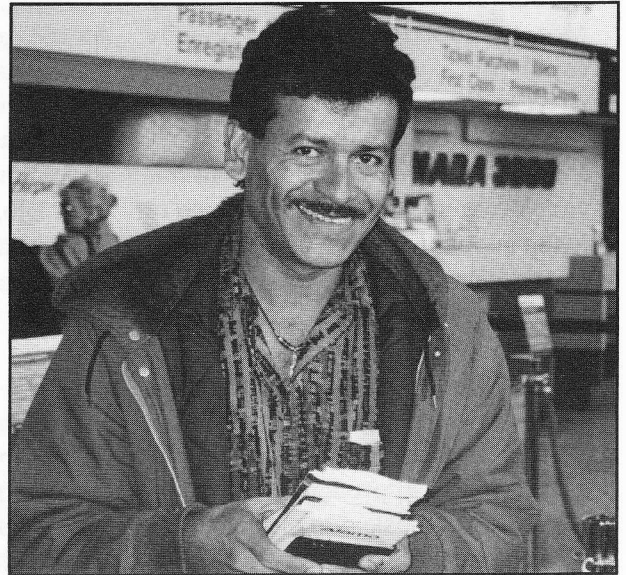
for Children joined forces with INPRHU to organize this tour.

Nicaragua's economy is barely recovering from a tyrannical U.S. embargo; years of war have left many orphans and the demands of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank's Structural Adjustment Programs have caused enormous poverty in the country. Health care and education suffer the most from the required slash-and-burn cuts to public spending. The undeniable gains of the revolution have been systematically eroded. Almost exactly half of the population is under the age of 16, and birth control is not promoted by the government in Nicaragua.

Five months after the Sandinistas had gotten into power in 1979, their literacy campaign began. 60,000 youths and 30,000 adults, all volunteers, were galvanized into bringing literacy to the Nicaraguan people. The campaign had dramatic effects: illiteracy dropped from 57 percent to 13 percent. People hung banners above their doorways proudly announcing that their home was illiteracy-free. The youth, call brigadistas, were sent to the countryside where they learned how to work the land in the day and taught reading in tents and makeshift classrooms to the campesinos in the evenings. Now once again the illiteracy rate is high and getting higher; nobody can afford the funds or the time to go to school. One of the reasons the Sandinistas managed to be so successful was the support from local grass roots organizations who united and galvanized the people and resources to mobilize that many volunteers into action.

INPRHU is an organization with a similar agenda: reaching out to the

marginalized poor, many of whom are children. Outreach programs send social workers like Freddy and volun-



Freddy Martinez, social worker, music teacher and former Sandinista soldier.
photo: Lorraine Swift

teers like Angel into the marketplaces and the intersections to seek out and recruit kids that need help. INPRHU's mandate is to fight for the rights of children, to lobby for them, to provide skill training, education, foster homes, drug abuse awareness programs, cultural activities and to heal and help these kids with all the resources they can muster. With limited finances and funding, INPRHU has had success using cultural means to educate the children - presently they work with 400 kids.

Freddy, the music teacher/social worker, remembers the kids before the project.

"Trino...Marvin...I used to see them in the calle; they looked sickly and depressed, barefoot and..." at this point Freddy puts his hand in front of his face, gesturing incomprehensibly, "they were runny nosed and dirty."

"Most kids are on the street; these kids they didn't have drug problems, just problems of poverty - like vagabonds. The children, they get exploited by everyone; there's sexual abuse, alcoholism in the adults, not enough to eat. They work from 7am to late in

the evening for very little pay."

During the Q&A portion of the gig at the Baptist church around the corner from my house, Marvin Moreira, through a translator, proudly says, "We have left our work in the street and now we have a more dignified way to make a living - people respect us now, we have a different image. We're not dirty little kids; we're going international and bringing pride to our community."

Elizabeth, the dancing-singing girl, is now 15 years old.

"When I was six years old, I started to work. My father was killed when I was three. One day on the street, I was approached by social workers. I was asked to participate in a silk-screening workshop. I liked it. Then I was involved in a gender development workshop where I was taught to stand up for my rights as a girl. Street life for kids - you're always having to defend yourself, being taken advantage of is common. I am proud to represent the people of my barrio,"

Liz proudly says.

The questions wind down and it's back to the dancing, jumping, and swinging. Everybody is up dancing. An old guy in the doorway does the Macarena - hands on his butt, it's a funny church scene. It's hard to believe when you see them all up there on stage, how far they've come from six years ago, hard to imagine them on the street - barefoot, illiterate, scavenging to make a living.

And we dance and celebrate.

In a global climate of massive trade agreements that threaten our autonomy on every level, this international cooperative project had a trade agreement of its own - using music and art as cultural currency. Human Promotion + International Alternatives = Change for Children. As Canadians question their economic, political and military role in the face of globalization, perhaps they should also explore their cultural role.

Tragedy has hit Nicaragua once

again - Hurricane Mitch has brought rampant devastation to the country. The United Nations estimates that development has now been set back 20 years. Thousands of people died and billions of dollars in damage was caused to houses, schools, crops, roads and bridges. Change for Children has been holding fundraisers for a Nicaraguan relief effort as well as doing extensive campaigning.

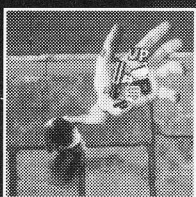
This January, Change for Children is sponsoring Vladimir Hernandez, a street educator and psychologist from INPRHU, to tour Alberta and give presentations and hold discussion sessions on the horrendous ramifications of the hurricane.

For more information on this project and others, please contact Change for Children in Edmonton at (403) 488-1505. Donations would of course be appreciated. Sophie Watson is a freelance writer and editor living in Edmonton.

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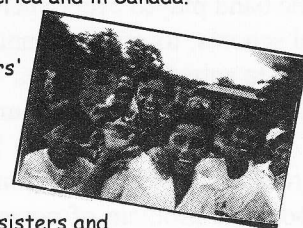
23 years of solidarity in the
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✓ Change for Children currently supports vital community projects in Central and South America and in Canada.

✓ Projects include programs for street children, support to farmers' co-ops, advocacy for human rights and cultural preservation for indigenous people.

✓ Change for Children believes that solidarity with our Southern sisters and brothers means educating ourselves about the root causes of poverty and our role in creating a more just world.



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