

February 8, 2010 Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: São Martinho – Teaching Rio’s street kids a better life is possible



More than 1.5 million people live in Rio de Janeiro’s overcrowded favelas (slums) that climb the slopes of the city’s hillsides.

Associação Beneficente São Martinho (St Martin Charity Association) has been reaching out to Rio de Janeiro’s street kids for more than 25 years, but it all started with a simple act of kindness that continues today: handing out breakfast to youngsters living in alleys and gutters. The children, as young as six and as old as eighteen, aren’t necessarily orphans -- many have families somewhere – but for various reasons they are fending for themselves.

Exact numbers – especially for Rio de Janeiro –aren’t readily available: Some conservative reports say there are 25, 000 kids living on the streets of Brazil’s major cities (source: SESC Brazil, 2009), while others suggest the number is more like seven million (source: The National Campaign for Children Now in the Street, 2009). According to information put out by São Martinho, their staff works with more than 1,500 boys and girls in Rio each year. The organisation has grown to have three bases around the city, where they can serve breakfast and lunch to the children.

Luis Basilio, the current coordinator of the organization, met Peace Boat participants at one of the centers, in the neighbourhood of Lapa; a second centre in Glória also works with street kids. “São Martinho gives an important contribution to the city in its social assistance,” by working with the city’s poorest and least-protected children and adolescents.



To help the kids get out of danger and away from crime, the organisation has created four programmes, including reading projects, job training and sport, music and dance activities. For those kids who have parents or siblings somewhere, São Martinho encourages the families to reunite. In recent years they’ve expanded their work to include kids that aren’t necessarily on the streets, but who come from one of Rio’s poorest neighbourhoods, the favela (slum) of Vicente de Carvalho. Even though they have homes and families, these children are still considered at-risk youth. At that centre in Vicente de Carvalho kids participate in similar activities and programmes after they’ve finished school for the day

After spending night after night on the streets, São Martinho’s centers around the city are a daytime sanctuary for the youth, where they can gain a sense of family support from the staff and each other.



A teenaged participant in the organisation's cultural programmes bears the mark of life on the streets in Rio.

Mr Basilo says the fourth facet of the organization is one of the most important: the legal aid clinic, which offers counselling and works to guarantee the children's rights. "We give legal assistance in all the instances when the rights of the children are being violated." The streets of Rio, in many areas, are notoriously violent and in a lot of cases the police cannot be relied upon to help or protect the children because they can be just as responsible for acts of aggression as drug dealers, gangs and citizen-organised death squads.

"They prepare a special plan for every kid, thinking about their specific situations," says Jairo Ferreira, a project coordinator, who has worked at São Martinho for eight years. But, he explains, there are many challenges in helping these boys and girls, in particular drug abuse. Often when they make their morning visits, the kids they meet are still high from the night before, which makes it difficult for staff and volunteers work with them. "They can't speak or do anything (when they're high)," Mr Ferreira says, adding that there's only one drug rehabilitation center in Rio de Janeiro.



Most of the kids who joined Peace Boat participants for an afternoon cultural exchange, practice some form of Brazil's famous capoeira.



The goal is to get the kids to focus their energy on something productive and stay out of trouble: Many otherwise turn to theft or prostitution to survive, or join gangs. Amongst the children, football (soccer), judo and capoeira – a Brazilian dance mixed with martial arts – are popular activities. Music teacher Nai Dias led a concert performance for the Peace Boat visit to the centre in Vicente de Carvalho. Since starting the music programme there last November she's seen a lot of dedication from the kids and says they're always ready to learn more. "In other countries, children have the opportunity to learn piano and dance, but in Brazil the poor children don't have these opportunities. With this project, we're giving an incentive to the children."

The music programme at São Martinho is quite new, but Ms Dias hopes the children can perform publicly by the end of this year.

And with the Mundo do Trabalho (World of Work) programme, they're giving the young men and women skills to support themselves so they don't have to turn to crime or join gangs. At their three centres they teach computer training classes, as well as trades such as woodworking and cooking. São Martinho cooperates with businesses to find job placements for the kids once they reach the age of 18; through this project 639 young people found work in 2008 after completing their training. It's of the utmost priority to give the kids the ability to get off the streets and stay off the streets.

With translation assistance by Leonardo Uego (Portuguese/Japanese-English) and Naito Yoko (Spanish-Japanese)

For more information about Associação Benficiente São Martinho visit their homepage at www.saomartinho.org.br



Peace Boat, through its United People's Alliance (UPA) campaign, donated pens and notebooks to the education programme at São Martinho's centre in Lapa,