


OUR STORIES

HONDURAS 2016

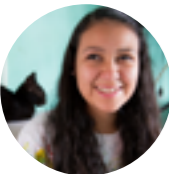


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OUR STORIES



Genesis 11



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WORDS FROM UNICEF HONDURAS

Children and adolescents in Honduras are often affected by social issues such as poverty, violence and migration, but they are also driven and recognized for their potential as actors of their own lives. For many years, UNICEF has worked with strategies aimed at empowering girls and boys by promoting their human rights and fostering their life skills through participation in communication networks, community organizations, sports, creative arts and self-protection.

Through a long-standing cooperation agreement with the Government of Canada, UNICEF Honduras is supporting the Municipal Programmes for Children, Adolescents and Youth (PMIAJ) in 64 municipalities across the country. Comvida originally started as Communication and Live (Comvida) in 1992 with emphasis on HIV prevention programmes and has gradually evolved into a more holistic approach, supporting positive development, protection, and meaningful participation of adolescent boys and girls in their neighborhoods and communities. During the last years, Comvida has also been supported by USAID and the United Nations Development Programme in selected municipalities particularly vulnerable to violence.

In this book, you will meet several of the young people we work with, as they tell their stories and share their ideas about life. These children and adolescents are a few examples of a growing population of girls and boys eager to contribute to a positive development in the country - investing in them is an important opportunity for Honduras, the Government of Canada and UNICEF to contribute to the national efforts in strengthening citizenship building and sustainable development towards the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals agenda. This book is our way of sharing the wise and inspiring voices of some of the youth and leaders in Honduras, because, as Andrei will soon tell you, they are not only the future – they are the present.

Luz-Angela Melo
Representative, UNICEF Honduras



Supported by the Government of Canada over the last 10 years, Comvida is a programme led by the Municipal Programme for Children, Adolescents and Youth, and is a joint effort between UNICEF, the Government of Honduras, municipalities and several local organisations. Using participatory methodologies and the arts, the municipal Comvida programmes construct and deliver targeted behaviour change messaging on sexual and reproductive health, empowerment, violence prevention and prevention of teenage pregnancies. The strategy encourages the participation of children and adolescents, as well as capacity building at municipal level. The primary target populations are boys and girls between 10 and 21 years of age, with a special focus on vulnerable adolescents and those who are most affected by social exclusion, violence and gender disparities.

“The purpose of the Comvida programme is to help young people create a participatory space where they can develop their talent and life skills, become leaders and learn new things.” Says Maria Elena Ventura, the coordinator for Comvida in Tegucigalpa. “I truly enjoy working with young people. They don’t have many opportunities and this helps them become more motivated to contribute to the development of the society. It’s an important project in creating a better future for Honduras.”

The Comvida programme has also been supported by UNFPA for almost six years with a particular focus on expanding adolescent-friendly health services in sexual & reproductive health and HIV prevention. The demand for these services has increased significantly as a result of the intervention.





FOR THE LOVE OF DANCING



“My father didn’t like that I was going to the Comvida meetings”

“My father didn’t like that I was going to the Comvida meetings. He thought that I should just focus on school and not spend money on the bus.”

18-year-old Genesis sits in her home in the David Betancourt neighbourhood, far out on the outskirts of Tegucigalpa, Honduras’ capital city. It costs much less to live in David Betancourt, but families only get running water for a couple of hours a week here and the roads need a lot of improvement.

A cat sleeps behind Genesis as her mother, Mayra, chops vegetables in the kitchen. “It’s true!” Mayra, shouts from above the cutting board. “He didn’t want to let her go, but he works all day so he doesn’t have to know. I let her go anyway because I see how important these meetings are for her. She is becoming more confident in herself and passionate about the community

and the causes it supports. These are her dreams. We can’t stop her from fulfilling them just because we don’t have the bus money. I look at supporting her as a long-term investment.”

Tears start rolling down Genesis’ cheeks. She dries them off with the backside of her hand and smiles. “It’s just. This is so important for me, I really love the Comvida. I know it’s hard for my parents, and I’m really happy that I can go. You have no idea how much happiness it brings me.”

Genesis was introduced to Samba through Fran. “He came to Comvida and taught me how to samba. A lot of people ask me where I learned how to dance, and they share that they would like to dance like I do. Samba has become such an important part of my life now – I’m so happy when I get to dance!”

“This project has taken me places I had never even dreamed of!”

Fran is 22 years old and has danced samba since he was seven. He says he is the only male samba dancer in all of Honduras and is now teaching children across the country how to dance. “Dancing is a way for me to distract myself and escape the reality that I live in – I don’t need drugs or alcohol. Teaching other people how to dance, in addition to teaching them about important things such as HIV prevention and treatment and avoiding violence, is such an amazing feeling, I’m doing what I’ve always dreamed of. Plus, I have found my true friends here – Genesis is one of them.”

Fran helps Genesis put on a colourful traditional headpiece used in samba. She is very excited to start dancing. “My father saw me dancing samba on TV one day when he didn’t know that I was in Comvida. I think once he saw me there it made him understand why I love it so much. He was proud that I was such an inspiration to others, and that I was on TV – but more importantly, he could finally see how happy I was when dancing.”

Fran, Genesis and their friends in the Comvida programme have gathered to prepare for a practice session to display the various art practices that they have learned.

Three girls are holding large signs with the following words in bold text: Solidarity, Responsibility, Respect and Love. Drummers, break dancers, stilt walkers, mimes – and of course the samba dancers – are together and ready to perform.

The music starts playing and the participants, in their hand-made costumes, take turns performing. The event is a celebration of the arts, a rainbow of colours twirl before the eyes of the audience and the place explodes of positive emotions. It’s powerful to observe the joy that radiates from these young people’s faces.

Once Genesis has finished dancing she shares that she wants to finish her studies and continue as a volunteer with the Comvida programme. “This project has taken me places I had never even dreamed of! I had the opportunity to meet Ban Ki-Moon, I have travelled to other neighbourhoods to dance with and educate their children and youth. I see different parts of Honduras, learn new things, and grow. Through Comvida I am encouraged to always aim higher – because if you really love something, you naturally become good at it and will be an inspiration to others. This is my future.”







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**I AM NOT THE FUTURE,
I AM THE PRESENT**





“Life really doesn’t have to be driven by money in the first place.”

“The most beautiful thing about the art of theatre is that you can use it to capture people’s attention. You can present a problem, a complicated reality, and offer a solution in the same play. You can use humour and entertainment to pull people in – and then you can teach them something. The possibilities are endless.”

Andrei Josue is 19 years old and speaks like a true poet. His father left before he was born, and he grew up with his older brother and mother in Comayagua town, surrounded by adults visiting his mother’s liquor shop. “I grew up in an environment of alcohol and macho culture. From an early age here in Honduras, we are pressured as boys to act in a certain way that is violent and demeaning to girls. I used to be like that myself.”

When Andrei joined the Comvida group in Comayagua, he started learning about theatre, juggling and how to communicate through different forms of art. He also became interested in the impact that the macho culture has on society. “It starts so early – at home the boys get to study while the girls have to clean the house. We can’t keep going like that if we want to move forward and become a better society. We have to support the girls more.”

The mayor of the Comayagua municipality, Carlos Miranda, has been supportive of the Comvida programme since its inception. “I am prioritizing young people and adolescents to create learning spaces and recreational spaces with a focus on entrepreneurship and empowerment. It is our responsibility to invest in our young citizens, they are the hope for the future and we want to continue transforming Comayagua into a city of opportunities for everybody, regardless of their gender or background.”

Serving as a positive example for other young people has been the greatest motivation for Andrei. “I know I wouldn’t be doing anything good if I hadn’t found this place. But here, you have such a great impact on young people who live in difficult conditions. It is a beautiful responsibility and honour to be able to serve as a good example.”

“People say that you can’t live off of art, but being here I have learned how that simply isn’t true.” Andrei explains. “You learn so much about yourself. You learn about comradeship, teamwork and humility. You learn new skills. and you grow as a person – and then you can get a better job. Life really doesn’t have to be driven by money in the first place.”

Andrei ties in the topics of machismo and alcohol in his theatre plays and aims to educate his audience about violence and sexism, although his favourite part of the show is his juggling performance. “I know it doesn’t sound important, but juggling reminds me of how much I’ve learned. It takes a lot of effort to learn how to juggle, you have to coordinate so many movements and use both sides of your brain – it’s a new skill that I now am using in my work. A real accomplishment that I’m proud of.”

The population in Comayagua is very young, and just like Mayor Miranda, Andrei is convinced that they can make a real difference. “We have to ensure that we are the driving positive change for the entire society. I really don’t like it how people say that the youth are the future. We are the present. The impact that we are having is huge – and giving us opportunities is a great investment.”



A woman with voluminous, curly red hair is smiling and looking off to the side. She is wearing a blue denim jacket. The background is a blurred outdoor setting, likely a village, with a yellow building and other people visible in the distance.

DREAMS OF PEACE & MUSIC

“This creative space has been such an inspiration.”

“I have always been a shy girl. I didn’t really know how to speak or express myself well – except when I sing.” The world stops for a moment when Marjorie sings. Her voice is strong and her presence is breath-taking when she performs.

The 20-year-old lead singer of Postal, a popular band in Honduras, sings bravely about ending violence, finding love and other relevant and important topics that are essential for young people.

Marjorie has been a member of the municipally-led Comvida programme for seven years. The programme provides a space where young people meet, learn new skills, create art, play music and participate in workshops and trainings on sensitive, but highly important topics, such as HIV prevention, early pregnancies, drugs, violence, empowerment and how to speak up for their rights as young citizens.

“I started growing as a person because of Comvida. I’ve become more confident in myself through the skills I’ve developed here, and I’ve learned how to better connect with children from other parts of my country through facilitating workshops. It’s a great eye-opener.”

The programme is structured so that older participants conduct capacity building trainings for their younger peers and new arrivals. The facilitators travel to different districts and neighbourhoods to establish new Comvida groups and expand the network throughout the country.

“My personal specialty and favourite discipline in Comvida is the drums. I love following the rhythm and it’s such a beautiful

feeling to share with others. I have taught more than 60 children, and there are now 12 drumming groups in various parts of the Comayagua municipality. Many of the drumming groups are from dangerous neighbourhoods, and I’m very happy that these children have a new thing to love and keep them away from trouble. Music changes lives.”

In 2011, Postal released a song about violence that became very popular in Honduras. The catchy lyrics say “so let there be no more violence, we shouldn’t have to win by competing any more,” and the music video highlights the Comvida group, playing the drums in the background. “Afterwards we would hear children singing our song on the streets and they would know all the words! It was an amazing feeling to be able to spread the message of peace culture through music.”

Since then, Marjorie and her band have participated in a nationally televised singing competition and travelled all over the country to perform in shows. They continue to sing about social issues and youth empowerment. Marjorie gets a lot of her inspiration from what she learns with Comvida “I’m not sure what I would be doing if I didn’t come here every day. This creative space has been such an inspiration for me and it helps me continue dreaming. I dream that I one day will be discovered and travel the world as a singer.”

Marjorie expresses the importance of dreaming big as an artist and the value of fighting to turn these dreams into reality. “I want to inspire the youth in Honduras to say no to violence and to make positive change in their lives. I want them to dream big!”





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PAINT YOUR WAY OUT OF DARKNESS



“I wasn’t sure what to do, but I knew I had to change.”

“When you inhale glue, you suddenly feel like you could do anything. You start making all these plans, but then dark ideas start to come, and before you know it, you realize that you’re actually just staring at a wall as your life passes by.”

Juan is 22 years old and grew up in a neighbourhood in Comayagua where most of his friends smoked marijuana, inhaled glue and did cocaine. He got high for the first time when he was only 12 years old.

One day, Juan’s mother received a call from his school. “They said that he had stopped coming to classes and that his grades were dropping. I had no idea. The next day I found him in his room, he had been sleeping all day and I could smell the strong glue, I was devastated when I realized that I hadn’t noticed what was happening.” Juan’s mother had been diagnosed with breast

cancer the same year and the entire family had been focusing on keeping her alive and healthy. Juan recalls the moment when his mother found him. “She means everything to me, I was so ashamed. I was hooked on the drugs and living a very dark life. I only dressed in black and painted disturbing, dark scenes. I wasn’t sure what to do, but I knew I had to change.”

Juan has always loved art and was originally inspired by his grandfather who also was an artist. He draws, paints and uses graffiti to express himself. One day Juan was walking down one of the main streets in town and stumbled upon a group of young people creating an art mural on a big wall. “I wanted to know what materials they were using so I went over to ask, and they invited me to come visit them in Comvida.” This is how he was introduced to the municipal programme.



“I was still getting high when I came to Comvida.” Juan says. “I was living in two separate worlds. My new friends here, my old friends on the street. I started noticing how different the friendships were – my friends here have ambitions, plans, dreams. I got inspired to follow my own dreams and use my skills in art to become an architect. Gradually, I stopped hanging with my old friends, stopped smoking, and started studying electrical engineering at the university.”

More than half of the young people in Comayagua are unemployed and out of school. This puts them at great risk to turn to crime for money, and drugs for distraction and numbing. José Luis works for the municipality and is the regional coordinator for Comvida in Comayagua. “The municipality uses this space to provide the young people with a safe place to hang and aims to help them become economically independent. We teach them important social skills and abilities, and we organise free workshops in cooking, carpentry, steel work, and of course, the creative arts. Many of our participants have started making their own money, and this is an important accomplishment for the community.”

The graffiti artists at Comvida work together as a team when they plan their projects – they sit and discuss the topics they want to paint and make sketches. Different restaurants, sports clubs, and even the town council, have started calling on them for mural projects. It has become a way for the artists to pay for their studies. For Juan, it’s also an opportunity to make art for his favourite audience.

“Graffiti is an art form that speaks to the hearts of the rejected youth. We are reclaiming the public spaces and streets of Comayagua through messages of love, environmental responsibility, and solving pressing social issues. We believe there are solutions to our struggles. We want to educate the society and reach out to the young people who are in a dark place – we are inviting them to join us instead.”





RESTAMOS VIOLENCIA...
PONTE EN SU LUGAR.

ESTEE E.
L M.
ryn R.
AD
LK
M.
Chin
BIB
Y Pina
ARLEN B.
S. NAOMI
R. ROSY E.
ABDY A.
B. IDREY M.
Hidalgo
LUIS E.



**EVERYTHING CHANGED
WHEN MY FATHER WAS
KILLED**

“After all that I had been through, I felt lucky.”

Idenia sits in the municipal library of Villanueva, an industrial town suffering from high rates of poverty and inequalities, and one of the most violent areas in the world. She is one of the coordinators for the local Ciber Comvida programme. The 21-year-old recounts the major events that have impacted her life. “Things have changed so many times. My family and I used to live on a farm outside the city, but we were so poor that my parents were forced to go to the city for work. I would stay at home with my grandmother during these times.”

One day when Idenia was only 9 years old, she was informed that her father was killed in a robbery in the city. It was the day that everything changed for her. “My mother just went completely numb. She couldn’t handle the new reality and turned ice cold.” Idenia sighs, “she wasn’t able to care for my sisters and I anymore.” Idenia and her two sisters were left to do all the housework. Idenia missed out on an entire year of school.

After a few years, Idenia’s two older sisters decided to move to Villanueva city for work, leaving 12-year-old Idenia behind to live with her mother and new husband. Unfortunately, her mom’s new husband was a violent man. “At first my sisters didn’t

believe me when I told them, but once they saw it with their own eyes during a trip home, they saved me and took me with them to the city.”

Shortly after moving to the city, Idenia met one of her new neighbours, an elderly woman, who told her about the UNICEF supported municipal children’s, youth and adolescent development programme, Comvida. The programme happened to only be a couple of blocks away from where she lived.

“I was immediately curious about the program and visited Comvida the same day. The people who welcomed me were so inclusive and immediately made me feel like I was a part of the Comvida family. After that I started going there every day after school. We would make art, help each other with homework, plan events, cook together, learn different skills and live like brothers and sisters. It was a beautiful place to grow up in. After all that I had been through, I felt lucky that I found the programme.”

After a few years of living in the city, Idenia’s sister decided to travel to Italy to start working. Idenia had started dreaming about going to university but couldn’t afford it at the time, she



“I know she’s competent, I know her!”

was becoming desperate. “When my sister called to ask me if I wanted to come join her in Italy I was terrified – but I said yes. My wish was to save enough money to be able to come back and pay for university.”

Like many other young people in Honduras, Idenia dreamt of possibilities abroad. Her sister paid for her airplane tickets, and Idenia travelled to Italy on a three-month tourist visa. “At first it was amazing! I was so happy to be with my sister again, and Italy was so different and beautiful from home. However, life was much harder there than I had imagined. It’s really not easy to find a job. After staying for more than three months, I was afraid to go out because the police could stop me and deport me at any moment. I lived in fear.” Idenia had become an illegal immigrant.

In the end Idenia couldn’t find a job and travelled back to Honduras after a year of living in Italy. While it wasn’t an easy decision for her, she felt that she didn’t have a choice.

In the year that Idenia lived in Italy, Comvida had started a computer literacy programme for children, the Ciber Comvida. The Villanueva Comvida programme is an open space where the entire community is welcomed. UNICEF donated six computers and provided the facilitators with skills on how to teach young people Microsoft Word, Excel, internet searching and other basic computer skills while learning about topics such as HIV prevention, early pregnancy and violence.

Jesús is 31 years old and is one of the senior coordinators of the Ciber Comvida and municipal library in Villanueva. He has also been with Comvida since he was a child and has known Idenia since she first arrived to Comvida 9 years ago. “I recommended her for the job to be one of the teachers at the Ciber Comvida. I know she’s competent, I know her! She’s been with us for many years and has the necessary knowledge and experience to talk about the various life skills that we teach here – she has been participating in the same workshops herself for years.”

Not unlike many young people in Honduras, Jisus, one of Idenia’s students, didn’t even know how to turn on a computer when he started the programme. He now exclaims with a proud grin on his face, “I know how to use Word, Excel and other programmes now. I know that this will help me when it’s time to start working.” He glances over to Idenia and says, “Idenia is very nice. She’s a patient and positive teacher and doesn’t get mad at us.”

After working at the Ciber Comvida for close to a year, Idenia saved enough money to pay for school. She took the admissions exam for the psychology department at the local university last month and just learned that she got accepted. While Idenia’s path took her to places she never could have imagined, she feels grateful that Comvida was able to help guide her to fulfill her dreams. She finally feels independent.







**THOSE WHO ARE ALIVE
HERE ARE SURVIVORS.**



“They killed all my friends. All five of them, dead.”

“This is not a good neighbourhood at all” 16-year old Antonio remarks quietly. “My friends and I used to stand just around the corner from here and smoke weed. We weren’t hurting anybody, we were just standing there doing our thing. Then there was this one day — I realised that I had forgotten something at home so I left the corner to go home and get it,” he pauses as his eyes gaze to the ground, “I had only been walking for a minute when I heard the gunshots...they killed all my friends. All five of them, dead. Like nothing.”

Raiza is the coordinator of the Comvida centre in Concepción, Antonio’s neighbourhood in Choloma city. She has lived in Concepción for 26 years, and she also heard the shooting. “When the massacre happened it sounded like war. Nobody would come out of their homes – all you could hear were mothers screaming. To this day we still don’t know who did it.” Unresolved cases of

murder and other forms of violence are not at all uncommon in Honduras and the Cortés district has the highest murder rates in the entire country, and in the world.

Several people close to Raiza have told her that she should quit her job. They say that being at the Comvida center puts her at risk. “Of course it’s dangerous, but I have to come here. Knowing that these young people believe in me and trust me, I can’t fail them. You can’t just close a place like this — I mean where would they go? These boys and girls would just come to my house and knock on my door if I wasn’t here.”

Everyone is welcome at Comvida. Children from the community between the ages of 8 and 20 come to relax, work out in the gym, play foosball, read, play videogames or study on the public computers. There is a barbershop where the guys give each other



cool haircuts, and workshops educating young people about safe sex, violence prevention and post-trauma therapy, HIV prevention and treatment options, and drug and addiction services.

“No, the centre doesn’t save the world” Raiza explains, “but it supports and protects the children by giving them an alternative to hanging out on the streets. There is no doubt that the place is important for them and they know it – otherwise I’m sure one or more of these 15 computers would have disappeared by now. Just a simple thing like that – they respect the place.”

Cinthia, an 18-year-old volunteer at Comvida, says she started coming to the centre as a young child because of Raiza. “I didn’t want to be at home, and Comvida was a place where I felt safe. Then I became one of the volunteers on staff, and now I try to support the younger children the way Raiza supported me.”

Antonio comes to Comvida to forget about the traumatic death of his friends. He enjoys playing games and practicing in the gym. “Here with Raiza I have found an inner calm. She speaks with us and gives us advice on how to deal with life’s struggles. It’s a place where I can talk openly about what happened and the people understand me – they live a similar life in the same place. They also knew my friends.”

He continues, “My dream is to go to the United States for work if I don’t find anything here. I would go alone, at night, and not tell anybody. I’m not afraid to travel. If you make it to the United States, I know I can find work and send home money home to help my family. I wish Honduras could give the young people here jobs so that we could feel like our life has a purpose. Right now all we see is death.”

Raiza nods, “I used to have a big group of friends when I moved here. Today, I can count on one hand my friends from that group who are still alive. I’m a survivor. Those who are alive here are survivors.”



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A FATHER WHO CARES





“We have buried too many children before their 10th birthday.”

“If you look closely over there, by the wall, you’ll see them. Gang members. They’re everywhere – it’s their job to always know what’s happening.” Ever Ponce explains, “While they are always keeping watch, they’ve made a deal with us – to not bother or approach our kids, and to protect us.”

The Los Pinos neighbourhood is located in the outskirts of Honduras’ capital city, Tegucigalpa. Most people living here are under the age of 18 years old, and many find themselves in violent and vulnerable conditions. It’s the perfect recruitment conditions for criminal gangs.

Many of the households are broken. Single mothers are struggling to meet ends, and the youth are becoming increasingly frustrated by not being able to find work. Ever Ponce explains that alcohol, drugs, and violence are rampant. “For a young person, there’s

nothing more difficult than feeling like you don’t belong to a group or have a safe place to be. The results are devastating – the youngest ones are being targeted by gangs and are offered protection and money in return for inclusion and protection. But then they are sent to the most dangerous areas as lookouts or delivery boys and many of them end up being murdered. We have buried too many children before their 10th birthday.”

Ever Ponce, 49 is the coordinator of Football for Life, a programme that officially began in 2002 as a partnership between the National Sports Commission, UNICEF and the former world renowned Honduran football player, Hector Zelaya. Football for Life’s mission it to use football as a tool to provide adolescents who live in the most vulnerable neighbourhoods of Hondura’s capital city with a supportive and safe place to learn, play and grow. Ever comes to Colonia Los Pinos every Saturday to organize friendly

“We use football for recreation and prevention, it’s both healthy and fun.”

football matches and tournaments between the teams from the various neighbourhoods. He has played and been involved in organizing football games his entire life. In its first year, Football for Life reached over 1,100 children. Jump to today and the programme reaches more than 15,000 children in more than 160 different areas of Tegucigalpa. More than 40,000 children have participated in Football for Life over the past 13 years.

Eduardo David, an 11-year-old, has played with Football for Life for the past three years. “You can’t go anywhere in this neighbourhood without the risk of being killed. Many boys my age have died because they got involved with dangerous people - but being here feels safe. I’m with my friends, and Ponce gives us good advice on both how to play football and how to be a good person. I joined because I love to play football, and I want to grow up to be a coach and play on a big team like Barcelona.” He smiles. “Do you know Messi? I love Messi. I like to watch his techniques so I can learn more and copy him.”

Heysi, a 16-year-old, is one of the girls playing with Football for Life “There aren’t many girls playing, but I know I’m good and I’m welcome here. I’ve never had any problems. These boys are all

my friends. I used to play with my dad when I was little, so he is very happy that I’m on the team here. Football is my life.”

“We use football for recreation and prevention, it’s both healthy and fun – and a way for us to get a lot of information across to these children.” Ever Ponce explains. “One of the rules to remain a member is that you have to stay in school. We also talk about what is good and bad. We talk about violence, drugs, alcohol, crime, HIV and early pregnancies – things that will help them make better decisions about their futures.”

When Ever Ponce walks out on to the football pitch to start the game, the children gather in a big circle around him. They call him Ponce and give him hugs and fist bumps as they receive their team shirts. Ever makes eye contact with every set of eyes for at least one moment as he hands out the shirts. “Are you good?” “Where’s your brother?” “How was your exam?” Every single one of the 75 boys and girls present today is addressed by name.

The platform is not only a way to provide children with recreation and education, but also with psychological and emotional support. Ever explains that they sometimes bring psychologists onsite to



speak with the children and provide follow up with support for some of the most urgent cases. “We realize a lot of our boys have difficult issues they are dealing with, the alcohol, the drugs. They have nowhere to go. Many are afraid and depressed.”

“To reach these children we have to come out here – to the dangerous neighbourhoods. We’ve met with the heads of the different gangs and explained what we are doing. The results have been overwhelmingly positive. The rule is clear: The football pitch is off-limits for gang activity and recruitment. And the reason the gangs comply with the rules is simple – the gang leaders want to protect the new generation from making the same mistakes they once made. Many of these boys are their family members and keeping them here has become a way to save them. With the Football for Life family, you can be safe without having to join a gang.”

The boys run off to play their friendly, today the yellow team is pitched against the blue team. One of the older boys acts as referee, and Ever Ponce calmly watches from afar as the proud extra-father he is to all these boys.

“It’s quite simple, really. Some people will say that young boys are aggressive, loud, confused, but many of these boys just need somebody to listen to them and give them some advice. It makes them calm. They want a hug, and they want to sit down and tell you something that matters to them. Sometimes it’s big things. Sometimes it’s small things. But mostly they just want to feel like somebody respects and cares about them. And I do.”







**RETURNING TO JOY,
AND DECIDING TO STAY**

“The most important thing I’ve learned is to be less shy.”

It is difficult to imagine how people dare risking their lives to illegally immigrate to the United States from Honduras. As soon as they embark on their journey, they are subject to being robbed or murdered. Women and girls are often raped, boys are forced to traffic drugs, and children get thrown off of moving trains. There are so many things that can go so terribly wrong. Yet, still they go.

“Adults go because they hope to give their children a better future; young people leave because they dream of opportunities.” explains Suani, a 16-year-old volunteer for the municipal Comvida programme and Retorno a la Alegría campaign in Puerto Cortés.

“My father left when he was fired from his job, he said he didn’t have a choice. My brother was sick and urgently needed surgery so my father decided to travel illegally to the United States to find work so that he could pay for it. He made it and survived, so we were blessed.” She looks down. “But I know of many young people who didn’t make it – they were hurt badly on the way or caught by the border patrols – still, many want to try again. It’s hard to convince people to stay when they feel like they have nothing to lose.”

Many migrants are arrested in Mexico before even reaching the United States, and the flow of deported migrant families and children who are returned to Honduras is constant. Sometimes

more than 500 people arrive per day to the reception centres, telling petrifying stories of terror and death. Nevertheless, the American Dream is still very much alive in Honduras. A vast majority of young people believe that the answer to their problems lies beyond the borders of their home land.

Retorno a la Alegría means “Return to Joy” and is a methodology that has been used by UNICEF since 1992 to support the recovery of children and youth affected by emergencies and traumatic experiences. The Government of Honduras adopted the programme in 2015 and its main objectives are to defer children and youth from illegally emigrating, and to provide psychological and emotional support to those children who have left and returned. The idea is to reintegrate them into the society, so that they don’t feel the need or wish to leave again.

Youth volunteers for Retorno a la Alegría work in communities and sometimes visit the transition centres where returning migrants are received. Using their specialised training, they work with young children who have survived traumatic experiences, using puppets and play therapy to reduce the possible consequences of emotional trauma. The presence and participation of the volunteers is important for everybody involved.

By establishing a foundation of trust, the volunteers serve as positive role models, helping the returned migrants see that





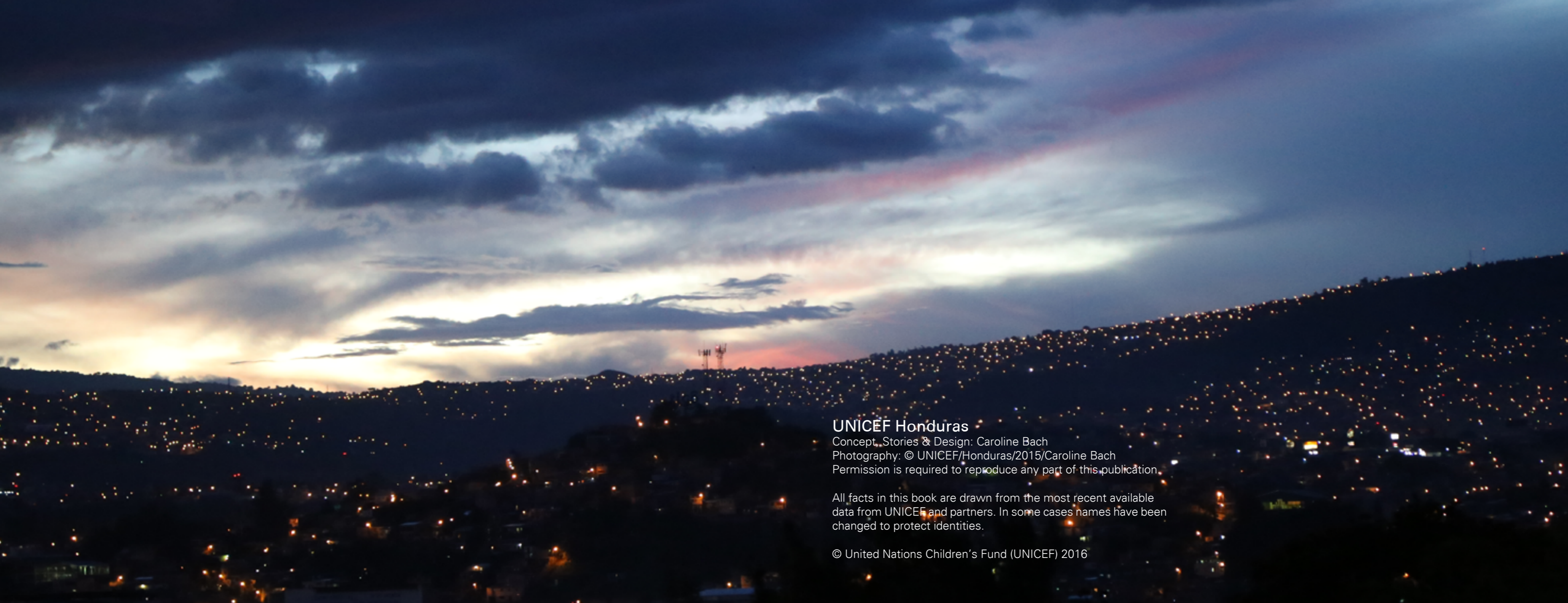
they themselves can play a meaningful role in solving their own problems. Most importantly, the volunteers help the migrants find reasons for joy, and reasons to stay.

To reach more young people, Comvida volunteers use the Child Communicator Networks and TV studio built by the municipality of Puerto Cortés. Nelson Castro is 26 years old and started with Comvida as a volunteer, today he produces a daily nationally-aired TV show led by children. “We work a lot on the Retorno a la Alegría campaign. We interview young people about what they appreciate about Puerto Cortés, and we interview deported migrants about their experiences. We want to inform the public while maintaining positive. It’s important for us to educate the youth on the benefits of remaining in Honduras and to explain how our department can help them. Many young people are just not being exposed to the opportunities that do exist.”

Suani has been a volunteer with Comvida for six years and was recently selected to be part of the Retorno a la Alegría volunteers. “Being a volunteer has changed my life. I used to be very shy and quiet but communicating as a young person on TV feels amazing! We empower each other – I feel empowered when being on TV, and other children can see that it is possible to be successful if you stay. We become the living proof that Honduras is a place worth investing our lives into.”

Suani likes baseball, arts and photography, and the Comvida programme has helped her to become more independent. “The most important thing I have learned is to voice my opinions and to be less shy. It has changed me in a very positive way, and I have even started to work part-time as an entertainer at children’s parties. The income from this job helps me pay for my studies and to help my family.” She smiles. “My greatest reason for joy is knowing that I can have a positive impact on the lives and choices of young people – and help them understand that they can be happy here too.”





UNICEF Honduras

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