

## Street kids' lives enriched by teacher's efforts

By Juan Carlos Hernandez

On any day of the workweek at about 5:30 p.m., the abandoned courtyard of the restaurant in the plaza facing the Instituto Cultural Cabanas becomes a school, a second home and playground for 49 children. During the following two and a half hours, teachers from the Movement for the Support of Abandoned Minors (MAMA) Working Child Program are busy tutoring, playing with or counseling children who spend their days hawking gum, washing windshields and juggling oranges for pennies.

Head *mairo* (teacher) Ricardo Ramirez walks among the kids, whose ages range from four to 17, offering words of encouragement, keenly observing the interaction between his colleagues and the children. He is clearly dedicated to his work but his tiredness is obvious: he pauses frequently to yawn, scratch his beard and rub his puffy, red eyes.

Exhaustion weighs heavily on Ramirez because this is his second job and he's been up since the crack of dawn. His first job as a secondary school teacher is his main breadwinner but his time spent giving children who work on the street an opportunity to change their lives is his real vocation.

Ramirez came to MAMA about ten ago disillusioned with political work, his original social calling. At that time, Ramirez admits a "soft attitude" toward the children prevailed and he believes MAMA was on the wrong track. *Mairos* felt sorry for the children who attended the downtown shelter, he says, and expected them to behave and listen simply because they were fed. Everything fell apart when children challenged the *mairos'* authority. There were food



Photo by JC Hernandez

**Mairo Ricardo Ramirez (R)** distributes letters to street children from their pen pals. Every night of the week, Ramirez engages the children in activities that enable them to see a world beyond their immediate lives.

## MAMA's current programs

**MAMA's Shelter** A house open every night where MAMA offers warm food, hot water baths, a safe place to sleep, friendship and counseling (capacity: 24 children). Currently shut down due to shortage of funds.

**MAMA's Big House A** home for 45 children rescued from the street. Children receive lodging, food, health care, recreation time, and an education, as well as friendship and counseling.

**Street Work MAMA's** teachers recruit and encourage children who work on the street to seek a better life. *Mairos* (teachers) track and record information about the children they make contact with.

**The House of the Working Child** An educational and service center for children who work on the street. Daily activities include breakfast, dinner, medical support, recreational and cultural activities, legal support, and counseling.

**MAMA's School** Grade school with a strong support component to meet the psychological and social needs of its children.

**Mothers' Program** A support program geared toward mothers of working children.

**MAMA (Movement for the Support of Abandoned Minors)** is located at Calle Montenegro 1786, Colonia Barrera, Guadalajara. For more information on any of these programs call 3825-2576.

fighters everyday and despite the pleas from the staff, the children refused to stop. After the *mairos* established rules, many children stopped coming.

"We didn't expect the children to do much, so we lost them," Ramirez says.

This experience taught the *mairos* that the children needed more than simply a free meal and advice. They started the street school (actually a tutoring pro-

gram) and classes in MAMA's downtown center. And the children started to come back.

Then just as suddenly as Ramirez had arrived, he left in search of new horizons.

"I thought I was done with MAMA and working with children," he says. But during the months that followed, Ramirez did plenty of soul searching and realized

Street children on 8

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