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### ON THE COVER

"Descarga Cero" by Jake Kheel, environmental director of Punta Cana Resort & Club in the Dominican Republic, shows waste before being processed in its ambitious Zero Waste Program.

# A Long Way from the Dump

Recycling Lives **BY EVELYN MANSILLA**

I AM THE OLDEST OF FIVE CHILDREN, AND FROM the time I was little I learned to look for toys and food in Guatemala City's sprawling garbage dump. My grandmother raised pigs, and I had to be in charge of them when they went to feed in the dump. My defensive weapon was a big stick that I also used as support when I had to pull my rubber boots out of the sticky mud, surrounded by hovering vultures that were attracted by the smell of rotting garbage. The morning air always carried a thin cloud of smoke, the smell

of burning copper, decomposition, but also smells that drew us to action, like the exhaust from the garbage trucks that brought trash from the fast food restaurants. Those trucks were the most popular. An avalanche of waste sat in the plastic bags that had scraps of hamburgers, fried chicken and pastries.

The dump was very chaotic and stressful because more than three thousand people swarmed to it to find things to eat or sell. Half of them were kids like me who were competing to find toys

and food. We had to survive the garbage trucks that careened from all directions and the tractors going from one side to the other, and besides that I had to look out for thieves who wanted to steal one of my piglets. That's how I learned to defend myself and what was mine. But the truth is that I felt useful and glad that I could do things. Nevertheless, my aspirations and dreams didn't go beyond the vague ideas of getting a job, helping my family, contributing to the household expenses and helping to fix the place we lived in.



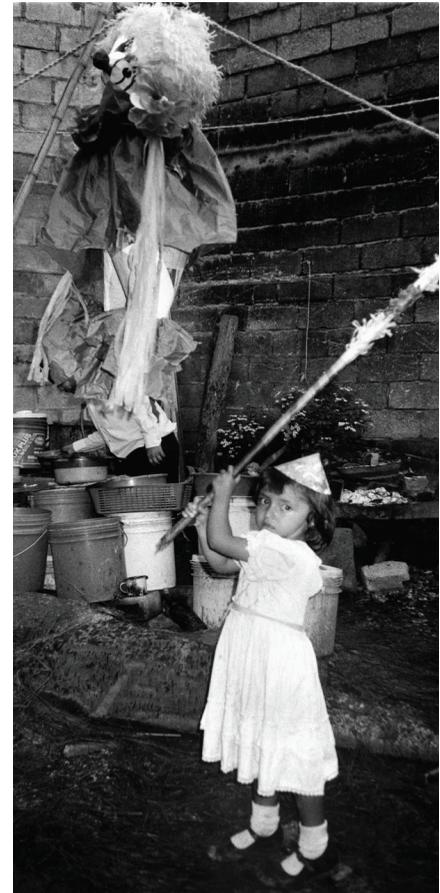
Since I can remember, my mamá has always worked for others, day and sometimes night, washing clothes, ironing and house cleaning. My father had been a car mechanic but suffered a bad accident when a car motor fell on top of him, detaching his retina and seriously damaging his eyes, part of his face and right arm. He survived but couldn't get a job after that. As the years passed by, I learned from my mother that women can maintain the home, but she also taught me to be submissive, to think that I couldn't do the same things that a man could. She thought we had to be realistic, which meant I was not to dream about having a pretty house or an extraordinary future because I was born into poverty and condemned to live my family's destiny. There was nothing that could be done about it.

When I was 12 years old I started to go to photography classes with a project that was originally called Out of the Dump. For me it was like discovering a new world; I could use the camera to show my environment and at the same time taking photos opened me up to entirely new horizons. During my first year of classes I started to develop my self-confidence. At first I was afraid to get close to people to take a photo. I liked to hide behind the camera, click, and go on. Later I discovered that every instant, every moment that got me to take a photograph was etched in my heart. My eyes were opening, making me more perceptive, sensitizing me and giving me the understanding that although my situation was difficult, there were families and children that were even worse off.

During this process of self-discovery, I began to realize I could do a lot more than care for pigs. I could show the world my vision of things. I could express myself without fear. But what was great was how the people perceived my work. The first time that one of my photos was in an exhibition, I couldn't believe that people called me—ME—a star. I felt great and hoped that from then on I could take control of my future, dream, plan, and have goals.

Given the Out of Dump's remarkable success, the project was able to expand beyond the dump and offer the same opportunities to other children from areas affected by extreme poverty and violence, and the name was later changed to FOTOKIDS.

After three years in Fotokids I was



Left: Nine-year-old Mirian takes a portrait of her mother; Above: Young boy works in the dump, 1992; La Piñata, 1995.



**Top: Evelyn, 14, with Marisol, helping Nancy McGirr cover the presidential elections, 1995; Below: Evelyn Mansilla now teaching the Save Girls class.**



given the opportunity to travel to Spain, a country with a culture completely different from mine, and share this experience with other children from the Sahara, London and Granada. I had dreamed about what it would be like to fly in a plane, but frankly never thought I might have the opportunity to travel twice to Spain, and to Australia, London and California.

I was the first in my family and in the Fotokids group to graduate from high school and the first to go to university, where I studied journalism. I started teaching photography classes to younger children in the Fotokids program when I was 14 years old. Teaching is one of the things that fulfills me as a human being: the power to share with other young people the knowledge I have acquired and give them the opportunities that I have been given.

I am now married and have a 9-year-old daughter. I am the administrative director of Fotokids and I continue giving classes in photography, video,

graphic design, creative writing and gender studies.

Fotokids really spun my life around. It wasn't simply giving a child a camera and showing her how to use it; it was giving children like me the opportunity to discover themselves. To know that regardless of our present circumstances or what might cross our paths, we are valuable and that we can change our future. The Fotokids' scholarship program offers economic support from primary school through the university. Getting children to learn to think and see, get an education, acquire a vocation, and gain parental involvement is what makes Fotokids a successful and integrated program.

*Evelyn Mansilla is the executive director of Fotokids in Guatemala.*

*She also teaches classes in photography, video, graphic design, creative writing and gender studies to the youths in the program.*

## More on Fotokids By Nancy McGirr

Fotokids has worked to break the cycle of poverty through professional training in photography, graphic design, web design, video and writing for more than 23 years. From its original start in Guatemala City's garbage dump, the organization has expanded to provide educational scholarships for some 170 students, all of whom live in some of the most violent and harshest economic conditions throughout rural and urban communities in Guatemala and Honduras.

### FOTOKIDS PROGRAMS WORK BECAUSE:

- We work long-term with kids, teaching them vocational skills in graphic design and photography while at the same time giving them scholarships to enable them to attend traditional academic schools.
- We keep it small and start with young kids, 10 to 11 years old, who can stay in the Fotokids program from elementary school through university.
- It's an integrated program; we work with the families and the schools.

We know our kids, their families, their problems; we foster self-confidence and critical thinking, and give them an opportunity to be heard and to show off their artistic skills.

Along with special programs for at-risk secondary school-age

girls, we provide vocational training for teens, and head start for grade school kids. Fotokids classes are free, but the academic scholarships that have helped hundreds of kids who otherwise wouldn't be able to afford school cost us from \$300 to \$1,200 a year.

Our graduates have gone on to the university to study law, architecture, journalism, graphic design, business administration and systems engineering. They've found good jobs and their photographs have been exhibited in 14 countries. The graduates now have their own design studio, Jakaramba.

*Nancy McGirr is founder and Director of Fotokids, award winning staff photojournalist in Central America for Reuters and recipient of the 2011 Lucie Award for her humanitarian work in Photography.*

*Funding for academic scholarships, vocational training and teachers' salaries is much needed because of the escalating violence and insecurity in Honduras and Guatemala. You can donate through the PayPal donation button on [www.fotokids.org](http://www.fotokids.org) or by sending a tax deductible check to Fotokids, P.O. Box 661447, Miami FL 33266.*