



Organizational History

I. HISTORY

Los Niños was founded in 1974 as a non-profit, bi-national organization that assists families living along the California/Mexico border to become more self-reliant. We specialize in cost-effective programs that make measurable differences in people's lives. Our projects are designed to be empowering. We address needs identified by community members in ways that lead to self-reliance and community development.

We are not religiously or politically affiliated and we receive no direct financial assistance from the government. The majority of our funding comes from individuals, private foundations, fund raising events and from visiting groups such as yours.

The people who formed Los Niños were shocked to see the sharp contrast between the wealth of San Diego and the abundant poverty so close in Tijuana. These individuals thought about their own lives and the things which bring them a sense of success, security, and happiness. The easiest way to facilitate this way of thinking was through sharing or giving that which they had. Early assistance from Los Niños was basically direct aid in the form of food and clothing that was delivered to low-income areas of Tijuana. This form of assistance was based on the presumption that "if we have, and they do not have, then they must be unhappy".

Despite the good intentions of wanting to help others the end result was not successful as it created a sense of dependency and it tended to lower the self-esteem of those who were receiving from others. They were addressing issues in the short term; there was no long term relief. There were limited supplies, an arbitrary selection of who was helped, and a sense of animosity was created.

II. CHANGE TO GRASSROOTS COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATION

In the mid 1980's Los Niños began the difficult transition from a direct aid organization to a grassroots community development organization. We took on an entirely new approach of working "with people" rather than "for people". Los Niños began concentrating on long-term development rather than on short-term aid. In 1985 today's programs of Nutrition and Ecology, as well as the Development Education Program were initiated.

At that time, Los Niños was still primarily staffed by U.S. citizens. The agents of change or teachers were long-term volunteers. The initial efforts were quite productive. However they were hindered by the continuing belief that WE must do it for THEM. In addition the volunteers were outsiders who did not have a complete grasp of the community structure as individuals native to Mexico do. The volunteer's tour of duty was no longer than one year, which resulted in a lack of consistency. The volunteers lacked the time to assimilate into work or to pass the torch onto the next volunteer. Each newly recruited volunteer would start at square one.



In the early 1990's the system of community promoters or promotoras was created to replace the long- term volunteers in the Nutrition and Ecology programs. This new development established a situation in which people were becoming educated and empowered to create changes for themselves. This allowed for more consistency and sustainability, and assured a greater cultural sensitivity. Since that time, and even today, a vast majority of Los Niños' staff and volunteers are now Mexicanos.

III Los Niños Today: Via International

In response to growing need, Los Niños expanded its services and established the Institute for Community Development and Voluntourism in 2009. In celebration of 35 years of successful community development work and in honor of its new name, Via International, the organization hosted the first Global Dialogue for Responsibility at the University of San Diego Institute for Peace and Justice October 2009 and founded the Via International Scholars program.

IV. Mission

The mission is to improve the quality of life by creating opportunities for people to discover their human potential through participation in the development of the community. The mission is accomplished through two programs: 1) Community Development and 2) Volunteerism and Development Education. These two programs are integrated to foster community participation and engagement, promote healthy lifestyles, complete community-defined projects, and offer cross-cultural experience.

Community Development Program: Three strategies

The Family Health and Food Security strategy trains community outreach workers to work in their own neighborhoods disseminating information about nutrition, health and organic gardening. The workers (promotoras) are community members, generally women, who are residents in low-income areas. They have had minimal access to education and as outreach workers are given the title of teacher in their communities. For this work they receive a stipend, transportation funds and teaching materials. This strategy has proven to be effective, reaching many families in this complex border region. The needs are many: access to water, electricity, adequate housing and, most basic of all, sufficient nutrition for the children and their families.

Good nutrition requires adequate income. The Micro Enterprise for Family Financial Security strategy provides access to credit to enable people to start small businesses. These include community kitchens, sewing cooperatives, and small community stores. Community members seek ways to augment income and many aspire to self-production of home produced food items. These include sales of soy products, canned cactus, organic honey, granola, etc.

Education can increase income opportunity. The Community Leadership Education (formation of promotoras) strategy trains Los Niños outreach workers in ways to attract

students to the nutrition and gardening classes. These community members then act as agents of change in their neighborhoods. This education includes teaching skills, self-development and technical training in nutrition, health and gardening. Los Niños also works in collaboration with two universities offering a formal, two-year program for community outreach workers.

Volunteer and Travel for Community Development

The Volunteerism Program was established in 1985 to educate US citizens on the value of community development vs. direct aid. There is a three- point focus to this program:

1) Experiential Learning / Hands on experiences

We focus on assisting communities with infrastructure construction projects. These projects are initiated, developed, and organized by the communities themselves. Often times our role in the communities is symbolic, yet also financial contributions are made by our visiting groups to alleviate some of the economic burdens that the communities have.

Most of our work revolves around schools, which are the heart of the community. At times we do work at community centers, medical centers, etc. However all projects benefit the general community. Los Niños provides a valuable bridge to communities which allows for personal interaction between the visiting participants and the community members.

2) Formal / Structured Education

To add to what you are seeing and experiencing, Los Niños provides opportunities for discussions, dialogues, and presentations by regional experts. The US/ Mexico border is the only place on Earth where you have a developing nation sharing a border with a developed, economic, industrial power. This dichotomy creates an area known as la frontera or frontier region. It is a place where two worlds collide. The border is a laboratory of world issues, which affect not only the US and Mexico, but other countries throughout the world as well. Issues such as migration, immigration, human rights, economics, politics, ecological, and environmental concerns are both positive and negative, and are in the news daily.

3) Social and Cultural Immersion

We believe that there are various ways to understand and appreciate the people and the culture of la frontera and of Mexico. In order to provide a well-rounded experience, participants interact directly with local residents, sample typical food, experience local music, language, and cultural traditions, and may also visit regional sites of interest and learning including museums, historic locations, natural wonders, and cultural attractions.



During your stay here we hope to raise awareness and understanding, eliminate myths and stereotypes, promote the organization's philosophy of "helping others help themselves", and encourage the continuation of active participation in the development of communities wherever you may go. Lastly, our goal is to make these educational encounters enjoyable, transformative, and unforgettable.

- More than 600 volunteers each year participate in the service learning and cultural immersion opportunity provided by our Volunteerism and Community Development Education Program.
- Our participants come from high schools, universities, civic groups, and non-profit agencies across the United States.

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