

# Monseñor Romero Popular Resource Centre in El Salvador

El Salvador is a country struggling to combat the ills associated with extreme poverty. In a society coming to terms with recent memories of war and violence, the cycle of poverty serves only to worsen the emotional state and general well being of El Salvador's citizens. **Many young people grow up without hope and with no chance of securing meaningful employment or access to proper education.** For young people, this often leads to a life of gang involvement and illegal activities. Violent crime and gang activities are increasing rapidly in El Salvador. During the war of the 1980s thousands left the country to seek refuge in North America, many of them illegally. Since that time, many people have been repatriated, mostly from the United States. While in the U.S. they formed street gangs, particularly in the city of Los Angeles where Salvadoran street gangs were notorious for their intense violence and constant fighting to defend their territory. Since repatriation, many of these gangs have returned to El Salvador - with their US gang ties fully intact – and continue their **pointless, deadly feuds on the streets of El Salvador.**

The weapons used in gang violence are left over from the war or imported illegally from the United States, facilitated by gang members and their connections to similar criminal organizations in the U.S. The types of disputes that erupt between rival gangs are often started by seemingly insignificant incidents. Gangs are inspired by a mythical sense of power that seems to serve no constructive end. It is widely thought that participation in gangs is the



Above: A banner stating "No To Violence"  
Below: Youth meet to discuss their concerns



result of idle behavior. For individuals whose family life may be abusive, whose future appears bleak, and who are presented with few options, gang involvement appears as an alternative to what many people see as a meaningless existence of life in poverty. The culture of violence perpetuated by Hollywood adds to this fascination with violence and gangs as Salvadoran youth increasingly aspire to American cultural values. **Gangs offer a sense of belonging, purpose and membership and fill a void in the lives of young people.** To be a member of a gang can be seen as fashionable, but sacrificing one's life is

often the cost of total and complete allegiance.

The problem of violence and crime among young people in the poor barrios of Latin America **can be addressed by identifying ways in which they can become involved in other kinds of activities** that are not gang or crime related but give the same sense of fulfillment and belonging. Recreational activities such as sports can be helpful. Activities must be chosen which combine fulfillment with a sense of belonging, and most importantly a sense of achievement. Achievement is what gives young people the self-esteem they need in order to feel the inspiration necessary for success. In contemporary Salvadoran society, there is little sense of achievement amongst young people. Furthermore, given the dilapidated state of the education system, youth are not particularly inspired to participate in the education system. This leads to illiteracy and severely affects the potential that youth may



**CHANGE FOR CHILDREN ASSOCIATION (CFA)** is an Edmonton-based non-profit, non-governmental organization with a 28-year history of working for sustainable, grass-roots community development in Latin America and the Philippines. Our development projects, their cost and priority, are determined by our Southern partners according to the needs of their communities. In Canada, our education program engages the public in a process of awareness raising, analysis and action on issues of global justice.

This project is funded entirely by donations from individuals and groups, especially Edmonton's Salvadorean community.

have to obtain a more promising future. Once youth give themselves over completely to the gang lifestyle, and quit school for good, they are contributing to the cycle of poverty and violence to which they have become victim. Healthy recreational activities can be used as a way to encourage participation in the education system, as well as to raise awareness of the rights young people have to an education, and the benefits to their future that an education can provide for them.



**Culture and the arts have proven to be useful tools in the struggle against poverty and crime.** Many young people find self-esteem and a sense of accomplishment through participation in activities like dance, music and theatre, inspiring them to be productive members of society. Art and culture are also a way through which people who might consider themselves to be outsiders may find their place.

**A centre of study accessible to youth in the Tierra Blanca community** of Usulután will enable young people to become involved in healthy activities which will improve their lifestyle, give them hope, and reduce the risk that they may become involved in criminal activity. The need for the existence of such a centre was identified by the community to respond to the growing number of violent incidents involving youth who are members

of gangs in the area. Community members have also identified family violence, AIDS and poor health, unemployment and apathy as problems in the region.

Constructed and operated by the Christian Based Communities of El Salvador (CEBES), the **Monseñor Romero Centre will attend to the needs of 100 children, 200 youth, 150 adults and many community members.** Its activities will include:

- Literacy training
- Vocational and computer skills training
- Early childhood development program
- Cultural programs (music and folkloric dance classes)
- Sports and recreation programs
- Cooking and life skills training
- Health promotion (AIDS awareness, hygiene and nutrition programs)

The Romero Popular Resource Centre will also provide access to trained psychologists, and have a special treatment room for visiting doctors and health care professionals. In addition the Centre will have a print and video library, a small store where school supplies will be sold at subsidized rates, and where there will be access to photocopying. The proposed structure will have a kitchen and two bathrooms, as well as classrooms.

The main objective of the project is to enable youth to incorporate habits and conduct which will enable them to take affirmative action on problems which may hinder their development. **The operation of the Centre will decrease the level of violence instigated by youth living in the area.** It will play host to special conferences designed to put an end to violence between rival gang members. The Centre will help to foster tolerance amongst people living in the area, with regard to the respect of cultural values, and respect amongst people. Youth will adopt positive values, which contribute to the building of a healthy community.



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