Cultivating Peace: Empowering the Orphaned Children of Criamar in Ceilândia, Brazil Brazil

Lewis & Clark College

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SECTION I

We sought to bring peace to the children at Criamar, an orphanage in Ceilândia, Brazil. Our goal was to empower the children to rise above their circumstances by providing them with new resources and skills, stimulating good behavior, and improving their environment through renovations and safety measures

Our project had many components. We constructed a computer lab and provided over one hundred hours of computer instruction. We also created a behavioral incentive system by awarding free computer time for good behavior. Finally, we made structural improvements to the sports and play areas and the wastewater system.

The project's value lies in its concrete improvements to Criamar and in that it will continue to motivate the children to behave well and educate themselves.

SECTION II

Project Summary

Criamar is located in Ceilândia, a poverty-stricken suburb of Brasilia. As a result of this poverty, many children are abandoned and live in the streets. Criamar is home to nearly fifty children who have been abused or neglected by their families. Many suffer from emotional problems and have thus turned to violence and drugs. The orphanage provides each child with food, clothing, and the opportunity to attend public school. Resources at Criamar are scarce and it functions thanks to the staff—which includes five "social moms" and one "social dad." Along with the directors, Angelica and Dirson Faria, these individuals provide care and endeavor to maintain order. Criamar, however, faces many problems: the children lack discipline and a sense of responsibility, have little motivation to learn and achieve, and are therefore prone to violent behavior. Finally, the orphanage was in dire need of structural renovations.

We assisted Criamar in creating a safe and encouraging environment in which children can learn new skills and occupy themselves with computer education, sports, and a healthy dose of playtime. In this, we were fortunate to have the help of many hands. We lived and worked closely with Angelica and Dirson for the duration of our project. In addition, we collaborated with the social moms and dad and were thus better able to understand the dynamics at work within the orphanage. We included the children in all components of our project, so as to make them feel part of the process and give them a sense of pride in the new achievements. Finally, we worked with a group of high school students at the American School of Brasilia to ensure that the benefits of our project would continue to be felt after we left.

Project Results

Many project components were successfully carried out as described in the proposal. Nevertheless, we had to improvise after learning about the immediate needs at Criamar. We ultimately decided to focus on constructing a computer lab, teaching computer classes, creating a behavioral incentive system, improving sports and play facilities, and implementing a wastewater management system.

To construct the computer lab we built a new door, installed electrical wiring, and connected the computers to the internet. Then we installed tables, chairs, a whiteboard, curtains, and a ventilation system. In addition to the six computers that we brought, we refurbished three old computers that were found in storage and received one unexpected donation. We installed numerous educational programs and provided over one hundred hours of computer instruction. The lessons included using a mouse and keyboard, typing, navigating Windows, using Microsoft Word, using the internet and setting up e-mail accounts. The children can now communicate with friends outside the orphanage, find information for school, and improve their computer skills.

The computer lab also serves as the first behavioral incentive at Criamar. We designed a simple, effective system with the social moms that awards children for fulfilling their responsibilities and behaving well with free time on the computers. By the time we completed our work the children had already demonstrated a significant improvement in their behavior.

Furthermore, we made structural renovations to the dilapidated playground. We separated the soccer field and play area with a fence to protect the younger children from stray soccer balls. The fence also made it easier for the social moms to monitor the toddlers. In addition, we repaired the playground equipment and painted both it and the fence in bright Brazilian colors to improve the atmosphere outside.

The construction of a new wastewater management system was successful. Previously, an open trench running along the soccer field collected sewer runoff and presented a health hazard in the form of Hepatitis A and Salmonella. We covered the sewage trench and constructed a rainwater drain, which prevents water from pooling and providing breeding ground for mosquitoes that potentially carry dengue fever.

Challenges

Although we had spent much time researching and planning, reality required us to be flexible. A major deviation from our proposal occurred right at the start, when it turned out that the UNICEF training that we had been arranging over the summer would be very costly and not suited to the immediate needs of Criamar. UNICEF offered a course on hygiene and raising infants, whereas the staff at Criamar required assistance with the unruly adolescents instead. We thus decided to focus our energy and funds toward starting our computer lab and behavioral incentive system.

As construction on the lab progressed, we found that getting the actual computers would prove much harder than anticipated. We already had three laptops that we had carried on the plane, but three more in a box were stuck at customs at the Brasilia International Airport, even though we had the official paperwork stating that the computers were a tax-free donation. A representative from UNICEF wrote a letter on our behalf, but ultimately the prospect of an endless bureaucratic process convinced us to pay the hefty tax to get the computers to the children.

In the renovation of the soccer field and playground area we experienced problems of a different nature. Our lead construction worker continuously tried to deceive us by overstating the required costs and salaries for different parts of the construction. In addition, the construction store was slow in delivering materials and we all worked extra hours to ensure that the renovations could be completed in time.

Most significantly, it was challenging to work with the children that snuck off to huff the paint thinner that we were using for construction; or who became physically violent against us when we asked them to leave the computer lab after their assigned free time; or who put shards of plastic in our juice because they were frustrated with the staff and us; or who even pulled a knife on Dirson after he confiscated a pack of cigarettes. It took perseverance and dedication to forge relationships with these vulnerable and badly-behaved children and cultivate peace at Criamar.

We managed to deal with and solve some of these challenges, but often cultural differences in efficiency, business procedures, and disciplinary action prevented us from resolving problems as effectively as we would have liked.

Impact and Sustainability

Our project had immediate benefits for the people we worked with on a daily basis. We also achieved a sustainability that will allow children to benefit from our work for years to come. Before we arrived at Criamar, it had no system by which to motivate the children and our behavioral incentive system provides one long-term solution. The computer classes we began will continue with the help of high school students from the American School of Brasilia. Emily Dobson, the Service Learning Coordinator at the high school, collaborated with us to create a new volunteer group, "Criamar Tech Team," which will continue teaching computer classes and supervising free time on a weekly basis. In addition, our renovations will continue to benefit Criamar for many years. The wastewater management system we implemented will allow the children to play without risk of contamination and the renovated soccer field and children's area will provide them with a safe location in which to play. Finally, we will speak at Lewis & Clark College and in the Portland community to continue to raise awareness about Criamar.





