

Mexico Child Link

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www.mexico-child-link.org 80 Locksley Park, Belfast BT10 0AS. Tel (028) 90622239

Lucero celebrates her 15th birthday

Lucero, who has been living in the Mexico Child Link project since she was four years old, celebrated her 15th Birthday on 7th September.

In Mexico, a girl's fifteenth birthday is celebrated in a unique and different way from other birthdays, and is given a special name - The *Quinceaños* (meaning fifteen years.) It is seen as the transition from childhood to adulthood. The birthday girl is known as the *Quinceañera* and the 15th birthday is always cause for a major celebration. The closest equivalents in the English-speaking world are the sweet sixteen or, in more affluent communities, a debutante ball at the age of eighteen. Lucero has always been very popular with the staff at the project and they spent months planning the event to make sure that she had a day to remember. Lucero has been living in the Mexico Child Link project for over ten years and she is a very special person in the lives of many people.

The festivities began with a Thanksgiving service at which the *Quinceañera* arrived in formal dress. A *Quinceañera* would usually be



accompanied by her parents, but in Lucero's case she was accompanied by a former project director, Angelica Lopez, who is also Lucero's Godparent. A male school friend also accompanied her. The mass was attended by all the important people in Lucero's life, including project staff past and present, her school friends, and other children from the house

where she lives. After the thanksgiving mass she left her bouquet of flowers on the church altar.

At the party the birthday girl does a waltz with two or more *Chambelanes* – formal dance partners. Lucero has been profoundly deaf since birth and she spent many weeks practicing her dance steps with the two young men who accompanied her.

The mass was followed by a party in Tenextepec which was planned over many weeks. The preparation of an event like this is very much a team effort and items such as the



Lucero's party

chairs and tables, the sound system, Lucero's party dress and the decorations were all donated by friends of hers who wanted to mark the occasion. At the open air party, Lucero danced the traditional first waltz, and a sound system blasted out music to over 200 guests.

Employment for young people with learning disability

Lucero's *Quinceaños* is a reminder for all of us that the children are growing up, yet an even bigger indicator is the fact that so many of the young people are now in employment.

Our partner organization Fundación Trébol has now been involved with *Centro de Capacitación, Industria y Artesanía* (Training Centre for Industry and Craftwork) for over a year. It is usually known by its acronym of CINIA. The relationship is proving to be very productive and this organization was established to provide training and employment opportunities to young people in Mexico who have a learning disability. According to official figures at least 700,000 people with a disability in Mexico have no employment. CINIA works exclusively with young people such as this and



Paty, Rodolfo and Marisol wait for the bus home from work in Puebla

provides them with an initial four months of paid training. CINIA has signed contracts with local employers and found permanent jobs for some of the young people from Fundación Trébol. Rodolfo and Marisol have been given jobs in gardening and ground maintenance in an exclusive Golf Club and residential complex on the outskirts of Puebla. Rodolfo has been picked as a team leader and gets extra pay for the responsibility. Paty is working as a cleaner in a car dealership, and Alma is working in an organization called *Fide* in the food processing industry. They receive statutory workplace benefits as well as access to healthcare and other state benefits through their employment. In Mexico, it is unusual for people with learning disability to have an employer who respects labour law in this way. This is a tremendous opportunity for the young people, as they are able to earn their own wages and integrate into the general workforce. This is in accordance with our policy of normalization for people with learning disability.

They have the opportunity to earn a living and



Project Director AnaLuisa Sandoval with CINIA Director Fernando Diez

very much appreciate the chance to socialize with people of similar age and interests. Paty and Marisol have made significant progress, with regard to their self-confidence and interpersonal relations. Marisol in particular has been able to overcome a lot of her anxiety about living and socializing outside of the project.

The programme is not without risk, and some of the main challenges include; safe use of public transport, money management and learning to socialize in free time. It requires a lot of dedication and patience from the staff group. Paty needed to be accompanied by a staff member on public transport, and collected from her workplace for the first eight months of her employment. Since October she has been making the journey on her own – so far without problems. This requires a lot of preparation and planning, as Puebla is a city of two million people, and a contingency plan is needed should one of the young people get lost. The bus drivers have now got to know them and are aware where each one has to get off the bus. It

local bus and transport infrastructure without any special consideration for their learning disability. It is a long working day for them; waking at 5.30am in order to catch a public transport Combi van at 6.30am into Atlixco, where they catch the bus which leaves them near the CINIA factory which is twenty miles away on the outskirts of Puebla. The working day ends at 5.30pm and they are back home by 7.00pm.

The coordinator of Mexico Child Link visited the CINIA factory in January and September as part of the regular evaluation visits, and CINIA management made a reciprocal visit to project partners Fundación Trébol.

Report on the younger children

The two most recent arrivals, eight year old Mario, and his brother Israel who is six years old, are both attending regular primary schools, Isra in the nearby village of La Trinidad, and Mario in Atlixco. Isra has been making good progress, especially with his speech and language. Mario finds school very challenging



is worth pointing out that they have to use the

as there are over forty pupils in his group and

his teacher is unable to give him the individual attention he seeks. An alternative would be to enroll him in the local special school, but AnaLuisa the project director is keen to see if he is capable of integrating into mainstream education, in spite of his special educational needs. He has also been enrolled in a dance class and has other external activities which we hope will give him more experience of; socializing with other children, learning to take his turn, and learning to follow instruction. Oscar (15) has been settled and happy recently although his level of disability means that he can not benefit as much from independence training and preparation for the world of work as much as some of the others. It is inevitable that he will need a high degree of care and attention for the rest of his life. Juan Gabriel (15) has been quite unsettled and his condition has deteriorated to some extent. Both of these children would benefit from a project which specifically caters for people with more demanding special needs such as theirs, but we have been unable to find anywhere locally. For the moment, the project is attending to their needs as best it can and their situation will be reviewed on a regular basis. Emmanuel (15) is attending a local school in San Juan de los Laureles. He has made friends there and is enjoying it.

Cemex building work

In April, our partner organization in Mexico, Fundación Trébol, was the beneficiary of a programme run by CEMEX, a Mexican Multinational Cement Company. The grant was



significant and worth over twelve thousand pounds. It was used to build a wall around the project site and to make improvements to the bathrooms and the sewage system. The wall is very welcome given some of the security problems in recent years. The company used its own employees to carry out the construction work, which started in April. There was a promotional event with 80 guests from the company and Esteban Ortega (pictured) laid

the first stone. The work has now been successfully completed. Our partner organization was proposed by a local CEMEX agent in Atlixco and beat off competition from fifteen other organizations to be selected as part of the *Lazos Familiares* (family links) programme.

Independence Day

The Mexico Child Link project has always tried to give the children and young people an opportunity to participate in local cultural activities. On 15th September Mexico celebrates “*El Grito*” – the cry of independence. The weeks leading up to independence day are a carnival of colour with the green white and red of the Mexican flag to be seen everywhere. September is known as *El Mes Patria* – patriotic month. Every street corner seems to have a flag vendor plying his trade. This year we took a group of the older children and young people to the centre of Atlixco where an evening of entertainment including Mariachi bands, dancing and fireworks had been lined up. Thousands of people packed the square and houseparent Karina had to be careful not to lose any of the youngsters. The mayor of Atlixco took to the stage at 11.00 PM to give the cry of independence - ¡Viva México!

Lisa Fleming

Lisa Fleming, a community artist and freelance



photographer, visited our project in Atlixco, on

the weekend of 10th June 2006. She has wide experience of working with young homeless people in Scotland - currently in Fife and West



Lothian. She uses photography and art as a tool to assist people in building their self confidence and communication skills. Lisa is currently working on a project called "The Invisibles" – This will be a set of portraits of people from all over the world who are on the margins of society. Her work is positive, and the viewer of the photographs should see hope rather than sadness or alienation. She gave some of the young people at our project disposable cameras with which they were able to record their world around them. They were given copies of their own photographs in an album. The photographs were displayed in Fife, as part of Lisa's residency with the Scottish Arts Council.

Mexico Elections

2006 was an election year in Mexico and the elections were characterized by accusations of fraud which led to a period of general protest in their aftermath. The winning candidate, Felipe Calderón, is due to take power in December but the losing party is to boycott the official ceremony in protest. There has also been a major protest regarding corruption, salaries and social conditions in the neighbouring State of Oaxaca which has led to several deaths in street disturbances and the shooting of an American journalist at the end of October. The situation is still very unstable.

House proposal Esteban and Argelio

We are still trying to raise funding to construct a small house for Esteban and Argelio on our project site, which has over two acres. Both of



them have expressed a desire to live more independently and would be well capable of this with the requisite amount of support. We are hoping to raise extra funding to support the construction costs, as Mexico Child Link has insufficient regular income at the moment to develop additional projects such as this.

Puebla-Chivas 3-2

2006 is the 450th anniversary of the foundation of the city of Puebla and a series of special



Rodolfo, Colette, Khaled and Emmanuel at the match

events has been organized to mark the occasion. One such event involved the local football team Puebla FC. Puebla now play in the Mexican second division but a special game was arranged with Chivas de Guadalajara, the most popular team in Mexico which has a squad packed full of internationals. Puebla play their football in the Cuauhtémoc Stadium

which was used in both the 1970 and the 1986 World Cups.

Rodolfo is a huge fan of Puebla FC and a group of us took him and his sidekick Emmanuel to see the game. In spite of having bought tickets beforehand, we still had to queue for an hour to get in to the stadium. I took the opportunity to explain to Rodolfo that Puebla were likely to get thrashed due to the difference in class between the two teams. At this point, Emmanuel declared that he had been a lifelong *Chivas* supporter. Ignoring my ill considered pre match analysis, Puebla went two up within twenty minutes and held on to win 3-2 in a very entertaining and hard fought game. Rodolfo, who was sporting Puebla's

colours of blue and white stripes, was on his feet for most of the game roaring on his team. He was able to dine out on the experience for days afterwards and was the envy of his workmates back at the CINIA factory, none of whom had made it to the game. Going to your first match in an international stadium is an experience to remember. I can still picture clearly the one and only time I saw George Best at Windsor Park when I was about ten years old – a game in which he had a perfectly good goal disallowed after tipping the ball from the hands of the hapless Gordon Banks.



Juan attempts to break open the piñata

The Piñata

The piñata is one of the many traditions which are typical of Mexico. A piñata is a clay pot filled with sweets, fruit and confetti, which is decorated with ribbons, tinsel and coloured paper. Mexican children love piñatas as they associate them with Christmas, birthdays and *fiestas*. A rope is thrown over a suitable branch or beam and it is then tied to the piñata. An adult or older child pulls the rope up and down while a child wearing a blindfold tries to break the piñata with a stick, thus letting the sweets fall to the ground. The children take it in turns, while the rest of the group clap and chant the piñata song:

*“Dale, dale, dale, no pierdas el tino,
Porque si lo pierdes, pierdes el camino.”*

Hit it, hit it, hit it, don't let your aim go astray,
Because if you lose it, you lose your way.

Whenever the piñata is broken open, a horde of children rush in to gather up the sweets and fruit which lie scattered over the ground. Care has to be taken as it can become a free for all. At Christmas a couple of years ago the Mexican President, Vicente Fox ceremonially opened a piñata in front of a group of disadvantaged children and when they saw the sweets falling they rushed in causing him to slip and fall in the resulting melee.

The piñata custom originated in Spain and was brought to Mexico by the Spanish conquistadors at the beginning of the 16th century. The Spanish missionaries used the piñata as a tool to attract converts to their ceremonies. They found that the Mexican Indians already had a similar tradition for the Aztec god of war, Huitzilopochtli. The priests placed a clay pot on a pole in the temple at year's end and decorated it with feathers. When broken with a stick or club, the treasures would fall to the feet of the god's image as an offering. The Mayans were enthusiastic sportsmen and they played a game where the player was blindfolded while he tried to hit a clay pot suspended by string. The missionaries transformed these games in order to attract converts to their religion. The traditional pot was covered with colored paper and used as a representation of the devil. Some piñatas are made with seven points which are said to represent the seven deadly sins.

Common grounds

Mexico Child Link has been taken on as a designated charity by Common Grounds, a non profit café, based in University Avenue, Belfast. It selects and supports local charities which focus on development work. The support will include profit from the sale of a CD by Caroline Orr. A concert which she organized in February 2006 raised over £1400. Caroline has recorded an album called Common Thread and the proceeds are being donated to charities working in the developing world.

Street Collections

Mrs. June Getty and friends have raised over £11,000 this year for Mexico Child Link at street collections, and collections in shopping centres and malls.

Thanks are due to the following individuals and organizations:

The City of London Freeman's School,
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Safeway, Bow St. Mall, Lisburn.
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92 Monthly donors who give from £1 to £50

Jonathan Getty
(Coordinator, Mexico Child Link)
November 2006



What is Mexico Child Link?

The Mexico Child Link Trust is a UK registered Charitable Trust, governed by a group of seven trustees with an interest in learning disability.

Mexico Child Link is an independent charitable organisation, not linked with any religious or political group. UK donations are fully tax deductible through the Gift Aid programme and US donors can ensure their donations are fully tax deductible by supporting us through CAF-America.

Mexico Child Link was founded in 1992 by Jonathan Getty & Colette Mc Ginnity, in response to the needs of abandoned & orphan children with learning disability in Puebla State, Mexico.

Mexico Child Link works in partnership with Fundación Trébol de Puebla A.C., an independent Mexican charitable foundation, which we helped to set up and now partially fund and advise. This close relationship allows the project in Puebla to be run efficiently by Mexican staff trained in the field of learning disability.

Mexico Child Link provides a range of services for people with or affected by learning disability. The core project is a home for abandoned & orphan children with learning disabilities, near the town of Atlixco. Many of them are ex street children. The children live on a small farm in 2 specially built adobe houses where they are cared for in a family setting. The farm, based upon sustainable agriculture, provides a degree of self sufficiency for the project and allows the children to learn practical skills. The aim is to help them gain employment as adults.

If you would like to get involved, or support our work, please get in touch. We are particularly interested in getting involved with local schools and making contact with individuals who have fundraising experience.