



TOS Before and After **Give an hour, save a youth's future**

A few volunteers make a big difference through new youth outreach centers

Statistics show that this is a bad time to be young and living in some Central American countries because of gangs, high crime-levels, extra-judicial killings, and the escalating percentage of youth homicides.

Parents in high-crime *barrios* fear for their own safety and that of their children. They must be ever vigilant against petty thievery and gang members who actively recruit their young children.

The USAID-funded Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment discovered that youth fleeing gang life are hiding in churches or non-profit organizations. The USAID Youth Alliance has been working in some of Guatemala City's most violent *barrios* to help at-risk youth survive temptations in the streets.

The Alliance assessed neighborhoods where it works for prevention programs. Finding none, staff decided a new approach was needed to help neighborhoods reclaim their streets, their children, their lives. They opened three youth outreach centers in partnership with different churches. One of the three centers is located where the notorious *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) controls the neighborhood, another was formerly the favorite dumping site for dismembered bodies, and the third is in a town where two rival gangs demobilized and turned to the church for help.

The faith-based partnership concept is not new. What's new here is the level of community-based volunteerism. In less than two-months, the three centers logged over 2,000 volunteer hours from 90 volunteers.

Each center relies on different volunteer skills and abilities offer who provide expertise, knowledge, and experience in everything from how to play a musical instrument to making cakes for sale.



Photo:

Youth around the marimba as the national anthem is played at the inauguration of Youth Outreach Center called "For my Neighborhood" in Ciudad del Sol, Villa Nueva, Guatemala on September 8, 2006. JGarzón.USAID/2006



Photo: Children and youth after school at the new Youth Outreach Center called "For my Neighborhood" in Ciudad del Sol, Villa Nueva, Guatemala on September 8, 2006. JGarzón.USAID/2006