

"Furious Joy"

Street Children in Brazil

By Joel Strachota

"How old is your son?" I ask the weathered young Brazilian woman.

"Ten months," she responds proudly.

The air under the bridge is thick with the smell of garbage and sewage. I feel that by breathing I am taking years off of my life; by the looks of my company I am right.

The woman's baby is partly covered in rags. He does not seem to be reacting to the boisterous group of street kids surrounding him. Puzzled by this abnormal infant apathy, I approach him and smile broadly but his dark, eerie eyes stare through me as though I do not exist.

I feel a stabbing pain as I gaze at the melancholy baby. His head is huge in comparison to the emaciated body that attempts to support it. A skin disease has tattooed discolorations and circular peeling scabs all over his delicate frame. I attempt to hide my growing nausea from his proud mother.

Suddenly I realize that his face is older than mine. This ancient infant already knows what I am about to discover: there is almost no hope for recovery from his life.

In Brazil, there are literally millions of children who live on the street. The above scene is not uncommon in the poor northeastern city of Recife, well known for its high population of street kids. They bear scars both physical and mental, so severe, that to simply look at them causes pain. Some have been told to leave home, some are runaways, but this matters little where I find them, struggling for their next meal, struggling for their next high.

One of the largest problems to overcome on the streets is hunger. There are two solutions: food and glue. The irony is that one fills the stomach and the other shrinks it. This destructive cycle is the reality of millions of Brazilian children.

The boy approaches the group quietly so as not to attract the attention of the younger kids. He sits down next to the oldest boy in the group and hands him his prize, a plastic bag full of rice. The older boy gives a nod of approval and the younger one goes on his way. At twenty, this street kid has reached the highest level of privilege amongst the group.

The boy now dips his hand in the bag for a bite of rice. Dissatisfied, he stands up to find a utensil. He reaches down into the gutter and picks up a dirty piece of cardboard. He folds it and now is ready for his only meal of the day. Of the week? Of the month? In two weeks on the street he was the only kid I saw eating anything substantial.

For the others a much grimmer option remains: glue, the powerful drug of choice for street kids. This type of glue is designed for a variety of industrial purposes, but huge quantities are sold to children through the black market. At first the drug supplies the kids a high, dizziness and an escape. But the chemical in the glue is viciously addictive and it soon owns all who use it.

The glue is sniffed or inhaled through a plastic bottle. As the tolerance of the victims grow, they need to inhale the chemical every minute to sustain a running high. Unlike other drugs, severe withdrawal sets in after only an hour of being away from the fumes. The glue then proceeds to kill brain cells quicker than Brazil can win another World Cup.

Once the children are in the grasp of the glue, the high diminishes and the reason for using it becomes more immediate. The fumes from the glue destroy the intestines of the user, so the addict loses all appetite for food. This is key for someone with no access to food. Children need only two essentials to grow: family and food. These children have neither. Instead they are left with only the false freedom that the street gives them and the solace of their destructive addiction. Hopelessness inevitably invades the lives of these children at a devastatingly young age. There is, however, a group of people who have taken notice, people who believe in the possibility of recovery and hope.

I work with a small group of 'guerrilla social workers' on the streets of Recife. Their strongest weapon against hunger, addiction, and hopelessness is a place called *Capim de Cheiro*. It is a farm retreat for abandoned and addicted children. Capim's main purpose is to give street kids what they need most, food and hope.

A new group of street boys has just arrived for a five-day visit at Capim. The first thing scheduled is a long awaited meal. Their eyes widen with the anticipation of the copious portions. The enticing smell of the rice and beans increases the frenzy of the scrambling boys. They begin to push and pull, wrestling for position in the lunch line, which has now become a mob of starving children.

I sit back with the less hungry, longer-term residents and watch this madness develop. One of the boys appears more fidgety, hurried, and hungry than the rest. He takes a seat away from the others and confronts his pyramid of food, which is so gargantuan that the steep angles would not hold another grain of rice. Fork clenched, the boy starts shoveling at a rapid pace. I grab my plate and decided to go give him some company and get a better look.

As I approach, I see that eating is not going well for him. His hand is shaking drastically and very little food is making it into his mouth. Most of it lands on the table or his face, the color of the beans matching his complexion perfectly. He is extremely frustrated but not enough to make him quit on his first proper meal in months. The irony is disturbing. He is here to eat, get healthy, and possibly quit glue; yet the withdrawal from that very addiction is keeping him from completing the first simple step towards recovery.

He is not halfway done yet but looks intent on finishing every bite. Suddenly the _expression on his face changes from frustration to pain. The fork clatters to the table; he grabs the place where his stomach should be, his face now wrenched in agony. He has been eating to hurriedly; his glue damaged stomach isn't used to any food, never mind this thick onrush of rice and beans. The chemical in the glue has only been out of his system for a couple of hours but the withdrawal symptoms closely resemble those of a heroin addict. Now he lies down on the bench breathing heavily, gripping his stomach, resting for the next round. Eventually he returns to the battlefield, every bite becoming for painful than the last.

The first goal of Capim de Cheiro is to replace glue with food. Making this step towards recovery is crucial, but even after this exchange is accomplished, the battle is far from over. Abuse, abandonment, and mental anguish take time to heal from as well.

The street provides the children a liberating but temporary independence. Capim counters with something different: a process of change that can result in the child becoming truly independent. In the end, most choose Capim over the alternative. The alternative is the life of the ancient infant that I met under the bridge. A miracle would be needed for him to survive. But the small percentage of street kids that find their way to Capim de Cheiro have a different story. These unique creatures develop an acute aliveness that can only be described as joy.

But they also carry with them their painful histories. Their weathered and scared features show the multitude of tribulations from their previous lives. Their eyes reflect infinities of horrors endured. They say, "I've been through things that hurt even to imagine, and look, I've left them behind. Now I'm going to squeeze every drop of joy from every moment of life."

Happiness is often regarded as synonymous with the innocence of youth. This is one of the many cultural standards shattered by my interaction with these 'children.' Their joy has nothing to do with youth; they have no innocence. Their joy is a grateful joy, full of fury, intensely alive within them every second of every day.

A girl at Capim de Cheiro named Cleonese possesses this furious joy despite having been abandoned to a life on the streets by abusive alcoholic parents. Perhaps worst of all she lives with the knowledge that her two brothers have not overcome those things and continue to endure a life of addiction and crime. At fifteen she is more grown up than most people double her age.

Cleonese shows her furious joy by signing. She is a ghetto opera star, possessing lungs with an endless supply of air. No matter how far away you are from her, you always hear her voice. In every waking hour her soul resonates though out every corner of the farm. Sometimes she sings just to annoy, other times with powerful beauty. Her song is a crazy song, a song full of passion about the beauty of recovery.

