

Juarez TC

Never forgotten: Organizations provide refuge for trouble youth of Juárez

by Adriana Gómez Licón \ El Paso Times
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Tony Briones came up with the idea of teaching boys how to cut hair with designs and how to make hip-hop music and record it in a studio. (Special to the Times)

JUAREZ -- In the outlying colonias of this border city, where most streets are unpaved and have become the territory of gangs, children descend dusty steep hills on rusty bicycles.

In these poor neighborhoods, a man and a woman are trying to bring about reform through kindly deeds.

Elena de Porras, 73, looks tired but stands strong for Juárez's neglected youth.

Near an industrial park of southeast Juárez, de Porras runs a boarding school for girls and young women who were prostitutes, drug addicts and victims of domestic violence. She modeled her organization, Reto a la Juventud, after the American version, Teen Challenge.

Tony Briones, 27, a former gang member, identifies with the boys and young men he helps. He works at a nonprofit center named Casa Promoción Juvenil in a hilly colonia right below the mountain with the words "The Bible is the truth. Read it."

Briones' group is made of boys and young men who are or were gang members and drug addicts. Through hip-hop, rap and break dancing, Briones helps them vent the rage they feel in the daily struggle on the streets of Juárez.

Two people in a city of 1.3 million may not make a big difference. But to the people whose lives they touch, they make all the difference in the world.

Girls and quilts

The good acts of de Porras span 29 years, but now the need is greater than ever.

De Porras rescues girls from hotels, hospitals and the streets. She shelters and nurtures them for nine months in her boarding school, which she says is the oldest of its kind in Juárez.

Since drug-cartel violence exploded in 2008, de Porras said, even greater numbers of girls have become victims of violence and drug abuse.

"Girls are now looking at us as a refuge. They feel protected here," she said.

In a way, de Porras can gauge the drug problem in Juárez through the girls' stories. For example, she is rescuing more heroine addicts than ever. And more girls are consuming "agua celeste," a chemical solvent that smells like nail-polish remover.

The story of Karla shocked de Porras more than any other girl she has helped.

Abused by her father since she was 3, Karla was diagnosed with a vaginal infection at 10, de Porras said. When the mother reported the abuse to police, the father took the deed to the house and left the mother and four girls homeless.

Needing money to provide, Karla became a prostitute at 12.

Karla's clients were drug dealers and politicians. She got romantically involved with a powerful drug dealer who beat her up. One time, when Karla tried to break up with him, he followed her and shot her three times. Already having a daughter, she prostituted herself so she could get money to buy drugs.



Young men browse the Internet at the computers of Casa Promoción Juvenil, a non-profit center in northwest Juárez where Tony Briones teaches workshops. (Special to the Times)

She was gang-raped, became pregnant and had a premature baby. With nowhere else to go, a woman took her to de Porras' school.

"Everything happened to her," de Porras said. "It has been one of the most terrible cases we have handled."

De Porras smiles and giggles, knowing that Karla is married and lives in the city of Chihuahua. She takes pride in saying that eight of 10 girls who go through her program overcome addictions and other problems.

The house where 18 girls and young women now live is in the working-class neighborhood of Tierra Nueva. The property is fenced and has two gates. De Porras has a panic button to alert police when suspicious people are in the area.

The girls sew quilts, read the Bible and learn how to cook. They also learn how to be hairdressers and how to use basic software programs on a computer.



In the face of uncontrolled violence in Juárez, some people are making a difference by helping those in need. Elena de Porras, 73, runs a boarding school for girls and young women who have had it rough. The school is fashioned after Teen Challenge and is called Reto a la Juventud. One of the activities is quilting. (Special to the Times)

What Yasmin Rosas, 14, enjoys the most is sewing.

Rosas ran away with her boyfriend. When her mom reported it to police, she found out he was 32, and not 25 as he told Rosas.

"He was a drug dealer, a gang member, he had many kids and wives spread everywhere," Rosas said.

Rosas sews a quilt with her friend and smiles. She said she is happy her mother intervened to put her in that house.

Reforming barrios

The word "barrios" does not have a negative connotation in Briones' mind.

"The barrio is a resource for communities," he said. "Strange things happen in them that are wrong, but I want to change the way kids see things around here."



A girl is descending a steep hill in northwest Juárez in the colonia Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, near the nonprofit center where Tony Briones teaches classes. (Special to the Times)

In the barrio named Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, the unpaved streets are narrow and the hills are steep. Once the sun sets, very little public lighting brightens this area of northwest Juárez where shootouts erupt daily.

Briones rescues boys and young men he sees wandering the streets with no school or job.

Briones had been searching for ways to reach out to these boys. He realized most of them listened to hip-hop music and were fascinated with urban hairstyles. So he created classes for boys who wanted to make music and learn how to cut hair with designs.

"With rap, they try to narrate what they see on the streets daily," Briones said. "We also analyze what they write."

The reality for these boys and young men is very different from the reality for the more privileged in Juárez.

"There are no government programs for them. They are forgotten," he said.

Their music is recorded in a studio Briones funded through his nonprofit organization.

Briones also makes the boys put on a hip-hop presentation with break dancing.

In a recent performance, Briones invited various gangs to see each other's work. Even without additional security or police, no fights broke out.

"I was surprised," Briones said. "But kids were at peace."

Briones reflects on his time as a member of the gang Callejón 16, or Alley 16. He was involved in shootings, assaults and fights, he said.

He became involved with the community center when he was 17 and looking for something to do with his free time. His mentors eventually offered him a job.

Something Briones hopes boys learn from him is to look forward to a better life.

"Many of them don't think about the future because they are worried about surviving day to day," he said.

One of Briones' students, Daniel, had a severe case of drug addiction. Through the center, he formed a hip-hop band, left drugs and went back to school.

Now Daniel is in college.

"When he got here, it was difficult for Daniel to think about tomorrow," Briones said. "Now he is working, he wants to get married and have a kid."

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