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THE AMERICAS

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## “Hitting the Streets”

RECIFE, Brazil

May 21, 1999

By Tyrone Turner

Let me recount two experiences that left a lasting impression on me as I started to look at the issues surrounding children living in the streets of Recife.

In a McDonald's parking lot I watched a security guard and a street kid. The ubiquitous American fast-food restaurant, located in the *Espinheiros* (Brambles) neighborhood of Recife, was a natural magnet for small urchins trying to raise some coins from the jingling pockets of customers.

As I entered the fast food place to get an orange juice, I noticed the two talking peacefully. This surprised me. The main purpose of the guards in many businesses is to chase loitering kids away from the clientele. Here was this middle-aged guard, thumbs hooked into a heavy belt below a protruding belly, chatting away with the unkempt child. Like a father and son, I thought, or maybe just two people killing the hours of the day.

I emerged with my juice and sat on the curb, waiting for a friend to pick me up to go to a concert. This young boy, who looked about eight years old, targeted the cars as they exited the drive-thru. One moment he was laughing and playing. As soon as a car would appear his demeanor changed. He'd press his face and hands against the window, and his face would droop into a pitiful caricature of his own poverty. More often than not, the drivers couldn't resist the charms of this urchin, and the window would roll down and a couple of cents would come his way.

The guard, so friendly before, became intent on keeping the child away from the clientele. He ran after the child who easily eluded his clumsy swipes. Fatigued from the game of cat and mouse, the guard retreated. I returned my attention to the street to look for my friend.

I turned back around to see that instead of giving up, the guard had removed his leather belt. Sneaking up behind the child, he swung the heavy piece over his head. With all of his force he brought the belt down. Only the quick reaction of the boy saved him, as he ducked and escaped by inches.

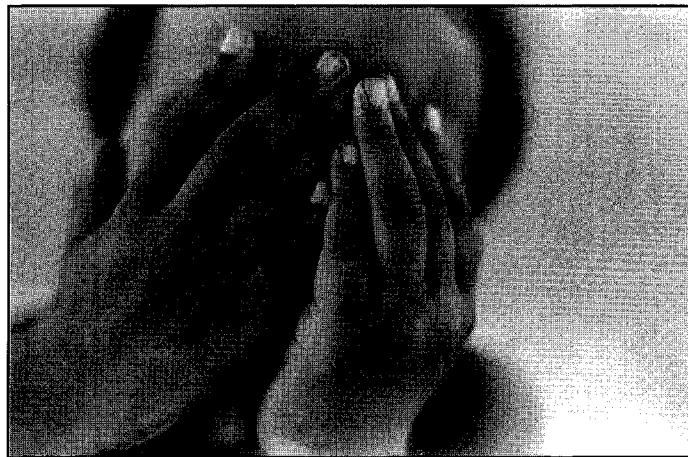
If I had been the boy, I would have fled without looking back. However, in a sign of pride, the boy turned and jeered at the guard for having missed his target. The guard grabbed loose rocks and pitched them in a last ditch effort to leave some kind of physical impression on the boy. As I climbed into the car to leave, the game between the two continued.

Another time, my wife Susan and I were with a friend, Sandra Ferreira. Sandra is a homicide detective with the civil police in Recife. We had met her at lunch and she was sharing with us some books of poetry from the Northeast. She pulled over to drop us off near the beach on her way back to work. Before we parted Sandra insisted on reading a few verses aloud in the accent



*Moises, 5, and his sister Camila, 4, pose for a photo at the edge of the Boa Viagem plaza where they and their parents live from time to time. The family is from Piedade, about 15 minutes away by bus, and have been without a home for the past five years.*

*Camila, 4, plays peekabo in the plaza with her brother and other people that her parents trust. She has lived on the street with her parents her whole life.*



of the rural areas. Parked at the side of the road, Sandra began with a series of fictional letters between two poor friends from the Northeast, one of whom had moved to São Paulo to look for work and was sharing impressions of life in the big city.

In the middle of her reading, three street kids crossed the avenue right in front of our car. Small plastic water bottles containing shoe glue hung from their mouths. The expression "glue-sniffing" doesn't really describe how the children grasp the bottle with their front teeth and breathe the toxic fumes. Discolored hair, blotchy skin and mud-encrusted clothing marked them as long-term abusers.

Sandra, without breaking the cadence of the poetry, reached down with her left hand and pulled up a chromed .38-caliber revolver to just below window level. She eyed the boys as she read, as if she would open fire if they made a wrong move. The kids ambled across the street, and

Sandra returned the gun to its holster. She continued reading without explanation.

The presence of street children did not surprise me. Along with *Carnaval* and the rain forest, Brazil is known for its *abandonados* (abandoned ones). Still, I wondered about what drove these kids to spend their days begging in a McDonalds parking lot or wandering the streets high on glue. I also found it sad and fascinating to witness reactions to the kids. Street children are pitied, feared and despised by a population that has grown weary of the youngsters pulling at them for money, or performing petty burglaries.

Though I don't condone the extreme reactions of the above examples, I understand the toll of constantly facing the outstretched hands of adults and children alike. I am not proud of the fact that when I am not "in the mood," I walk around specific areas — even when I

know the people begging or sleeping on the sidewalk. I feel ashamed walking back to our apartment with full bags of groceries. Sometimes I just want a break from the constant exposure to misery. And I think most people are like that — they just want someone else to take care of the problem.

The sheer number of children on the streets of Recife boggles the mind. Just glancing around the Avenida Conde Boa Vista at noon, anyone can see that half of the Brazilian population is under 20 years old. Many have parents gripping their hands as they try to dodge the insane traffic. However, a surprising number of kids have no guardian, negotiating the streets like pros, alone or in small groups.

To understand this free-ranging population of youth, one must distinguish between the kids working in the streets, and those actually living there. The child-workers hustle for money, selling gum or trinkets, washing windshields and shining shoes, or just begging. At every major stoplight, in the markets, and wherever any significant flow of people occurs, these working kids are trying to earn a couple of *reais* (Brazilian currency) for themselves and their families. They have homes, and return to them at night.

One day Susan and I stopped to talk to a group of children selling gum along a major thoroughfare. As soon as I pulled out my camera, their mother appeared, shielding her eyes from the afternoon glare. Vera Casio, 25, said that her three sons provided the sole source of income

for the family. Every day after school she brought the children, ages 8, 9, and 10, to that corner. Just then the light turned red, and the youngsters jumped into action, weaving through the line of cars, pressing themselves against windows, pleading with the drivers.

Vera knew the dangers of this work. One son, Sano, 10, had already been hit by a car and another, José Casio, had been sideswiped by a motorcycle. She also told of a man in a black car who had cruised by a couple of times, threatening to take José. She said that he had hinted about sex, that he claimed that 'one of these days I am going to take him.' When asked why, she responded, "I don't know. To sell...to send to other countries...for the Germans."

Another group exists on the margin. These are the children and adolescents who live in the streets, who roam in small groups, many with bottles of glue-like life-support systems attached to their faces. Most have "homes," but have found living with nothing to eat and no shelter better than a family life of domestic abuse and poverty.

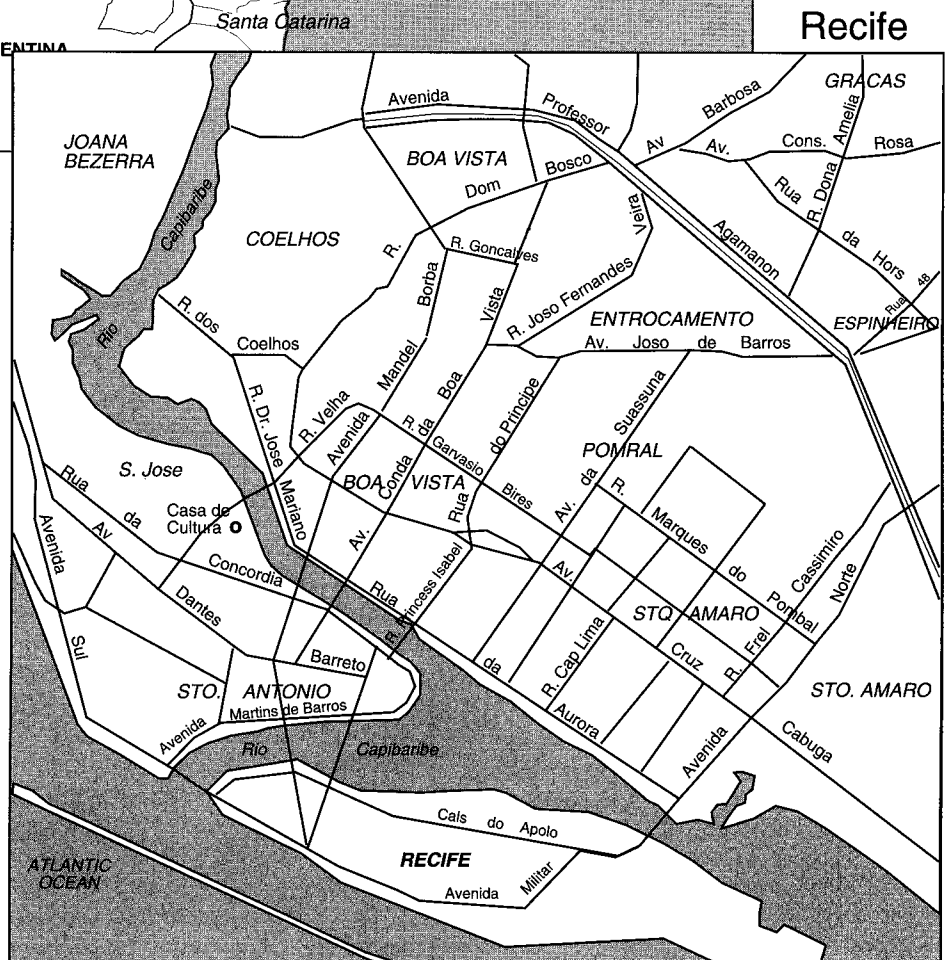
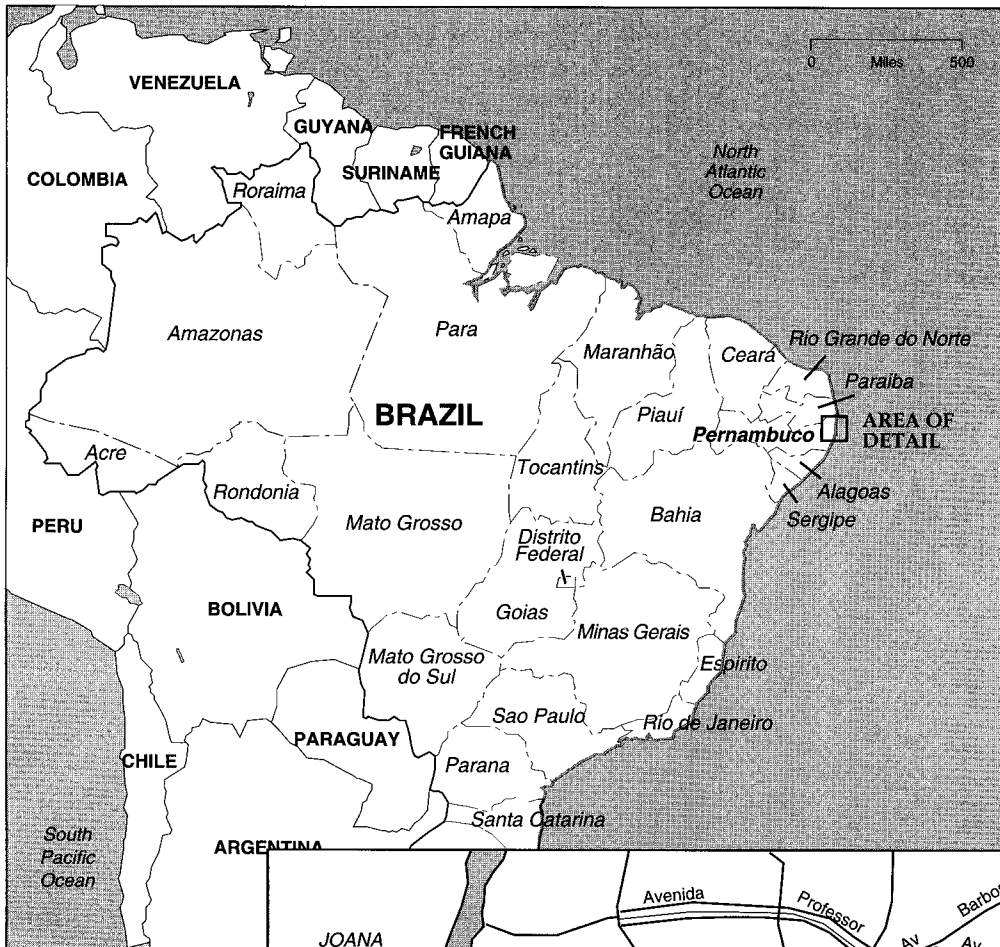
They stay on the streets for weeks, months, even years. I have talked to some who have lost any sense of the passage of time — they don't remember how long they have been away from their families or sniffing glue. They don't remember their ages.

Nightly, hundreds of these children huddle on benches, on sidewalks, under the overhangs of businesses<sup>1</sup>. Instead of being evenly distributed across a met-



*Two young boys stand on Agamenon Magalhães Avenue selling gum to help their families' income.*

<sup>1</sup> Their numbers range from about 300, to 800, to thousands, depending on whom you talk to. 770 According to the *Jornal de Comercio*, there are 700. March 18, 1999, Recife, Brazil A2.



ropolitan area of 3 million, they clump in fairly predictable areas in the center of Recife and out toward the beach community of Boa Viagem. Finding these kids is not difficult.

Susan and I run across them in our daily life. Walking through the *Boa Viagem* (good journey) plaza, Atlantic Ocean breezes at our backs, we pass the homeless huddled against the Nossa Senhora da Boa Viagem church. One night we approached with grocery bags of bread, cheese, milk and fruit, and asked some boys if they were hungry. They sprang up immediately, putting the glue bottles under their shirts, accepting what we had brought.

We talked with one boy, 14 years old. Fumes of the glue seeped from his shirt. The vapors were surprisingly strong, making both of us step back a bit. It was a sweet, pungent odor, much stronger than I expected. I couldn't believe these kids could breathe the glue fumes directly from the bottle for minutes, much less weeks or years. I imagined the boy's central nervous system disintegrating with each inhalation.

"Tia, Tio (aunt, uncle) bring us some shirts if you have them...please, bring some shirts." They weren't asking for money — just clothing. As we left they sat down to eat, inhaling food and glue fumes one after another.

As a photographer, two things made me hesitate to start work on this subject. First, I had already seen many images of Brazilian street children. Though provocative, these photos seem to get lost in the great sea of images of suffering from around the world. I knew that I wanted to do something on the problem, but how could it be different?

Second, I felt tired, just thinking of the commitment of time and energy such a story takes. I could see the long days of work ahead, the doubts and fears. How would the children react to me, my camera, my wanting just to "hang" with them? And what would happen if the children want money for the pictures? In spite of my own questioning, and in spite of not knowing exactly where the work would take me, I decided to dive in.

On the day I was to start my story, Thursday, March 18<sup>th</sup>, a surprise in the local paper greeted me. The metro section banner headline of the *Jornal de Comercio* read, "*Estado vai, enfim, retirar menor das ruas*" ("The state will, at last, get kids off of the streets").<sup>2</sup>

My heart sank. Great, I thought. I delayed too long and now I am not going to even have any kids for my story. Of course, then I felt guilty about my selfishness. All in all, not a good start to the day.

The article described a bold "emergency plan," a

"*Busca Ativa*" (active search) going into effect that same day. Five teams of social workers, each accompanied by a police officer, would go into the streets to convince the children to accept help. The article stressed that this was not a "cleaning" of the streets, whereby they would force the kids to go to a shelter. However, the goal was a "definitive removal" of the minors.

Immediately, Susan and I hopped a bus and headed to the area of Recife near the McDonalds described above, where we had seen the largest concentration of street children. At least I could see the government efforts first-hand.

Upon arriving we found no kids around. It was like a ghost town. We spent the afternoon walking from there to the old part of Recife, another congregating point for the glue-sniffers. Not one street child. It felt as if the city had been wiped clean. I didn't know whether the city had taken the children, or if they had been frightened off by the initiative.

I had to chuckle the next day when I read in the paper, "*A tão esperada ação de retirada de menores que vivem em situação de risco nas ruas do Recife não aconteceu, ontem, como estava previsto*" ("The expected action of removing the at-risk minors from the streets of Recife did not occur, yesterday, as foreseen."). After so many years, it would have to wait another day.

Finally, on Monday of the next week, the *busca ativa* began and the newspapers carried reports that 11 children had accepted help — 10 went to municipal shelters, one returned home.

From the reports in the paper, I found it hard to swallow that the city was going to solve the problem "definitively." I knew that my next step was to talk to the city about its effort, as well as meet the other organizations working with street children. I wanted to get the lay of the land, to know how different entities saw the problem of street children, and the solutions that they offered.

A friend of mine, free-lance sociologist Andre Vasconcellos, filled me in on the non-governmental programs around town working with kids in the streets. He said that, surprisingly, there weren't very many organizations actually working with the kids. Of the ones that do, he said that I should not miss talking with José Mar of *Pé no Chão* (Feet on the Ground), and Selma Andrade of *Ruas e Praças* (Streets and Plazas).

## PÉ NO CHÃO

I walked into *Pé no Chão's* stripped-down office on the eighth floor of a 1950's office building in downtown Recife. Sitting down with the director, José Mar, and

<sup>2</sup> *Journal de Comercio*, March 18, 1999, C1

two social workers, I started to ask about what *Pé no Chão* did. Immediately, José turned the question around to ask what interested me. I rattled off an obvious list: street children, glue addiction, violence, child prostitution, etc...

José took a deep breath and launched into an unexpected diatribe about why the real problems were not what I had just mentioned. Only a small minority of the kids are actually living on the streets. In fact, according to him, the kids who actually live in the street have made an active decision to change their lives. They have already begun to assert their independence, and chose the dangers of the street over a worse domestic situation. Many more children and adolescents live at home, but in situations of poverty and violence.

As for glue, "If you want to look at a drug that affects more kids' lives, look at alcohol." Behind most of the domestic problems one finds alcohol abuse by the mother or father.

He explained that to understand street children, one must look at the history of the *menor abandonado* (abandoned child). That term, according to José, reaches back to slavery. Slaves were not emancipated all at once in Brazil, but in a series of stages. First, the government enacted the "free womb law" in 1871, emancipating the unborn child of any slave. This created a population of youth freed and on their own. The term *abandonado* was later used for these children, who had no home and whom the government ignored. The first entity to care for these children were Catholic nuns.

According to José, the attitude of the government toward the *abandonados* has been the same ever since — it has forgotten them. During the 1930's and 1940's, repressive, jail-like institutions were created to deal with the children of the streets. José criticized the current *Busca Ativa* as operating with the same attitude, claiming that the city is not really interested in these children's lives. The City's goal, he claimed, was to remove an eyesore. And, he continued, they are focusing on the most evident problem, leaving untouched the legions of worker-children, and the economic conditions that drive families to use children to gain their income.

About 15 years ago, working with *abandonados* and *meninos e meninas de rua* (boys and girls in the street) was the rage and "money flowed like water" from national and international sources. "Anyone who said, I have 100 abandoned children and need money to build a house in the country to give them a home — no problem," said José.

The height of this was around the time of the "Candelaria" murders in Rio de Janeiro in 1993. Five children were assassinated in their sleep on the steps of the

Church of Our Lady of Candelaria in Rio de Janeiro. The killers were off-duty policemen.<sup>3</sup>

José credits the group of social workers that would become *Pé No Chão* with challenging the indiscriminate use of the terms "abandoned" and "street children." Four years ago they did a survey in the area of Encruzilhada, a border neighborhood between middle- and lower-class populations. It includes a large market area where a number of children worked and congregated. In doing in-depth interviews with 50 children, they confirmed that the vast majority had homes to which they returned, though perhaps not on a nightly basis.

Because of this work, *Pé no Chão* elected not to work with children living in the streets. Instead, they strove to fortify the family relationships that already existed for "at-risk children and adolescents" who worked in the streets, but who were exposed to the dangers of drugs and violence. Today, they provide activities for children aimed at building self-esteem. They also conduct educational work with mothers to help their domestic lives and strengthen their communities.

Coming out of this meeting, I felt a bit unhinged. I had not expected someone to challenge my focus on the children in the worst situation. As I walked toward the bus stop in the night air, three street kids cut across my path, glue bottles hanging from their mouths. I took it as a sign to keep going with my original idea.

## BUSCA ATIVA

One day I ran into one of the *Busca Ativa* teams in the Boa Viagem plaza. I met social workers Benedito and Valéria and asked about the news reports. They were critical of the press because the stories published made *Busca Ativa* seem like they were forcing the children off of the streets. They defended the process as long-term, developing relationships with the kids, and figuring out which ones really wanted help. I asked how I would be able to accompany them in the field, and they gave me the name of the director of the program, Roberta Melo Magalhães.

Structurally, the program consists of teams of two to three social workers and a military-police officer that go out in shifts during the mornings, afternoons and evenings to find children that are living in the streets and convince them to accept help. If the child accepts help, the situation of the child is evaluated by the *conselho titular* (like a department of social services), which decides whether the child needs treatment for drug addiction (glue, usually), will go to a shelter, or be reintegrated with his (or her) family.

I began riding along with the "Centro" (Center of Re-

<sup>3</sup> Page, Joseph A. *The Brazilians*. Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., Reading, Massachusetts; 1995; p.259



*Two teenage girls sleep on a doorstep in Old Recife.*

cife) team. We cruised through the cobblestone streets of Old Recife and pretty quickly came upon three young girls sleeping in the doorway of a bank.

The social workers approached, and one of the girls, 15, awoke. She eyed us cautiously. Both she and another of the girls, 14, had been taken by the *Busca Ativa* to a girls' shelter the week before, but had left soon afterwards to go back to the streets. The social workers said that they probably were in Old Recife, "*fazendo programas*" ("doing programs," or turning tricks). The 15-year-old looked groggily at the adults without saying a word, refusing to communicate. The social workers gave up, and we left.

We swung across the Beberibe River to the neighborhood of Santo Amaro. As we passed respectable businesses and middle-class homes, the accompanying police officer told me about the *favela* of Santo Amaro that we couldn't see. He described the place as "hot," with lots of crime and drugs. As he said this I found myself remembering the words of others telling me that a significant part of the violence problem in Recife was due to corrupt police who rob and kill — probably not too fair of me. But I wondered how the social workers were going to build trust with the street children with a police officer in tow — even one in plain clothes. From my experiences in the United States with gang youth, I knew

that any hint of police would negate all confidence.

We spotted two boys walking with an adult, all with glue bottles attached to their mouths. The bus pulled over, and we crossed the busy avenue to talk with them. Our approach scared the older guy, who crossed another street and never returned. The two boys didn't run, but as soon as they heard that the social workers were from the city, they started saying "FEBEM"— the common name for the institutions that house youth offenders (State Foundation for the Well-Being of Minors).<sup>4</sup>

After dispelling that misconception, the social workers tried to get the youths to accept a "*referral*," to start the process of going to a shelter. Clipboards were ready with identification forms and the *Busca Ativa* people started to fill them out. Giggling, the boys gave their names, but ultimately couldn't hide the fact that they were lying. One of the boys faded away, but the other one hung on, claiming that he would go the next day.

By the time the team was back at the van, two kids had shown up, a 16-year-old and an 11-year-old, wanting to go to a shelter. *En route*, the older boy told me that he had already killed someone, shot in a drug dispute. I looked at the police officer, who shrugged, commenting that it

<sup>4</sup> Although in Pernambuco it is known as FUNDAC, Foundation of Children and Adolescence.

probably was true. No one asked any more about that.

We dropped by the *Conselho Titular*, and then transported the kids to the shelter *Miriam Guerra* (or Miriam War) in Beberibe. Just outside the gates is a thriving street market, and vendors sell popsicles and cigarettes through the iron bars to shelter kids who have spare change. The social workers filled out some paper work and the boys hounded me for money.

This particular shelter was opened in March to accommodate the influx from the *Busca Ativa*. As a temporary shelter, it housed the children until the city figures out where they should go — back home, or to a more permanent residence. With few amenities, it was basically a large, one-story house with bunk beds for sleeping quarters, a large open room for watching TV, a few offices, a kitchen and a yard sprinkled with trees and rocks.

On a later visit to the home, I attempted to interview some of the resident children, but without success. They jumped on the beds, tackling each other in mid-air, and sporadically shot me questions about the United States. "Do they have street kids? Do they sniff glue?" Then I listened as they started singing a song from the backlands of the state:

*Madalena chorava  
Mamãe consolava  
Fui passear na roça,  
Encontrei a Madalena,  
Sentado numa pedra,  
Comendo farinha seca,  
Dizendo assim,  
Pobre não tem valor,  
Pobre é sofredor...*

Madalena was crying,  
Mommy was consoling her,  
I took a walk in the country,  
I came upon Madalena,  
Seated on a rock,  
Eating dry manioc,  
Saying thus,  
The poor aren't worth anything,  
The poor are for suffering...

The next day, I found myself in a meeting of the *Busca Ativa* social workers. Most talked of problems with some of the children, as well as, delays at the *Conselhos Titulares*. One male social worker sneaked around trying to embarrass others by showing a picture of a naked woman. Others grimaced and tried to get him to stop.

Leaving with the afternoon *Busca Ativa* team, I headed for the neighborhood of *Coelhos* (Rabbits), where the children's hospital, IMIP, is located. We arrived and descended from the bus into a rush of activity. Outside the hospital stood about 20 vendors serving food and

drinks to weary souls suffering the waiting game of Recife public healthcare. People streamed in and out of the entrance, cars and buses flew past; we threaded our way down the ribbon of clear sidewalk.

Spotting some glue-sniffing kids on the opposite side of the street, the team approached. As soon as we started to talk to the kids, a small one, named Clevsom, 10, started to make the same claim that the social workers were from FEBEM. "*Vou não, Tia, vou não.*" (I am not going, Aunt, I am not going).

The *Busca Ativa* people argued back, saying that they were not from FEBEM, that they were there to help them get off of the streets. More boys circled around, eight in all, with glue bottles both hidden and in full view. The youngsters had the seasoned look of long-term street dwellers. Without fear they crowded around arguing about whether they should all go or not. An older boy, Langelo, 16, leaned towards the other boys and mentioned that they could get a change of clothes and food.

The agreement with *Busca Ativa* was that if the child gets into the van, then the glue is forfeited for good. Pretty soon the bulk had decided to go and one of the social workers held an arm-full of plastic glue bottles against her chest. I wondered how she could keep from fainting from the fumes.

Before even boarding the van, one of the younger boys changed his mind. The police officer had already grabbed his glue, and raised it above his head as the youth jumped and screamed for it. Eventually the boy calmed down and reverted to his original desire to go to a shelter.

Five youths boarded the bus, with the rest of the street children jeering from the outside, waving their glue bottles and climbing on the back of the van. Then one banged on the door, threw his glue into the front seat and got in. Another, and then another squeezed in, until finally eight kids, three educators, a police officer, the driver and me were crammed into the vehicle. All eight bottles of glue sat in the front seat.

Suddenly one boy screamed that he hadn't known that he wasn't going to get his glue back. The social worker, in a calm and deliberate voice, explained what they had already agreed about the surrendering of the glue. Shouting that he wanted to get out, he threatened to break the windows of the van. This agitated the others like a chemical reaction, with all yelling to get out and wanting their glue.

Finally, the social workers had had enough. If the kids were just playing a game, then they had won. The driver pulled to the side of the road about four blocks from where we started. Six of the eight left, grabbing the plastic bottles from the front seat. The two that remained made it only as far as the *Conselho Titular*. Because of a

delay at that office, they left before their interview started.

One of the social workers, Ana Nery, explained that she didn't expect the *Busca Ativa* to solve the problem of street children. She had previously worked for four similar city programs. All began enthusiastically and all ended because of funding cutbacks or political changes. She predicted that the *Busca Ativa* would last for about a year.

In her opinion, the real value of the city program lay simply in putting social workers in the streets. They could map out who the street children were and where they were living. This in turn could put pressure on other government agencies to fulfill their duty with respect to children's rights.

The director of the *Busca Ativa*, Roberta Magalhães Melo, stressed that their work had the same goal as the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) — getting children off of the streets. However, as opposed to the long-term educational approach of the NGOs, they see themselves as an emergency measure. "It's as if the kids are at the edge of a cliff and we are saving them." With such a great number of children living in such risky situations, "we can't sit back and wait."

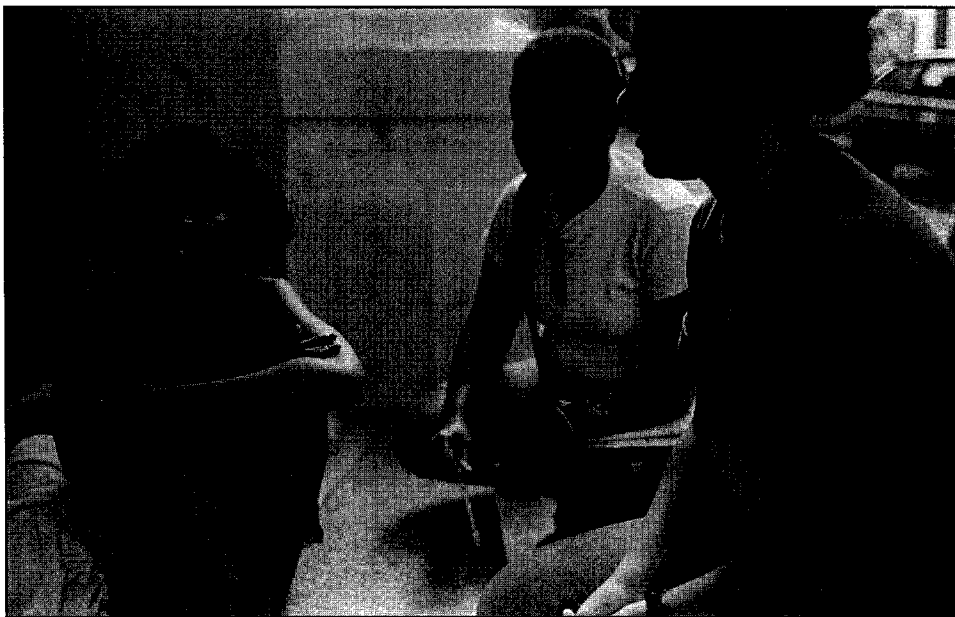
## RUAS E PRAÇAS

My final stop on the whirlwind tour of street-children programs in Recife brought me to *Ruas e Praças*, (Streets and Plazas). Arriving at the office, I entered the worn, two-story building to find a group of women shelling beans at a rickety conference table. They explained that the beans were actually grown by street children who lived at the *Ruas e Praças* shelter about 90 minutes north of Recife. These beans were extra ones that hadn't been consumed by shelter residents and were destined for market.

Selma Andrade, administrative director of *Ruas e*

*Praças*, explained that the 12-year-old program was the only NGO in Recife that worked directly in the streets with children. In contrast to *Busca Ativa*, it took a long-term educational approach to helping street children<sup>5</sup>.

Everything they did was geared toward raising the consciousness of the children so that they could decide for themselves to quit glue-sniffing and leave the life of



*Two Busca Ativa social workers try to talk with one of two teenage girls about returning to the shelter they had left the week before. The girl refused to talk with them.*

the streets. The social workers provided daily activities in the streets to get to know the children and build trust. Weekly meetings provided a further forum for reflection by kids on what their lives were like and how they could change. During these meetings the kids themselves, along with the social workers, decided which kids would actually go to the shelter.

The week following my meeting with Selma, I began accompanying the *Ruas e Praças* social workers. Through them I met again the street kids from the *Coelhos* neighborhood of Recife — actually the same group that I met with the *Busca Ativa* team. Since that time, I have been returning regularly, documenting not only the work of *Ruas e Praças*, but what life is like for these glue-addicted children.

You'll read about my experiences in the streets of *Coelhos* in a future newsletter. □

<sup>5</sup> Though one quarter of their work deals with child workers, the vast majority focuses on the kids living in the streets addicted to glue-sniffing.