

# JOIN MY GANG



**IN THE CITY OF GUAYAQUIL IN SOUTHERN ECUADOR,** Latin pop music blares through the doorway of a graffiti-sprayed shop, competing with American hip-hop blasting from another nearby store. Teenagers, mostly boys, gather at the edge of the street, leaning against parked cars, bodies taut with restrained aggression. Children as young as 4—some shirtless or shoeless—spill onto the sidewalks in restless clusters. And slumped against the cracking paint of concrete walls, half-clothed men sleep, shaded from the hot Ecuadorian sun.

Despite the music and activity, the streets feel empty. Few cars pass; only locals enter the shops. No weapons are visible, though just a few months ago, guns and knives would have been hidden under car seats or in pockets, and instead of just talking, the boys would have been fighting or selling drugs. With a population nearing 3 million, Guayaquil is home to more than 200 gangs and 60,000 gang youth.

But in recent months, this neighbourhood has become

quick communication. She refuses to label gang members “delinquents,” and suggests the instinct to come together in “teams” is a positive response by area youth to “a very unfair and unequal society.”

She cites society’s emphasis on individualism, lack of respect for nature and humanity and inability to support strong family structures as reasons young people turn to gangs and violence, which is how they get a sense of belonging, value and presence.

Curbelo saw this dynamic early on. “By far the most terrible thing I learned,” she says, “is that assaulting, harming or killing others is a way to say, ‘I am here.’” This insight gave her direction. “What needs to be enhanced is the power to build life,” she continues. So Ser Paz offers young people ways to “feel present without committing a crime.”

In Barrio de Paz, this isn’t lip service, but practical, real-life opportunity. Ser Paz helps young people get business loans to start projects that have so far included a pizzeria, a

**Nelsa Curbelo, a 66-year-old former nun and schoolteacher, took on the toughest young criminals in Ecuador’s most violent city—and won them over with love. BY HILARY HART**

a Barrio de Paz (“peace town”) under the guidance of Ser Paz, an organization committed to fostering peace in Guayaquil’s violent neighbourhoods. And instead of a gun or knife, Angelo, a teenager wearing a backward baseball cap and gold earrings, holds a clipboard thick with paperwork from the new print shop he manages alongside what were once his rival gang members.

Angelo ran away from home and joined the “Latin Kings” after his parents died. “There was nobody to support us,” he explains. Today, support comes from Nelsa Curbelo, a 66-year-old woman who looks more like a friendly grandmother passing time with neighbourhood children than a pioneer of social reform working in the most dangerous city in Ecuador.

Curbelo has been playing against type for years. When she founded Ser Paz (“being peace”) in 1999, she began her work by not working at all. Instead of establishing programs, she spent almost two years listening to the young people she’d later serve: walking the neighbourhoods of Guayaquil alone, sometimes after dark, talking with those who’d talk to her, learning about gangs and impressing the youth with her fearless willingness to be present on their streets.

It’s these qualities of presence and acceptance that distinguish Curbelo from others who work with gangs. Instead of dismissing gang culture, she validates the positive elements it inspires: teamwork, commitment, a sense of belonging and

recording studio and the print shop where Angelo works, which produces T-shirts and a hip-hop magazine. Teenagers have the chance to learn from these businesses while they’re earning their livings.

But there are a few requirements: All participants agree to renounce crime, and each business must include members from rival gangs. In this way, gang members learn to work together toward common goals. It’s an effective strategy. At one point, crime in this neighbourhood included 100 murders a month; now that number is down to 10.

The young gang members are responsive to these chances. In a show of commitment, respect and gratitude, rival gangs piled their weapons—rifles, AK 47s, pistols and knives—in the street, and drove over them with a steamroller.

Much of this sentiment seems as though it’s being offered directly to Curbelo, whose stunning wisdom and straightforwardness is overshadowed only by the power of her heart. Born in Uruguay, Curbelo was a nun and a schoolteacher for years before working full-time for an Ecuadorian human-rights organization focused on uncovering abuses in the military and police force. The horror of this motivated her to work for the prevention of violence rather than trying to repair the damage that came from it. So it was to young people, where violence begins, that Curbelo turned her attention.

Projects initiated through Ser Paz focus on many aspects

of young people's lives, including conflict resolution workshops in schools and in the community; teacher training so other Peace Towns can be created in schools; sports team development; training in circus performing skills; and even a collaboration with the military to develop an alternative to the traditional service requirement for young men.

In its nine years, Ser Paz has grown to include eight employees in addition to Curbelo, along with a vast network of supporters. And one can't deny the revolution taking place in Guayaquil. "Nothing is more revolutionary than love," Curbelo declares. "Love is the greatest power in the universe. Love is more powerful than violence, more powerful than the atomic bomb. Love has the power to transform lives, to change cities and the whole world. Only love has this deep creative power. I am absolutely sure of it."



## **CURBELO SUGGESTS THE INSTINCT TO COME TOGETHER IN "TEAMS" IS A POSITIVE RESPONSE BY YOUNG PEOPLE TO "A VERY UNFAIR AND UNEQUAL SOCIETY"**

This love has worked. Gang members who were once lost in darkened lives with little hope suddenly have possibilities that excite and encourage them. Mauricio, a boy in a black cap wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with "Barrio de Paz"—printed at the shop where Angelo works—says, "The dream for my future is to finish my studies. I want to be somebody important in life so that my family is proud of me."

George, a gang leader imprisoned for murder, was released with Curbelo's help—on the condition he give up crime forever. Now in his thirties, he runs the print shop with Angelo. "When you meet a person who shows you love," he says slowly, "you start to trust that person. That love motivates you to change and you start to see new positive options for your life. It's something that touches your heart." Like the scars on his face, the sorrow in George's eyes can't be hidden. But neither can the love.

"I've known Nelsa for seven years," he says, smiling slightly, his head tilting a bit with vulnerability, "and I'm ready to give my life for her."

Surely the deepest honour in any gang.

**HILARY HART** is the author of *The Unknown She* and *Pearlie of Great Price*, which explore the role of women in individual and global transformation.

## **ALL FOR ONENESS**

The story of Nelsa Curbelo and Ser Paz is part of a library of short films available for free from the Global Oneness Project. Since 2006, the project has been travelling around the world with a small camera crew filming courageous and creative people who understand that we are all connected and bear responsibility for each other and our shared world. At this time of global change, Global Oneness Project documents the many ways that an awareness of oneness informs innovative responses to collective challenges. To watch a film about Nelsa Curbelo and Ser Paz or other examples of oneness at work in politics, spirituality, the environmental movement, conflict resolution, business development or economics, visit [globalonenessproject.org](http://globalonenessproject.org).



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