

Risaralda Youth Community Micro-Business, Colombia

TOF 97-05

Over a three-year period this project has promoted youth leadership and the creation of micro-businesses to benefit the young people involved: to work, to learn and to become better human beings for themselves, their families and their communities. Little by little the project has become a concrete alternative for these young people, many of whom had been driven by poverty and lack of education and training to prostitution, drug addiction and crime. The youth have organized themselves into groups according to their interests and received training in the creation and management of micro-businesses with emphasis on leadership training, creativity and values formation. The whole process has given them a sense of hope for their future. Its positive impact on two of those young people is related below.

Elvira is 18 years old. Her family is one of the humblest in the neighbourhood. Her father died some years ago and her mother tries to make a living by washing clothes in rich people's homes. Elvira was always lonely and miserable but one day she saw a group of cheerful young people carrying boxes. One of the young people, a school friend of Elvira's, called to her and invited her to go with them to a primary school where they were carrying out a recreational activity. Elvira went along with them and, motivated by what she saw, became involved in the recreation micro-business. She says that in the YMCA group she has found affection and happiness. She has also learnt a lot and made some money to help her mother.



Recreation micro-business



Arturo Mejía lives in Barcelona-Quindío, a municipality which was 80% destroyed by the earthquake of January 1999. He is 19 years old. Before the earthquake he studied in school in the morning and in the afternoon he worked on a farm to help his family. The earthquake destroyed the little house he lived in with his parents and brothers and the farm suffered serious damage so he could not continue working there. The family was in a desperate situation and Arturo had to leave school as he didn't have the money to pay for his studies. The family was later given some support and a tent to live in and basic equipment and moral support were provided by the YMCA.

Some time later a youth group started and some of the young people became involved in the micro-businesses. At first Arturo was apathetic and reluctant to participate. He was depressed and this showed itself in his sloppy appearance and undisciplined behaviour in group meetings. But in a workshop on feelings regarding the earthquake Arturo changed his attitude and was able to express all his feelings to the extent that the same day he elaborated a plan for his future which he is working on day by day.



After a month his participation and good spirit were so effective that he became a leader. In this way Arturo realized his abilities and his need to work for other people. When he became involved in the agriculture micro-business his knowledge and experience enabled him to help his partners in the training process. Now, though Arturo and his family continue to live in a tent, he is sure that with the money he is saving from his work in the micro-business he will be able to support his father so they can buy the house they are dreaming of. He is happy that he has learned to value what he has and also to work for others.