

GLOBAL VOICES

I want to make a difference

Victoria Ferrero Allende is a voluntary social worker who works with the poorest children in the worst slum areas of Buenos Aires in Argentina. Her big dream is to offer these children greater opportunities and a better future

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Let's be clear from the start: Victoria has no formal training in social education or working with socially challenged children.

Thrown in at the deep end at the age of three, she accompanied her mother to sing at the city's prisons, churches, children's homes and for the poor.

"Learning by doing is how I and the people at LIFE learn. We share our experiences and life has taught me to look after my poor brothers and sisters," she says with a clear steadfast look in her eyes.

Her mission and that of her family is to help Argentina's poorest children, many thousands of whom live below the poverty line. Her mother founded LIFE during the economic crisis in 2001.

Work at LIFE is completely voluntary and unpaid, which is why Victoria Ferrero Allende works as a translator for Coca Cola in Buenos Aires.

In her experience, the Argentinian authorities ignore the poor and the outcast. They do not receive a penny of support from the social authorities for their work. LIFE is wholly financed by voluntary donations from around the world.

On this January afternoon the social educator

has accompanied Victoria Ferrero Allende and a handful of volunteers to Ciudad Oculita, Mataderos, one of the outermost suburbs of Buenos Aires. About 60,000 people live here. It is an extremely poor, densely populated neighbourhood with a great deal of violence, theft and crime in general.

LIFE's projects are centred in this area.

This is an area sorely lacking in human resources and where the children are worst affected.

"This is why we concentrate our efforts on the children," says Victoria Ferrero Allende

Next to her on the bus are the balloons, decorations, cakes and presents she and the other volunteers have packed. Their plan is to hold a party for all the children with birthdays in January.

"The families don't hold birthday parties for the children – they neither have the energy nor the money. So we do it for them," she explains.

Big positive effect

LIFE's activities with the children focus on homework assistance, educational counselling, computer training, play, games, cooking, a trip to the cinema etc. And they talk to the children about the things they can't discuss at home – puberty, development, AIDS, sexual maturity and pregnancy, for example.

All the activities take place during the children's spare time in the afternoon.

"Some of what we do doesn't look like much but it has a big effect on the children. There is always something you can give and giving a little also goes a long way. It isn't just about creating instant happiness. You can also see the effects over the long term," says Victoria Ferrero Allende.

She and her fellow volunteers always dress in LIFE T-shirts so everyone knows who they are. Otherwise it can lead to problems in this slum area where even taxis dare not venture.

Most of the families get by on a day-to-day basis and do not think much about the future. They have nothing, no work and this is very bad for their children.

“The schools in the area are very poor, the teachers are underpaid, everyone has enough on their plate and the children don't learn a lot. Our job is to be present, open the children's eyes and give them a future,” she continues.

The activities she and LIFE run are always rooted in dialogue, hopes, needs, ideas and suggestions from the local community.

If you ask the active local women who work at the spartan community centre, LIFE has a significant positive effect, especially on the children. But the families are also glad about the activities that lift the whole neighbourhood.

For Victoria Ferrero Allende each little smile or hug is a reward in itself.

“These people didn't choose to live this way. This is their lot. Their appreciation and a little smile means everything to me. I can't change the world but I can give them something they didn't have before. Above all, I can give them hope. Looking into the face of a happy child warms my very heart,” she concludes.

