

# ICWA LETTERS

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TLT-7  
THE AMERICAS

*Tyrone Turner is a Fellow of the Institute writing about and photographing Brazilian youth and their lives in rural and urban settings.*

## Glue Kids

RECIFE, Pernambuco, Brazil

November 25, 1999

Peter Bird Martin  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
Four West Wheelock Street  
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 USA

Dear Peter,

From Recife's commercial center neighborhoods fan out in a jumble of old and new, residential and commercial. Crumbling facades of turn-of-the-century houses mix with modern, poured-concrete structures. From the doors and windows spill an infinite variety of goods and services for sale: hot lunches, pvc piping, notebooks, plumbers for hire, videos for rent.

*Coelhos* (which literally means "rabbits," but is named after one of the founders of Recife) is one such neighborhood that lies just across the Capibaribe River from downtown Recife. Walking over the bridge into *Coelhos*, one can see shanties hugging the curve of the river, part of the labyrinthian *favela* tucked away behind the lumberyards and mechanic shops lining the main road. In the early mornings, the backs of young men glistening with sweat strain under loads of plywood. Workers who have already put in a couple of hours relax by the coffee stands, or take a shot of *cachaça* (sugar cane rum) from a mobile booze bar.

At the other end of the commercial zone is the public childrens' hospital, *Instituto Materno Infantil de Pernambuco*, mostly known as IMIP (Ee-MEE-pee). At the foot of its tired, 1950s façade three streets converge into a "T" of daily transit confusion. Emergency vehicles and rural-health buses push through the normal glut of taxis and *combis* (VW vans used as public transportation) that choke the roads heading into town.

Once one passes IMIP, the mood of the street changes from poor working class to middle class. Lottery kiosks, small grocery stores and aged but dignified residences spread into a quiet neighborhood with cobblestone streets.

I know some of the struggling people of *Coelhos*. Many make their living from the passing traffic. There's Lourdes, one of the *barraca* (snack-stall) ladies, who sells coffee and small fried snacks. Toni, a rough-and-tumble taxi driver, offers his protection if I stay in the area past nightfall. João, a heavy, 23-year-old security guard, likes to recount the vast quantities of beer that he drank over the previous weekend.

However, the real reason I am here is to document a different kind of struggle, that of glue-addicted street kids. *Coelhos* is their home also, and their lives play out on the sidewalks in front of IMIP. There's Josenildo, 16, tall, skinny, on glue and in the streets because his family refuses to tolerate his homo-



Murilo, 16, middle, and two other glue-addicted youths hang out in the Coelhos neighborhood of Recife. Like Murilo, some have families and homes in the area, while many of the other glue sniffers stay for long stretches of time in the streets.

sexuality. His buddy Murilo, also 16 but a foot smaller than Josenildo, spends nights in his grandmother's house and his days with glue-addicted friends. His skin has the tell-tale ashen look of glue-addiction. I have gotten to know Murilo's younger brother, Tota, 14; Abrahao, 10; Clevsom, 10; Careca, 14; Toni, 15; Disha, 13, and the other street children of Coelhos.

My entrance into the world of the *cheira cola* (glue sniffer) is through *Ruas e Praças* (Streets and Plazas), a nongovernmental organization connected to the National Movement of Street Children and dedicated to changing the lives of street children in Recife. The basic thrust of *Ruas e Praças* is two-fold. Fourteen educators work in the streets with children, developing play and educational activities designed to help the kids develop an awareness of their lives, options available to them and the desire to change. The second part takes place at their recuperation camp, *Centro Educacional Vida Nova* (New Life Educational Center), which is located in the village of *Capim de Cheiro* (Fragrant Grass) in the neighboring state of Paraiba. Street children who decide to change their lives and give up the street and drugs, can live there while they attend school, work, and repair broken relationships with their families.

#### GLUE KIDS

One of the first things I noticed about these kids was how well they use the words that social workers like to hear. The street children talked about the evils of sniffing glue and living on the streets. They spoke vaguely about love for their mothers and the families that they left behind. Violence was bad and school was good. They knew that sex should be "protected," and that their dreams could be fulfilled.

Many of the kids claimed that being *cheira colas* was their choice. Scratching

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"Street children who decide to change their lives and give up the street and drugs, can live there while they attend school, work, and repair broken relationships with their families."

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beneath their bravado, it became clear that many problems catapulted them into life in the streets. But they defiantly insisted that they stay because they want to be there. This slippery assertion of independence hints that, with guidance, the choice could be reversed and a young life saved. This notion sustains the hopes of the individuals and organizations that direct their time and resources to helping the kids walk away from glue, an easily found substance that is not illegal to possess or use.

That these were glue kids and not "ordinary" poor children was immediately apparent. Besides having glue bottles in their mouths, their emaciated bodies were swallowed by filthy clothing.<sup>1</sup> Their skin was usually blotchy, with teeth rotting in their gums. It looked as if the glue was sucking the life from them.

Because of their addiction and their sleeping in the streets, they were looked at as more "at risk" than other poor, malnourished children. It was a visibly acute problem, in plain view of Brazilians and tourists alike. Public action was focused on them, both positively through social services, and negatively through the police.

Behind the words, however, was a harsh and stubbornly unchanging reality. This was a life of boredom made tolerable by sniffing glue and highlighted by moments of violence. It was a life of begging and hunger. It was a sexual world, where intimacy is bartered, and where the older simply force themselves on the younger. It was a world where the street was preferred and often safer because

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"Their skin was usually blotchy, with teeth rotting in their gums. It looked as if the glue was sucking the life from them."

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*As rain drops bead on his face, Breno, 14, inhales glue fumes from a plastic water bottle. According to the glue addicts in the neighborhood, about one inch of glue (about 50 U.S. cents worth) allows them to stay high for about three hours. Some of these children claim to stay high for weeks and even months. Though Breno lives on the streets of Coelhos, his family's house is in an outlying part of Recife.*

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<sup>1</sup> Even in the heat of Recife, the glue-sniffers are very rarely without shirts, which serve to hide their bottles of glue.

home meant neglect, hatred, abuse, embarrassment and even threats of death.

The kids lived their lives in public spaces. They slept on sidewalks, fought in the streets and got high in the plazas. They lived in a fishbowl with even their most private times in public view. At any time, their space or bodies could be violated, just as they unpredictably perpetuated such violence on others.

Though some people tried helping the street children, most treated them as pariahs, ignoring or fearing them. Strangers would approach and lecture. The kids listened passively, staring off and breathing into water bottles holding an amber lump of glue. The kids allowed the words to wash over them, without retort, without challenge.

The one part of the community interested in their continued presence was drug sellers, who would buy gallon-sized cans of shoe glue to divide into small quantities for sale. Each hit of glue cost fifty cents. Most kids inhaled their way through three globs a day making their addiction a profitable captive market for suppliers.

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“Most kids inhaled their way through three globs a day making their addiction a profitable captive market for suppliers”

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The *cheira colas* reinvented “home” in the streets. Family became other glue kids, with whom they spent virtually all of their time. They wandered the streets in small packs, unaware of the world around them unless danger arose. Secrets and intrigue, loves and tensions were all present in the world they created. It was a highly fluid family, serving immediate needs and forgetting the past. Street children would arrive from other parts of the city and gain acceptance into the group by virtue of their common addiction. In general, conversation rarely went beyond the themes of consumption of glue and often escalated into arguments. Most hardly knew where the others were from, or why they were in the street. Some lost all track of time, as weeks and months on the glue ran together into a blur. Usually, they had only vague notions of how long they had been on the streets.

The unwritten rules of this street family started with the fact that there were no leaders. “*Quem tem chefe é índio*” (He who has a chief is an Indian) was a common phrase. The respect for each other’s glue and money for glue was of paramount concern. One could tell this by the gravity of the reaction to transgressions. However, the law of “might makes right” superseded all, with the stronger ones generally forcing their will upon smaller street children, who had to accept it or leave.

The sense of family was extended to those who cared about them, paid attention, or gave them things. Attachments were made, so that the social workers, the *barraca* ladies, the *fregueses* (clients), and even I, became “theirs.” Materially, they felt entitled to the resources available within this “family.” Shelters and social programs were used to any advantage. And they demanded copies of all of the photos that I ever took of them.

However, it went beyond the material, as they created relationships of trust and affection. Once formed, they were closely kept. For example, only once did I ever see a glue kid steal from the local *barraca* ladies. When it happened, the others were quick to reprimand him and return the goods. It didn’t mean that they never stole, but that they did not do it where they lived.

In regard to me, this code translated into an unusual amount of concern over my safety. The glue kids would warn me about following them into dangerous areas, as well as admonish anyone who tried to touch my cameras. Surprisingly few times did any of them hassle me for money.

## DAY BY DAY

Typical days for the *cheira colas* began in the streets. Some awoke in their homes, and immediately headed to the streets. Others spent the night there, on cardboard, in-between *barracas*. It was not by accident that the ones on the street slept near





*(From left to right) Tatai, 14, Josenildo, 16, and another glue-sniffing boy take a break from the Coelhos neighborhood where they live and go to the beach in Pina, a nearby neighborhood in Recife. The glue bottles, which are the highest priority of their addicted lives, become like pacifiers and are rarely far away.*



*Clevsom, 10, attempts to throw a rock at a man who has taken his glue bottle away, as a Ruas e Praças street educator grabs for his hand. Most of the violence between the street kids is fights over glue.*



*As if invisible to passers-by, Toni, 15, sniffs on his glue bottle among a group of people waiting for transportation outside of the IMIP hospital in the Coelhos neighborhood of Recife.*

businesses and public institutions. The same guards that hassled them during the day provided a bit of security during the night hours, when bad things could happen to children.

Though they slept with their bottle of glue, it was usually dried by morning, and they needed a fresh supply. The first order of business was begging for some bread and coffee, as well as the first hit of glue. One *real* (U.S.\$0.55) gave them about one inch of glue in a discarded mineral water bottle—enough for three hours of inhaling.

The kids then waited for the *tias* (literally “aunts,” but used as a greeting of respect for any woman) of *Ruas e Praças* who came on weekday mornings around nine o’clock for activities and meetings with the kids. They would spend two animated hours painting and talking about their lives, and how they wanted to get off of the streets. The only rule that the educators had was that the kids not sniff glue during the meetings. Usually, however, the kids just hid the glue in their shirts, sneaking sniffs from not-so-hidden bottles.

After this, the day was open to them. Some went off to bathe, some to beg for more glue and food. Many just reclined on the sidewalk, as if they were in a private opium den. Their small bodies splayed on the ground, bottles of glue in their mouths, they caused passing mother to sidestep, tugging the arms of their gawking children.

Later in the afternoon, the kids started looking for the social workers from the city program to help street children, the *Busca Ativa* (see TLT-4). The street children who wanted to go to a shelter for a night or so, get food and a bath, waited for the government’s white VW van to round the corner. They had been through the drill before: fill out the forms, surrender the bottle of glue (that probably has

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“The same guards that hassled them during the day provided a bit of security during the night hours, when bad things could happen to children.”

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old glue anyway), and jump into the van. Returning to the streets just meant jumping over the shelter wall. Tota had gone through this revolving door so many times the *Busca Ativa* refused to pick him up.

## ONE DAY

One Friday in June I went to the office of *Ruas e Praças* in the Santo Amaro neighborhood to attend meetings between the social workers and the kids involved in the process of getting off of the streets. As I approached the office, João, a 13-year-old *cheira cola* came running toward me laughing and screaming my name (which sounded like Charlie when he tried saying it). I had printed a picture of him and his family, all homeless, to give to him, and pulled it out of my camera bag. He was ecstatic. He beamed with pride to see the photo, and showed it to everyone around, street children and social workers.

One of the older *cheira colas* grabbed the picture out of João's hands, crumpled it and held it in his fist. João melted in anger, screaming at him to return the photo. I intervened to try to tell João that I could print another, but he ran off. Following him, thinking that I could calm him down, I saw him pick up an empty beer bottle and crack the bottom off, just like you'd see someone do in a movie bar fight.

The educators took João aside as he clenched the glass weapon by his side

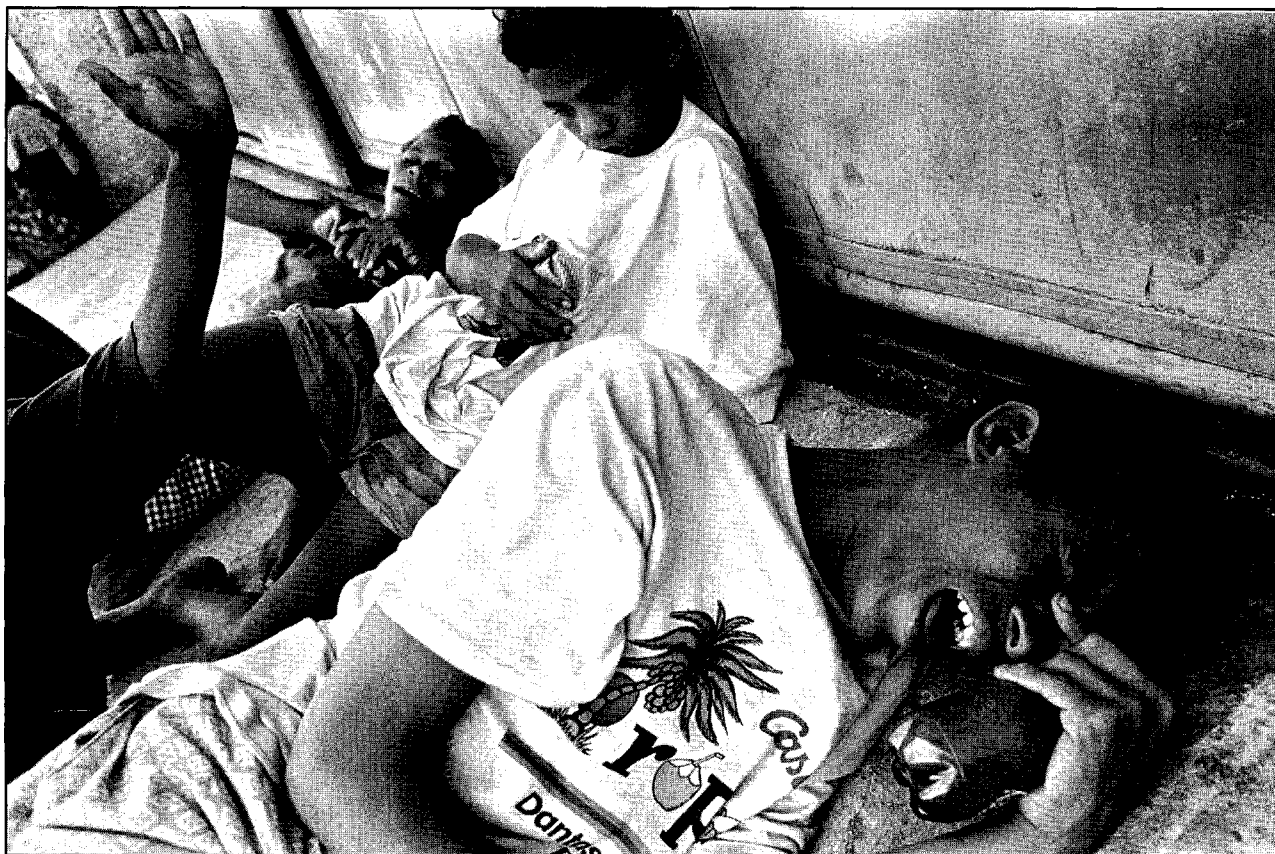
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"I saw him pick up  
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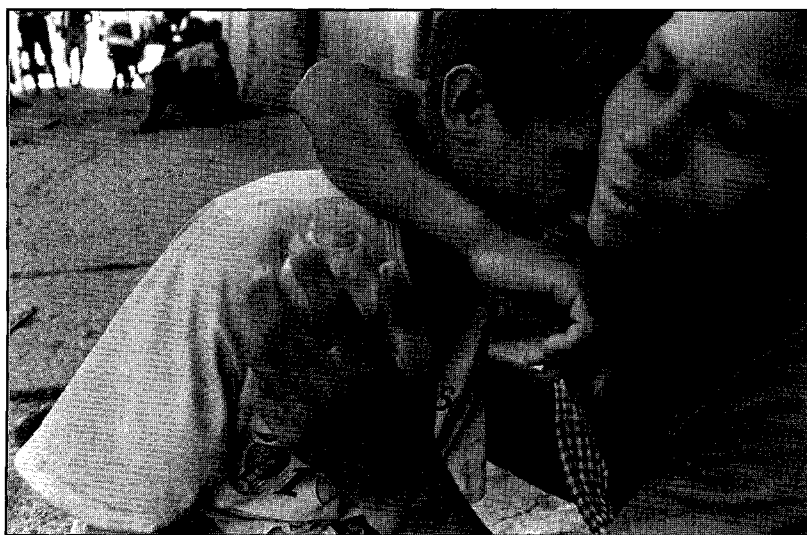
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*After four street kids divide some rice and beans that a passerby had given to them, Givanildo, 15, begins shoving handfuls of rice into his mouth in front of the Ruas e Praças office. The boy has been living on the streets of the Santo Amaro neighborhood for over one year.*



*Stoned on glue fumes, Josenildo, 16, foreground, starts crying about missing a meeting at Ruas e Praças. He had lost track of the day of the week, and therefore missed his chance to go to the Capim de Cheiro, Ruas e Praças' recovery camp in the neighboring state of Paraíba, the next week. The boys in the background, also high on glue, poked and teased Josenildo about his being upset.*



*After crying for a few minutes, Josenildo is held and comforted by one of the other glue kids, Edmilsom, 16.*



and tried to reason with him. I tried again to talk to him, feeling responsible, since the problem was a photo that I had given to him. Finally he calmed down, released the broken bottle and left abruptly. Later he returned after begging for enough money to pay the older *cheira cola* 50 centavos to buy back his destroyed photo. So little meant so much.

This was not the only time a photo caused an argument. After a couple of episodes of kids fighting over the pictures, I resolved to not bring any more. However I had opened Pandora's box. They were very aware when I was photographing, and would remember and request pictures from almost every moment. So that the kids would not think that every photo that I took would come back to them as a gift, I resolved to bring a "point-and-shoot" camera every so often. I'd snap photos especially for them, and bring them a week later.

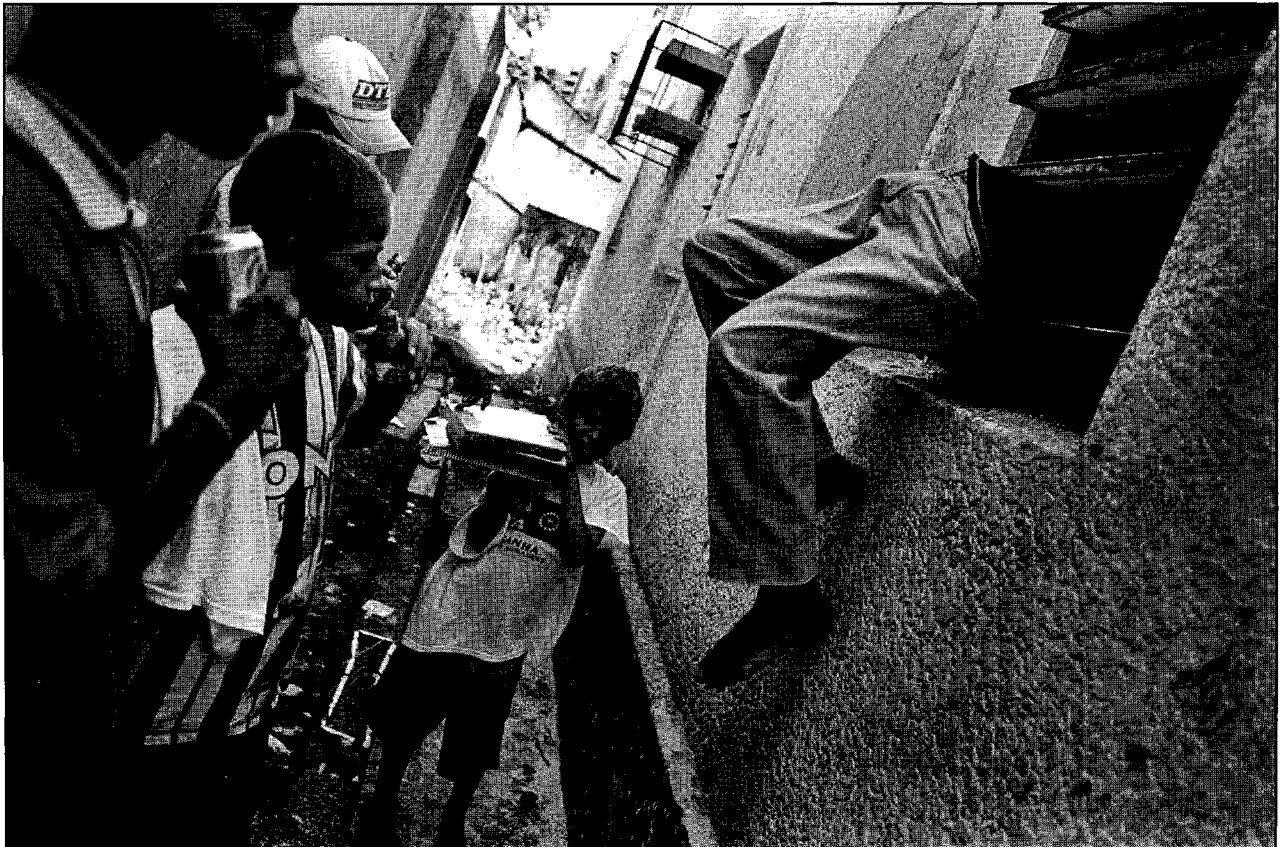
I learned how they wanted to see themselves. Each of them wanted a color photo of their whole bodies, *tudinho* (everything). No headshots. They wanted to be smiling and alone in the photo, or with one of the stray dogs they fed. They felt a sense of possession of the photo: It was theirs, and if I were late in delivery they would complain. Few thanked me when they received "their" photo, but I could see their appreciation as they proudly showed it to all of the other kids and *barraca* ladies. One little guy, Breno, 13, returned to me and handed his picture back. He didn't have anywhere to carry a photo, and instead of losing it, he wanted me to store it in my camera bag.

After the episode with João, I decided to swing by Coelhos. Arriving at IMIP and the *barracas* area, I ran into Wellington, a street kid who I neither knew very well nor trusted. I asked him where Josenildo was, and he led me past the lumber-

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*Iangelo, 17, squeezes through the bars of the window of an abandoned house in Coelhos where he lives as other glue sniffing friends wait for him.*





*Oscar, 15, and his aunt, Edileasa, sit in the latter's home in the favela of Coelhos. Oscar is a resident of the recovery camp Capim de Cheiro and comes home only once a month for visits. To avoid being tempted to return to sniffing glue, during his home visits he avoids going to the street where his glue-addicted friends hang out.*



*At Capim de Cheiro, educator Antonio José da Silva, back to camera, meets with Josenildo, 16, left, and Murilo, 16, right, as the latter two bitterly argue about wanting to leave the camp and return to Recife. Josenildo, who is openly gay, claimed to want to get back to the streets in the Coelhos neighborhood in order to be with another glue sniffer who was his boyfriend. The next day, the pair secretly slipped away and returned to Recife.*

yards. Walking behind him, I could see the faces of the workers looking from the glue-sniffer to the gringo with a camera.

The two *cheira colas* that I knew the best in Coelhos were Josenildo and Murilo. Their families lived in the *favela*, and they had been friends since childhood. A small-framed youth, liked and trusted by many in the area, Murilo was the first of the two to go to the streets. About four years ago friends tempted him and his brother, Tota, to try the glue, and both became hooked. Though they spent their nights at their grandmother's, every morning they were back on the streets inhaling glue.

The story of Josenildo, a tall, thin boy whose blue eyes sparkled when he was not sniffing, was a bit more complicated. Sometimes he claimed that the impetus to leave his home was his father's violence toward him and his mom. He also said that his brother beat him because of his effeminacy. At other times he blamed Murilo and Tota for his beginning on the street. "Before them, I didn't know anything about glue or stealing or begging." They lured him out and gave him the glue to which he is addicted today.

Openly gay, Josenildo also says that it was because of Tota that he began having sex. They were hanging out near a high school when Josenildo saw Tota having sex with another boy in a bathroom. Instead of leaving, he watched them from a distance. After they finished, Josenildo approached and had sex with the other boy also.

\* \* \*

At the shaded entrance to a warehouse six street children sprawled about the pavement. I stooped next to Josenildo, and his eyes came into focus as he sat up, "Tio (uncle), how are you? What day is it, Tio? Are the *tias* coming today?"

I explained that it was Friday, and that the *tias* were not coming because they were having the meeting about the next group to go to the recuperation camp in *Capim de Cheiro* at their office. Josenildo's face cringed tightly, and as he slumped back to the ground he wailed, "I missed it...I missed it."

He had forgotten the meeting and thereby lost his chance to go to *Capim de Cheiro* the next week. He lay crying in a fetal position as other glue kids began to taunt him, hitting and poking him and trying to pull his glue bottle away. Like a hurt animal, he swatted them away.

Edmilsom, 16, got him to sit up and awkwardly hugged him, trying to get him to stop crying. After Josenildo began to calm down, the group returned to sniffing. Suddenly the boys jumped forward as I saw something swoosh past the corner of my eye. A man had emerged from the adjoining lumberyard and swung a belt to disperse the ragged group. Luckily, he hit no one.

As we walked toward the IMIP, Josenildo declared that he wanted to take a bath. The rest of the kids, including an arriving Murilo, excitedly agreed, and we all headed for an abandoned dairy-processing factory just beyond the lumberyards.

We skirted down an alley along the side of one of the eight-foot perimeter walls, avoiding the guarded front gate. At the end of the alley, the wall had crumbled, and we stepped inside the property. The city-block-sized plant consisted of a series of cement structures. Trees and plants grew through the floors of the ruins. Shards of glass and tile lay scattered about the ground, and I wondered how the boys avoided shredding their bare feet.

Walking through the maze, I suddenly spotted another group of people up ahead. I called to Murilo to stop, and I told him that I didn't want to go on. My

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"He lay crying in a fetal position as other glue kids began to taunt him, hitting and poking him, and trying to pull his glue bottle away."

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nerves were on end, not knowing why they were there and knowing the only exit was behind me. The area of Coelhos was known for drug dealing, and my mind raced with the real possibility of stumbling upon a transaction.

Murilo calmed me down telling me that he knew them, that it would be all right. As we walked through I saw five young men with back packs lighting up joints. They looked at me and I returned the glance, saying a quick *tudo bem* (How's it going?) as we left them behind.

Instead of leading me to a bathing area near the front of the building that I had seen before, we headed to the very back of the property. Arriving at the locked back gates, Josenildo ducked into a room open to the blue sky. In the center of a trash-littered cement floor was a small opening to a large tank of water. The kids stripped and jumped in.

Leaving aside the glue, they splashed and played in the water, acting like children instead of drug addicts. As they started to wash themselves and each other, the playfulness mixed with eroticism. Edmilsom caressed Josenildo and they even kissed briefly. I thought about Josenildo's homosexuality, but also the fact that many of the boys in this group had had sex with each other. As I mentioned before, sex is used for barter and control, but it is also part of the intimacy that these street children have with each other.

After the kids put on their fetid clothing and scooped up their glue, we exited straight out the front of the property passing seated guards who didn't say a word. Back on the street, Josenildo and Murilo split off from the group to find food. Josenildo headed toward the middle-class area on the other side of IMIP, claiming that the families there always gave food. He pressed his face against the security bars, looking into living rooms, but without luck. After four tries, Murilo said that his grandmother probably had something extra to eat at home.

We crossed into the *favela* across from IMIP and headed down an alley with modest but well-built, brightly painted, two-story attached cement-and-brick homes. This *favela* was relatively well-off, with water (only once a week), sewerage, electricity, mail delivery, churches and an internal economy of small stores and bars. As the aunt of a recovering *cheira cola* said, "Coelhos is great, close to downtown and a hospital. The only thing that makes it terrible are the people."

Coelhos had been a *favela* of houses on stilts hovering over the Capibaribe River. The area flooded regularly. Over 20 years before, the city tore down the *favela*, raised the ground level and built new cement housing. This did not get rid of the shanties totally though, as precarious new wooden shacks were then inserted on the little strip between the official housing and the river. Poverty abhors a vacuum.

Murilo walked rapidly in front and Josenildo guided me with his hand loosely placed upon my shoulder. We meet the stares of people in the alleys, as they quickly looked from the glue kids to the gringo and back. When people asked who I was, they would say that I was from *Ruas e Praças*, a name the residents recognized. In front of people I did not know, in a heavy drug-selling area, I did not correct their mistake.

Suddenly Murilo stopped in front of the locked, gated door of a house that looked similar to most others in the *favela*. Murilo's grandmother, Edide Maria, 62, who he called "Mom," pulled open the latch with her small, withered hands. She was a tiny, slight woman with hunched shoulders, a weathered face and a permanent air of exhaustion. Hugging her leg was another grandchild, Murilo's mentally handicapped cousin, who lived with her.

She accepted readily the appeal for food from Josenildo, and served up the last of her beans and rice. Josenildo thanked her for the plate he ate under a por-

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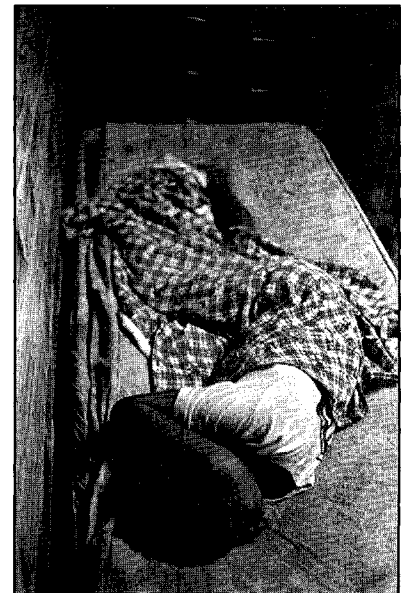
"Coelhos is great, close to downtown and a hospital. The only thing that makes it terrible are the people."

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*Rogério, 15, lost his right eye when a gunfight broke out near him on the streets of Boa Viagem in Recife. One of the persons involved grabbed him and used him as a shield. A year later, he was at Capim de Cheiro, off of the streets and the glue. Here, he was pictured in the yam fields of Capim de Cheiro that the kids themselves planted and cared for. In September of 1999, Rogério became ill due to infections from the lingering effects of the gunshot wound. He was hospitalized for tests, but died suddenly on September 16 of cardiac and respiratory failure.*

*Murilo, 16, lies in his room at Capim de Cheiro covering his face and not wanting to talk to anyone. He had stormed out of a meeting after refusing to explain an incident where an educator claimed to have caught him sexually attacking another boy. Murilo said later that they had been merely playing.*



*Jadsom, 13, works in the fields of Capim de Cheiro planting macaxeira root. Chores like these form an important part of the rhythm of life at the recovery camp. The youth, mostly glue-sniffing street kids, learn to obey schedules and share responsibilities.*

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“The shock of seeing the thin boys with their blotchy skin registered on her face and she immediately blurted out that we would buy hotdogs.”

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trait of Jesus. Murilo fidgeted, pacing back and forth. As soon as Josenildo finished, we left. Scarcely out of sight, they reached under their shirts and pulled out hidden bottles of glue. They put them to their lips and inhaled. This calmed them. We walked to the edge of the *favela*, crossed back to the *barracas*, and the cycle of the street life began again.

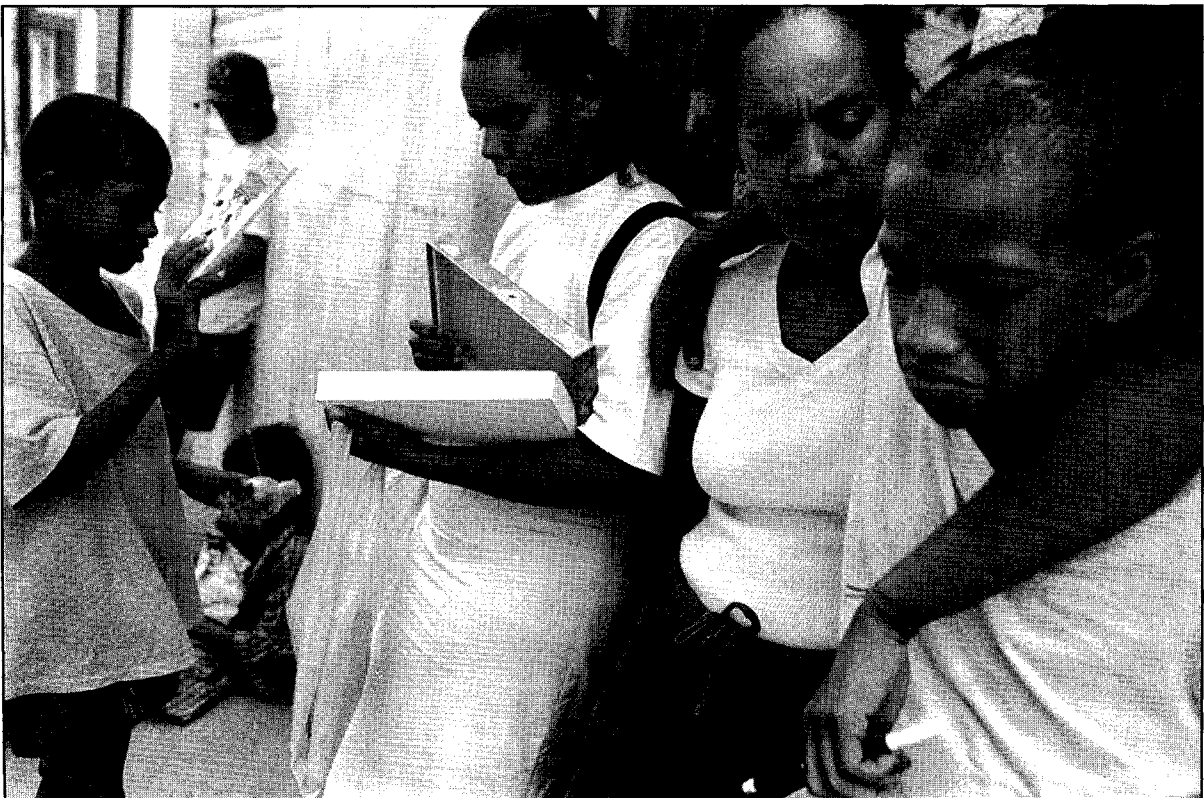
The days flowed. As the boys floated in and out of childhood, in and out of consciousness, the constant was the glue. The variety was in hanging out, fighting, begging or swimming in the river. Josenildo told me that they even once hustled enough to take a taxi to the beach, a three-buck fare. However, most days glue ruled reason and their world remained confined to a five-block area.

#### FAMILY LIFE

Mothers' Day gave me my first good look into the relationships between these kids and their families. I had arranged with Murilo and Josenildo to visit their homes that Sunday, "One o'clock, in front of IMIP," I said.

My wife Susan and I jumped out of the cab near the hospital and walked to the main intersection under ominous skies of clouds too dark and heavy to stay afloat. Two and then three and then more of the glue kids ran up to say hello and to meet Susan for the first time. The shock of seeing the thin boys with their blotchy skin registered on her face and she immediately blurted out that we would buy hotdogs.<sup>2</sup> Four kids grew to nine, with eight hotdogs and one *coxinha* (fried pastry with chicken or cheese filling) on the bill. As they devoured the snacks, penny-sized raindrops pinged around us and we all scurried for cover under the barraca awnings.

We weren't the only ones taking cover from the now driving rain. Passing



Ruas e Praças educator Rosiane de Rocha Silva puts her arm around Tota, 14, as Solange Maria de Silva, another educator, talks with Abrão, 10, and other kids living on the street in the Coelhos neighborhood.

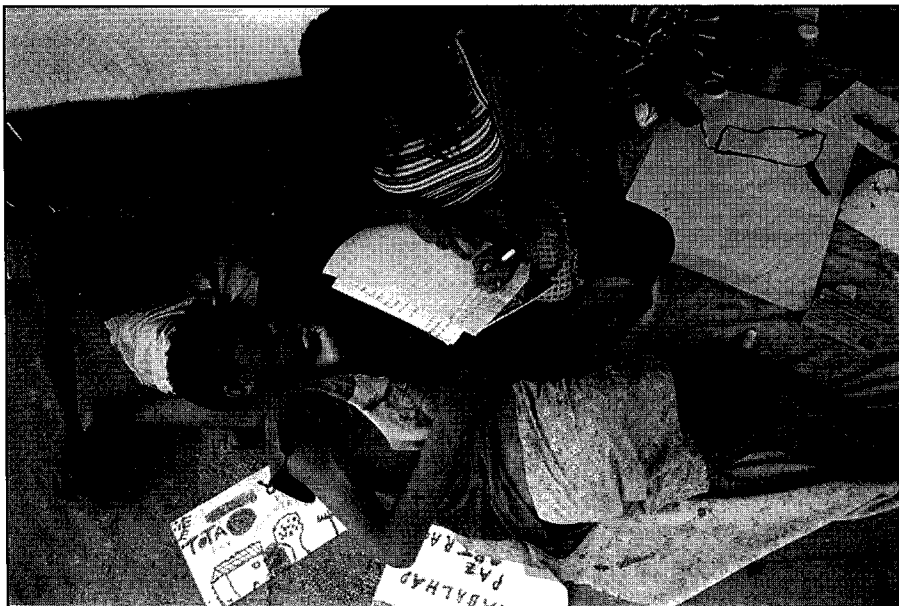
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<sup>2</sup> Breaking my usual policy of not pulling money out of my pockets to buy anything.





*Two glue sniffers playfully balance on a pipe hanging over the Capibaribe River, which runs through downtown Recife. The boy in front, Samuel, 14, sniffs glue but goes home to sleep at night. The other boy, Edilsom, 15, had been sleeping in the streets for over a year, but is now a resident at Capim de Cheiro.*



*Street educator Iracyla Aragão Silva writes Mother's Day cards with Josenildo, 16, foreground, and Tota, 14, left.*



*High from inhaling glue fumes, Toni, 15, screams and spreads his arms in the rain. Inhibitions are released w*



*er the influence of the glue, with the kids going from one emotional extreme to the other, from ecstasy to rage.*

pedestrians, and families of hospital patients also ducked in to wait for transportation.

Taking out my camera seemed to animate the glue kids. They began playing and dancing in the flooding streets as cars and trucks sped dangerously close spraying water toward us. One of the kids, Toni, 13, slipped into the sewerage drain, was completely immersed, and then popped out again. With a captive audience under the barracas, the street became the glue kids' stage in a surreal swirl of "freak show" performance art. High on the glue and attention, they howled and laughed as if they knew themselves to be in control at this very moment.

As the rain slacked and the energy dissipate, Murilo motioned for us to leave. We picked our way around puddles and snaked through the maze of streets to his grandmother's home. We hugged Edide Maria and wished her a happy Mother's Day, offering her a box of chocolates. When Josenildo arrived, we continued our movable holiday to his house.

The tension between Josenildo and his mother, Eunice, was immediately palpable. Though in conversations on the street Josenildo described how much he wanted to return home to hug and kiss his mother, when we arrived they did not touch. While the whole family, (16 children, grandchildren and in-laws) crowded into the eight-foot-square living room to wish her a happy Mother's Day, Josenildo remained passive and distant. It was my first clue that the language the kids used to describe their families was idealized.

As I met more of the mothers, the same story played out. "*Sofredora*," or sufferer, was the word the mothers used to describe themselves. They all talked about how, at the beginning, when their children started to run away to the streets and sniff glue, they sat at home and worried themselves to distraction. Murilo's mother, Katia, said some nights she left both of her boys naked and tied up with a cord to try to keep them in the house. Murilo would beat his head against the wall and scream that he would call the police on her. Katia eventually gave up on them, leaving the worry to her own mother. A cold residue of resentment and shame registered in her voice that after all of her efforts, her two children are still *cheira colas*.

The mother of Jadsom, 13, a glue kid from the neighborhood of Santo Amaro, echoed the same story. She also tried the tying-up method to keep him from going to the streets and to the glue. However, the first time I went to his house, I ran up against the flip side of the story. Walking through the *favela* at about two in the afternoon one Friday, Jadsom and I stopped to talk to his older sister just outside their home. She said that their mother had already gotten drunk, had passed out and was sleeping. Jadsom's face registered no reaction to the news, just blank familiarity. As we walked on, he muttered that we would simply have to visit another time.

The story of each glue kid was individual and yet remarkably similar. Usually something besides poverty drove these kids to escape and sniff glue for weeks, months, even years. If poverty were the sole cause, millions of Brazilian children would have been inhaling glue and sleeping on the streets. Many of the stories included alcoholism, domestic abuse and neglect. Any positive change in their lives meant unraveling the complex web of defense mechanisms the children constructed in order to survive. For them, being a *cheira cola* was not a problem, but a solution.

## GETTING BETTER

For their work, the *Ruas e Praças* educators went to where the street kids hung out—parks, plazas, in front of the IMIP. They attracted the children with fun activi-

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"Any positive change in their lives meant unraveling the complex web of defense mechanisms the children constructed in order to survive."

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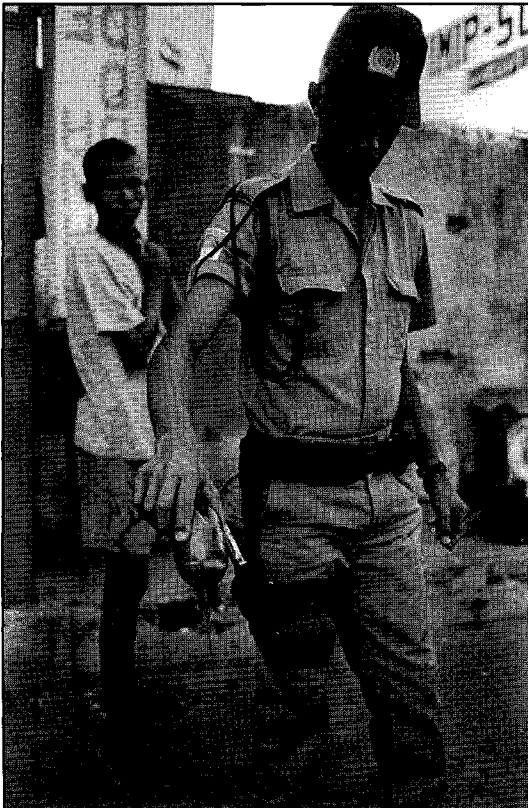


*Two young street kids lean over a ten-year-old passed out on a Recife sidewalk.*





*A young glue sniffer lies on a sidewalk next to a three-month-old baby born to a former glue addict. The mother brings the baby to the street daily in order to get donations from passers-by.*



*A military police officer pours out the glue of a street kid in front of the IMIP hospital. Though selling glue to minors is a crime, glue sniffing is not: however, when the police catch them, the kids usually lose their bottles.*

ties, drawing and painting, before beginning to talk to them about their lives.

For an upcoming May 1<sup>st</sup> Workers Day, the educators were having the street kids near IMIP decorate banners to carry in a solidarity march. Asked to write about their experiences on the street, Josenildo painted, “*A droga coloca uma pessoa no mal,*” (Drugs gets a person into trouble), and, “*Cola, destroi coração da pessoa,*” ([Sniffing] glue destroys a person’s heart).

On another occasion, an educator brought a color photograph of workers in the now deactivated gold mine of *Serra Pelada* (Naked Mountain) in the state of Minas Gerais. The shocking image showed tens of thousands of workers loaded down with sacks of mud emerging from a huge open pit. He explained that many of these men were from the Northeast, some probably from Pernambuco. He challenged the kids of the Santo Amaro *favela* to talk about how the picture made them feel, and whether it reminded them of ways people struggled and worked here in Recife.

The encounters were not always productive, though. Sometimes, the kids would arrive drugged-out and refusing to put away the glue. Other times they would fight, or refuse to participate in activities. However, in the midst of normal crises, usually one child would be progressing, committed to changing his or her life.

Those street children interested in possibly going to *Capim de Cheiro* were invited to the *Ruas e Praças* office every Friday. They discussed their week on the street, what they had done or what had been done to them. The educators tried to guide them into harder areas, like why they started sniffing glue or about AIDS, which sometimes just resulted in jokes and ridicule. Though they didn’t have the final say, the kids themselves voted on who would be eligible to visit the *sítio* (or site), as they called the rural camp.

*Capim de Cheiro* lies just over Pernambuco’s border with the state of Paraíba, in the middle of sugarcane farms. As far as one could see, the “gold” of the Northeast stretches over land that used to be shaded by a thick Atlantic forest. Street children would get their first view of the place on a two-day visit. This was meant to be a tantalizing taste, with them participating in activities, playing soccer and interacting with the educators. They then returned home to think about the experience and try to prepare themselves for another two-day break from the streets.

If enough of the two-day visits went well a child was promoted to five-day visits. This slightly longer time frame gave them a chance to feel what the glueless rhythm of life at *Capim de Cheiro* was like. From that point they were encouraged to decide if they were prepared to get away from street life in Recife, whether *Capim de Cheiro* would help them and whether they could contribute to the community. If the kids decided they were ready to make the break, and the educators agreed they were ready, the next step was residence at the camp. There they were to be enrolled in school, to have responsibility in chores, to participate in group discussions and live by strict rules.

Concurrent to work with street children, was a focus on the mothers. They were usually pulled into the process when an educator would visit the home to get permission for a child to visit *Capim do Cheiro*. After the initial contact, educators would begin the process of rebuilding the mother-child relationship. Mothers were also invited to participate in periodic meetings at the camp.

*Capim de Cheiro*, built and sustained with help from a German youth group, was a simple collection of brick houses on a couple of acres of land. At last count, 14 boys and one girl lived there. An average of eight rotated through for shorter visits.

The structure of life at the camp was one of the most important parts of the

Institute of Current World Affairs

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“The educators tried to guide them into harder areas, like why they started sniffing glue or about AIDS, which sometimes just resulted in jokes and ridicule.”

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*Edmilsom, 16, left, holds Josenildo, 16, as they and other boys bathe in a water tank of an abandoned building in the Coelhos area. Though many of the street kids have sex with each other, in this group only Josenildo is openly gay.*



*With a glue bottle clenched in his teeth, one glue sniffer threatens to hit another. After the fight was over, I asked the boy on the right what it had been about, and he couldn't tell me.*

therapy. Having a schedule for meals, chores, school and sleep departed radically from the timeless life on the street. Teaching basics, like personal hygiene and sharing, formed part of the important work of constructing a more “normal” model of life.

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“They were afraid of the darkness of the night and the *guará* (a wolf indigenous to the region, but almost extinct) that the older kids mentioned in teasing.”

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And though one might have thought that these street children, who recently had been high on glue in Recife, might have resisted hard work, this was not so. Elated to be in the fresh air of the country, they loved working in the fields of corn and *macaxeira* (manioc root, which is eaten like potatoes). Later, with dirt encrusting their feet and legs, they cleaned up by taking a dip in a nearby river before heading to dinner.

How the kids related to food also changed as they became accustomed to a more secure life style. At first they would hoard food, piling it onto their plates. Only after time passed, and they were assured that no one would steal from them nor deny them seconds, would they relax and take more moderate portions.

After spending time on the streets with these *cheira colas*, I was amazed at the behavior changes of the visiting *colas* at the camp. Without the glue, they were different; more attentive and playful. They also exhibited childish fears that were taboo on the street. For example, most of the visiting glue kids asked for educators to lock the doors of their rooms from the outside. They were afraid of the darkness of the night and the *guará* (a wolf indigenous to the region, but almost extinct) that the older kids mentioned in teasing. They could sleep with ease on urban streets, but not in the quiet of the countryside.

At the end of each five-day stay, the kids evaluated their own behavior and



A group of glue sniffers walk through the Santo Amaro cemetery to visit the grave of a fellow glue sniffer who had been killed the year before. The boy who died was hit by a truck as he stepped into the street while high on glue. The truck never stopped.

progress. Instead of the hedging or exaggerating I expected, the kids were brutally honest about themselves and the others. *Catita*, 15, whose nickname "mouse" is used to describe someone who can steal deftly, launched into serious self-criticism. "I really messed up this week because I was picking too many fights."

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"Oscar found relief in the streets where he sniffed glue for a couple of years, sometimes living at home, sometimes sleeping on the street."

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As for the residents, I could hardly believe they had been glue addicts. On average they had been there for six months and had lost the physically wan look of *colas* still on the streets. The boys were proud of their strength, and puffed out their chests with the cocky air of teenagers. While forming a close bond with the resident educators, they also respected their authority. Though there wasn't a professional training program, some of the kids had started informal apprenticeships with an auto mechanic and a bread shop in the nearby town.

One of the residents, Oscar, 15, had been a *cheira cola* in the Coelhos area. Oscar said that he started glue because of pressure from his friends. He liked it and got hooked. His aunt, Edileasa, a Coelhos resident and Oscar's guardian, said that the breakup of his parents sparked fights between Oscar and his mother. Oscar found relief in the streets where he sniffed glue for a couple of years, sometimes living at home, sometimes sleeping on the street. His aunt showed me a picture of Oscar when he was still addicted. His face was gaunt with sunken eyes.

It was after visiting *Capim do Cheiro* that Oscar wanted to change his life. Speaking matter-of-factly, he said he simply quit glue-sniffing, returning on visits to the camp until he became a resident. When I visited him at his aunt's home one weekend, he neither wanted to see his former glue friends nor spend time on the street.



*Josenildo sleeps on the floor of his house as the rest of his family watches a daytime soap opera. After eating and without glue to sniff, he quickly became tired and stretched out on the ground. Though his family has a home, he does not sleep there, preferring the street because of his glue addiction and because his mother, at left with the three children surrounding her, does not accept his being gay.*





*Murilo stands with his grandmother, Edide Maria, who he calls "Mom," in her home in the favela of Coelhos. Edide took over the care of Murilo and his brother Tota, both glue addicts, after their real mother (her daughter) gave up trying.*

During his monthly home visits he kept himself confined inside, watching TV or playing dominoes with neighbors. As Oscar was escorting me out of the *favela* one day, a man stopped us to say hello to Oscar, commenting, "Oscar's a good boy; he's always been a good boy."

What I saw at *Capim de Cheiro* underscored the long road the children must walk to attain their dreams of a "good" life — work, family, a home of their own. Doing glue in the streets precluded education, and most arrived without knowing how to read or write. At the school in nearby Caaporã, most of the residents struggled with basic literary skills — knowing their letters or forming words.

In what seemed like a scene from "*Central do Brasil*" ("Central Station," by Brazilian director Walter Salles), two 15-year-old residents, Chico and Lucio, sat down in front of me and spoke words of love that I then wrote down in letters their respective girlfriends.

For most, the long process of change was not a smooth one. The first time I arrived at *Capim de Cheiro* and was introducing myself, I asked the one girl resident her name. Roseanne, 14, looked away and mumbled, "My name is nothing, I am nothing."

At the end of my first stay at the camp, the team of educators asked me to write an evaluation. Though I did think that a larger emphasis on literacy skills and professional training would be useful, I thought they were hitting the mark

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"All went through difficult times, be it a relapse into drug usage, a rejection of authority or faltering self-esteem."

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*Fourteen-year-old Tatai holds a bottle of glue as she kisses a boy glue sniffer in the Coelho neighborhood. Though she claimed to be pregnant by another glue sniffer, she had no intention of giving up her habit for the health of the baby.*

on the important emotional side. Through the surrogate-family and community environment, the kids were given what they lacked on the streets and in the homes from which they fled — love, trust, responsibility, and ultimately, value as a young person. Day by day, the work focused on the growth and strength of the youths, preparing them for the day they were to leave *Capim de Cheiro*. It was tremendous work.

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“The vapors made the bad family situations and poverty, the hunger and the violence, hazy and distant in their mind. ”

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For the visiting kids especially, the test came not while they were at *Capim de Cheiro*, but when they returned to Recife. After a week of abstinence, virtually all of them returned immediately to sniffing. It was as if the addiction was contextual: With the street came the glue. The culture and the language of the street all revolved around the glue. They needed it in order to fit back in to their community.

The power of the drug could not be underestimated. Glue gave them their own altered world, where they were in charge. For about 50 cents, they could “trip” for three hours and forget what they were missing. The vapors made the bad family situations and poverty, the hunger and the violence, hazy and distant in their mind. And it helped them live with the illusion that they were in the street by choice.

This altered world of glue, their solution, exacted terrible costs from their young lives. Physically, it affected the immune and central nervous systems. Their anemic bodies wasted away to almost nothing. The director of the Recife drug center that treated the *Capim de Cheiro* residents on a weekly basis said that the addiction could even kill by provoking heart attacks.

Recently, one of the residents at *Capim de Cheiro* died. Before he had entered

the center, Rogério, 15, had lived on the streets of Boa Viagem, sniffing glue and begging. According to the educators at *Ruas e Praças*, gunplay had broken out near him and someone grabbed Rogério and used him as a shield. A bullet perforated his right eye and lodged in the back of his head.

A year later, after he had given up the street, he became sick and was hospitalized. Infection had grown around his eye and the doctors had found inflammation around his heart. He was transferred to a larger facility, but nothing could be done. Soon he was dead of cardiac and respiratory failure.

As I talked to Josenildo and Murilo about the loss of their friend, I could tell that they were visibly shaken. However, they never linked Rogério's death with life on the streets — nor did they make the leap in thought that something similar could happen to them.

\* \* \*

As I have mentioned in previous newsletters, the number of street kids in Recife and Brazil in general is still disputed. Almeri Bezerra de Mello of the *Centro Interuniversitário de Estudos da América Latina, África e Ásia* (CIELA-The Interuniversity Center of Studies of Latin America, Africa and Asia) claimed that earlier estimates of seven to eight million abandoned children in Brazil could have resulted from a problem of terminology. He ventured that international organizations such as UNICEF used words such as "abandoned" children and "street" children to describe the large numbers of poor children in Brazil. The media played

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"They never linked Rogério's death with life on the streets — nor did they make the leap in thought that something similar could happen to them."

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*A group of Coelhos street kids put their glue bottles down and strip off fetid clothing to take a playful swim in the polluted Capibaribe river behind their favela.*

up the shocking numbers. A May 29<sup>th</sup>, 1991 article by the Brazilian magazine *Veja* stated that 30,000 “*meninos bandidos*” (or bandit kids) were on the loose just in Recife alone.

Nowadays the pendulum swings in the other direction, with more conservative numbers that claim to count actual street children (kids that sleep in the streets as opposed to kids that work in the streets but return home at night or just poor children in general). In his book about street children in the Northeast of Brazil, *At Home in the Street*<sup>3</sup>, Tobias Hecht claims that there are not more than 39,000 street kids in all of Brazil. CIELA’s recent research, paid for by the state government, counted only 460 street children in the city of Recife, and 1,184 in the greater metro area.<sup>4</sup> Almeri Bezerra de Mello recounted that the first time CIELA published research results on the numbers of street children in Recife, some in the NGO community were very angry. They were afraid of losing funding because of the lower numbers.

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“With so many  
NGOs, religious  
organizations, and  
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lem, why are kids  
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and living in the  
streets”

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However, even if the numbers are not as high as previously reported it does not diminish the gravity of the problems for those 460 youth who make the city streets of Recife their homes. Though there is no official estimate, I would venture that the vast majority of the street kids sniff glue. The question that remains is the following: if the numbers are more reasonable than previously thought, then why is it so hard to solve the problem? With so many NGOs, religious organizations, and the government spending time and money on the problem, why are kids still sniffing glue and living in the streets?

The various NGOs talk about the crises in funding that they are going through right now. *Ruas e Praças* sent people to Germany and Italy over the summer looking for additional funding. For them, the image that Brazil’s president Fernando Henrique Cardoso is trying to put forth to investors that Brazil is overcoming its problems run counter to the argument of their work, that in fact the social problems are persisting and in some areas getting worse. They say as well that the international furor over street children in Brazil has died down in the past few years, and that entities are focusing on other areas of the world to apply their money.

As far as the efforts of the government, *Ruas e Praças’* educators are critical. They disagree with programs like the *Busca Ativa*, which, in their opinion, tries to pluck the children from the street without any in-depth preparation. One of the educators, Edison de Oliveira e Silva, told me that when the government does come up with a good program it inevitably ends with the next election cycle. Continuity, so vital in building confidence with the street children, is broken and the work compromised.

I think about the problem of inhalant abuse worldwide as a particular problem in developing countries. In 1996, the parents of a Central American boy who died from sniffing glue sued the U.S. glue manufacturer for damages<sup>5</sup> and to change the chemical composition to make the glue non-addictive. I asked educators at

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<sup>3</sup> *At Home in the Street: Street Children of Northeast Brazil*, by Tobias Hecht, published in June, 1998 by Cambridge University Press. In chapter four, and especially on pages 98-101, Hecht treats this issue of numerical estimates of street children. I recommend the book for anyone interested in the subject of street children and child poverty in general in Recife, even though Hecht does not have a glowing opinion of photographers.

<sup>4</sup> The only doubt that remained in my mind about the numbers of street children counted was about the method of counting. CIELA had sent out qualified teams, but they spent only one day, four hours during midday and four hours at night, making the rounds of the city. Personally, after spending months documenting the lives of these kids, I know how frustrating it was to often lose track of their whereabouts. The street kids disappear without a trace, only to appear days or weeks later. I think that it would have been more valid to have repeated this process at least one more day. Almeri Bezerra de Mello disagreed, saying that the method of counting did not compromise the result.

<sup>5</sup> This was the subject of a report by the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* on April 16, 1996.

*Ruas e Praças* about the possibility of bringing similar pressure to bear on the local producer of the Brazilian glue that the kids sniff, Norcola. They said that this has been tried various times to no avail. Though changing the formula might not solve the problems behind the addiction, it would diminish access to a cheap high.

An informal indicator of the lack of priority given glue-addiction in Brazil might be that no one with whom I spoke, including the director of the largest drug-rehab facility in Recife, knew of any studies on the long-term effects of glue sniffing. She guessed that there weren't too many entities interested in spending the money on such research.

As I see it, the difficulty of dealing with street children and inhalant abuse is that the problems lie at the nexus of two much larger and more damaging societal concerns. The first is substance abuse in general. Though glue, marijuana and cocaine abuse are rampant, alcohol destroys more lives and families. Many of the children I talked to recounted stories of beatings at the hands of drunk parents. Alcoholism is a dark secret of Brazil.

The second factor is poverty in general. Those 460 children living on the city's streets are unique. They are kids who left their homes behind. In terms of children "at risk," they are the tip of the iceberg. Beyond them are the estimated 27,000 child-laborers<sup>6</sup> (between ten and 14 years of age) in the greater Recife area working to supplement their family's income. And it certainly does not include the even greater number of children simply living in misery. According to CIELA, approximately 45 percent of households in Recife live on less than U.S.\$145 per month.

The fates of Brazil and its poor children are intertwined. Families at the lower end of the economic scale have been hit by the double whammy of higher prices for foods and goods and reduced social services. In the short term, this squeeze means more children on the streets begging or washing car windows. In the long run, it will be all of Brazil that suffers from the lack of a healthy and educated workforce.

In short, without addressing larger political, social and economic concerns, shelters and programs won't resolve the issue of street children. As one *Ruas e Praças* educator told me, the most they can do is help a few individuals who grab onto what they have to offer. As these youth put the glue and the street behind, other kids slip in to fill their place.

The issue reaches deep into the structure of Brazil, into the history of its unequal wealth distribution and the ineffectiveness of political leadership to make changes. It implicates a Brazil that has written powerful statutes<sup>7</sup> hailing the rights of children, but struggles to carry out those laws.



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"Though glue, marijuana and cocaine abuse are rampant, alcohol destroys more lives and families."

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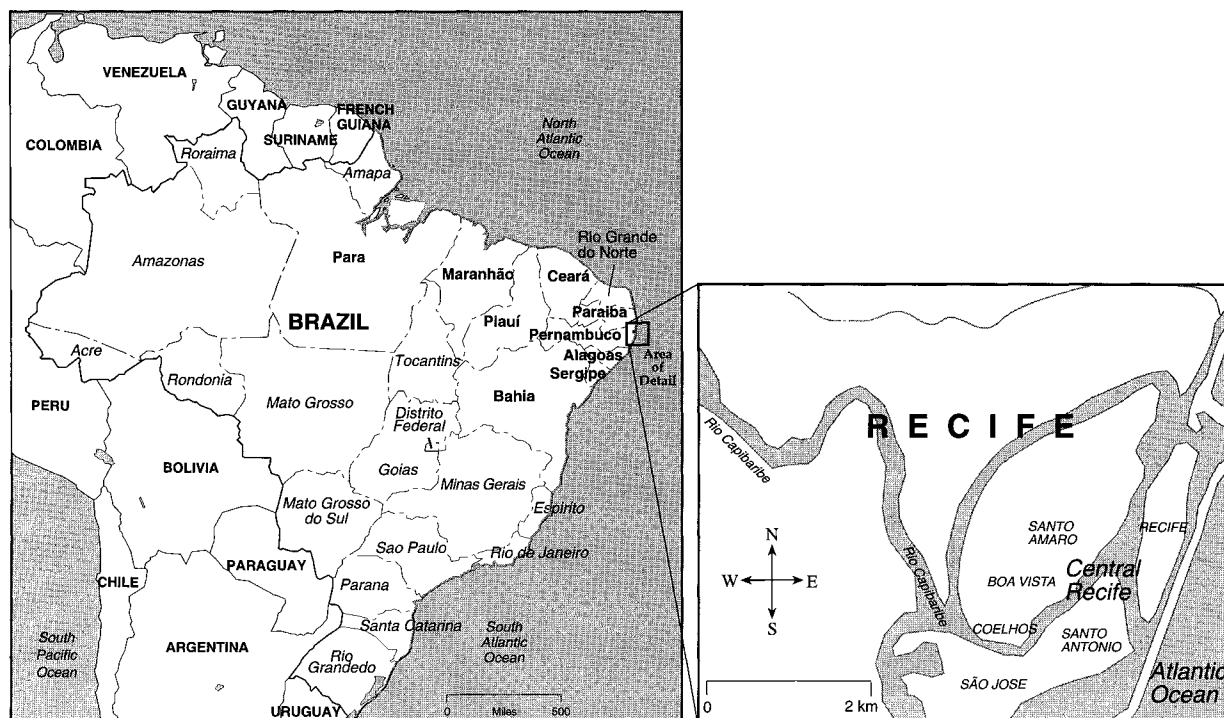
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<sup>6</sup> According to Tereza Cristina Vanderley de Araujo of the *Centro Josue de Castro/DIEESE (Departamento Intersindical de Estudos e Estatísticas Socioeconômicas)* of Recife.

<sup>7</sup> I am referring to the 1990 *Estatuto da Criança e Adolescente* (Statute of the Child and Adolescent), is a wide-ranging statute dealing with the special rights of and protections for Brazilian youth. This statute, which contains such specific rights as food, shelter, education, training in a trade and participation in sports, among others, deserves treatment on its own in a separate newsletter.

Note: The address for *Grupo Ruas e Praças* is Rua Capitao Lima, 20 Santa Amaro, Recife, PE, Brazil 50040-080, Tel:081-231-4388. No one in the office speaks English, but if readers are interested I'd be glad to serve as intermediary.





## INDEX

### A

*abandonados* (abandoned ones) 4 2, 4 6  
 alcoholism 7 29  
 Alto José do Pinho (the Summit of Joseph of the Pines)  
 5 1  
 Andrade, Selma 4 9

### B

Bahia 6 6  
 Banhado 1 1  
 Beberibe River 4 7  
 begging 4 1  
 Bezerra de Mello, Almeri 7 27  
*bloco de frevo* 3 2  
 Boa Viagem 4 5  
 "Brazilian Banana Party" 6 4  
 Busca Ativa 4 6, 4 8, 7 6, 7 28

### C

Cabral, Pedro 1 4  
 Cabral, Pedro Alvarez 1 4  
*cachaça* (sugar cane rum) 3 7, 7 1  
*cafezinho* 1 4  
*caldinho* (a light broth with beans, shrimp (or chicken)  
 5 6  
 "Candelaria" murders 4 6  
 Candomblé 3 5  
 Canudos rebellion 6 6  
 Capibaribe River 7 1, 7 12  
*Capim de Cheiro* (Fragrant Grass) 7 2, 7 21  
*capoeira* 2 6  
 Carnaval 6 3  
 Carnival 3 1  
*Centro Educacional Vida Nova* (New Life Educational  
 7 2  
*Centro Interuniversitario de Estudos da America Latina,  
 Africa e Asia* (CIELA-The Interuniversity Center  
 of Studies of Latin America, Africa and Asia)  
 7 27, 7 28, 7 29  
*cheira cola* (glue sniffer) 7 2  
 Church of Our Lady of Candelaria 4 6  
*Coelhos* 7 1, 7 12  
*Comando Vermelho* (Red Command) 6 4  
 Copacabana 6 5  
 Corinthians 1 4

credit 1 9  
 crime 1 7  
*Cruzeiros* 1 4  
 currency policy 1 9

### D

drug-addiction 2 5  
 drugs 1 7, 2 6, 6 4

### E

economic conditions and trends 2 10  
*embolada* (improvised musical poetry using guitar and  
 tabourine) 5 2  
*Encruzilhada* 4 6  
*Espinheiros* 4 1

### F

"*Faces do Suburbio*" ("Faces of the Suburb") 5 6  
*favela* 6 1  
*fazendeiro* 1 4  
 "FEBEM" (State Foundation for the Well-Being of  
 Minors) 4 7  
*feiras* (markets) 2 2  
 Ferreira, Sandra 4 1  
 Ford Motors 1 10  
*forró* music 5 6  
 "free womb law" 4 6  
*futebol* (soccer) 1 4

### G

*galeras* (gangs) 5 5  
 "garage" bands 5 2  
 General Motors 1 10  
 glue addiction 7 1  
 glue kids'  
 "code" 7 4  
 families 7 18  
 self-image 7 9  
 glue-sniffing 4 3  
 Gongorra, Francisco de Oliveira 3 5

### H

Henrique Cardoso, Fernando 7 28

*Home in the Street*, Tobias Hecht 7 28  
 homosexuality 7 12

### I

income, household 7 29  
 inflation 1 10  
*Instituto Materno Infantil de Pernambuco* (IMIP) 7 1  
 Inter-Continental Hotel 6 1  
 Ipanema 6 5  
*irradiados* 3 8

### J

job placement 2 6

### K

kidnapping 6 6

### L

life styles 1 5, 1 7  
*Lonely Planet* guidebook 6 1

### M

*macumba* 1 5  
 Magalhães, Roberta Melo 4 6, 4 9  
 Mangueira 6 3  
 Mar, José 4 5  
*Maracatu* (a marching percussive Carnival beat)  
 3 5, 5 2  
*Maracatu "Baque Solto"* (Carnival marching group)  
 3 1, 3 5  
*Maracatu "Baque Virado"* 3 8  
 Marcos de Oliveira, Rogerio 2 1, 2 6  
 Mardi Gras 3 9  
 Mardi Gras Indians 3 11  
*"Matalanamao"* (*Mata ela na mao*, or "kill her in your  
 hand") 5 7  
 McDonald 4 1  
*meninos e meninas de rua* (boys and girls in the  
 streets) 4 6  
*Mercado do São José* (Saint Joseph's Market) 5 8  
 Minas Gerais 1 6, 7 21  
 Mothers' Day 7 14  
 mud 1 5

Entries refer to ICWA Letter (TLT-1, etc.) and page, with letter number given before each entry.