

# NGO in the field

## *Change for Children:*

### An Edmonton group helps vulnerable kids and their communities

A small non-governmental organization from Alberta called Change for Children (CFC) is making a big difference in the lives of threatened children in Latin America.

CFC's focus is on children and the communities they live in. These are youngsters born in the shadow of war and living in a wasteland of poverty. They work the streets by day and night, staying alive by picking garbage, running errands, selling things, sweeping market stalls, cleaning car windows at intersections, or sometimes by prostitution.



Ron Berezan (centre) with youth from projects in Managua

To complement its work in Latin America and the Philippines, CFC has programs to educate Canadians about the underlying causes of poverty in developing countries. Co-ordinating these is Ron Berezan.

CFC makes efforts to involve young Canadians, especially Albertans, in its work. In some projects, for instance, young people from Alberta and Nicaragua explore social themes through the visual arts, music, dance or theatre. Recently the organization sponsored travel exchanges for groups of Canadian and Nicaraguan young people. CFC also runs a school twinning program, publishes a newsletter (*Building Bridges*,

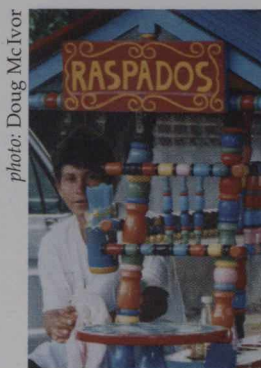


photo: Doug McIvor

Child street vendor in Managua



photo: Ron Berezan

The Lights of the Future (Nicaraguan street youth band) during CFC-sponsored tour of Alberta

circulation 3000), and stages workshops and presentations. And now it has a Web site ([www.changeforchildren.org](http://www.changeforchildren.org)).

In Latin America and the Philippines, CFC collaborates with partner institutions in what Berezan calls "partnerships for peace." He explains, "These include advocacy programs for street kids and children affected by war and violence, women's projects, support for agricultural co-operatives, and projects to get small businesses started."

Berezan sees the relationships thus built as mutually respectful and enriching: "We get to know these communities. We promote awareness in Canada of their needs, raise funds for them, support the development of project proposals and invite them to Canada to speak about their work."

***"We focus on communities***

***because kids are parts of communities.***

***They are at risk because something is wrong in their communities.***

***They are poor because their families are poor."***

photo: Ron Berezan



Children in front of a mural in Esteli, Nicaragua

In Alagoas, Brazil, CFC works with Zumbi dos Palmares Centre for the Defence of the Rights of Children. The aim is to educate the public about children's rights, bring to light cases of violence against children and provide legal support for children charged with crimes. The project also pressures the Brazilian government to enforce its Statute on Children and Adolescents, educate children and youth about their rights, protect adolescent workers, and end child labour.

In Managua, Nicaragua, CFC works with street kids in co-operation with the Institute of Human Promotion. "These kids are quite vulnerable," says Berezan. "The Institute has safe houses where they can go for meals, get resources for survival, find information about their legal rights and learn how to protect themselves. The Institute also offers them the chance to be children again through music, dance, visual arts and other forms of play. They develop self-esteem. For a while they are not just kids picking through garbage; they are artists and performers."

The common element in all the projects is community development. "We focus on communities because kids are parts of communities," says Berezan. "They are at risk because something is wrong in their communities. They are poor because their families are poor." ●