



Christian Aid/Shan Curry

'At Caja Lúdica we're all people from different places, working together to try to find a way forward' – Victor

## From gang member to teacher in Guatemala

**Victor never thought of himself as being in a gang, just hanging around with friends on the streets of Guatemala City.**

'We fought a lot with other groups. We didn't kill people but if people wanted to hit me I was going to hit back,' he explains.

But since joining Caja Lúdica's carnival classes, Victor has turned his back on violence, and now teaches young people carnival skills. 'It makes me very happy, and it makes me humble,' he says.

Guatemala, still in the shadow of civil war, has one of the highest murder rates in the world. The harsh streets of Guatemala City are packed with drugs, gangs and guns. Caja Lúdica, supported by Christian Aid, is a youth arts collective, using arts and carnival activities to promote a culture of peace in communities rocked by violence.

Using activities such as drama, dance, acrobatics and stilt-walking, Caja Lúdica draws marginalised children and young people – including gang members – in to a range of social and educational opportunities. Caja Lúdica aims to reclaim community space for enjoyment and togetherness, and to help brutalised youngsters discover a sense of purpose and of worth, so they can grow into peaceful, responsible Guatemalan citizens.

Caja Lúdica's way of working is simple. They kick-start their work in a particular school or neighbourhood with a spectacular carnival parade. After astounding onlookers with their dexterity, they soon return to start free workshops

for youngsters who want to learn stilt-walking, juggling or other parade skills.

There's a lot of interest. After all, entertainment options are pretty limited in these areas – and nobody is turned away. Gang members are welcomed along with everybody else. Within about 18 months, youngsters who've stayed the course are ready to strike out into a new community, putting on a carnival parade of their own and sparking off a fresh wave of workshops that they lead themselves.

Victor says, 'You've got to respect yourself and others, everyone is a human being. Violence hurts everyone. It oppresses people. In Guatemala things are really difficult. At Caja Lúdica we're all people from different places, working together to try to find a way forward, but it's hard'.

With ongoing support from Christian Aid, Caja Lúdica is constantly increasing their work, and in January 2009 they opened a new regional centre in the province of Baja Verapaz, with an initial intake of 60 youngsters into their arts, culture and carnival classes.



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This carnival parade through the streets of Sanarate is the first step in Caja Lúdica starting work in this area



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