



Adriana Arciniegas (top, far right) teaches former child soldiers and prison inmates to make greeting cards and other paper products for sale; the proceeds support counselling and job-skills programs for marginalized Colombians.



IT'S IN THE CARDS

A Colombian woman changes lives with paper and positive thinking. TEXT: SUSAN MCCLELLAND

Eight years ago, Adriana Arciniegas was in her Bogotá, Colombia, home when a newscast on the television caught her attention. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) had agreed, as part of their peace talks with the government, to hand over some of their youngest combatants for rehabilitation. The country's civil war, ignited in 1964 by leftist groups seeking more equity for the poor, was winding down, but the remaining fighting had become increasingly tied to Colombia's lucrative drug trade. (The country is responsible for 90 percent of the world's cocaine supply.) Several factions in the conflict, including FARC and right-wing paramilitary groups, are known to recruit children under the age of 18. Colombia, as Arciniegas learned, has the fourth-worst record in the world for child soldiers.

The newscast talked about some of the challenges facing the children's reintegration into mainstream society. "It's one thing to get the children out of the jungles where they're fighting," says Arciniegas, now 39. "It's another thing to keep them out. All they know how to do is fight."

Arciniegas should know. Since 1998, she has been working with another group of marginalized Colombians, female prison inmates, as part of a project that arose from a promise she had made to herself and God. When she was a child, Arciniegas frequently found herself alone as her single mother worked long hours as a seamstress. A carpenter who shared her family's low-income home sexually



assaulted her when she was three. When she was 10, a stranger in the market lured her away and raped her. As a teenager, she was depressed and tried to commit suicide by drinking prescription medications. But Arciniegas had one thing going for her: school. She excelled—so much so that she graduated from high school at 15 and won a scholarship to study industrial design at the University of Bogotá.

When Arciniegas was 22, she married her husband, Oscar. They tried to have children, but she suffered a miscarriage. In 1997, Arciniegas, pregnant again, confined herself to bed for nine months. She made a promise to God that if the baby lived, she would dedicate her life to healing herself and others. To stay busy, she made cards with intricate cut-outs and designs and gave them to friends and family. After her son, Oscar David, was born, her friends encouraged her to start a card-making business.

Arciniegas, whose husband made a comfortable salary, didn't need to pursue a profit-driven company. But she remembered her promise when, one Sunday, a representative from a local prison spoke at her church about the large numbers of women serving sentences. Their lives were filled with violence, which had often started when they were children. When they were released, many would return to crime due to a lack of opportunities. "It hit ▷

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me hard,” says Arciniegas. “These women and I had similar pasts. If I didn’t have my school and my husband, it could be me behind bars.”

Arciniegas, an industrial designer, fused her card-making with her vow to help others. She received permission from the Colombian government to go into one of Bogotá’s roughest female jails, and in 1998 she started working there, paying 30 female inmates to make holiday greeting cards as well as paper products like wall hangings. While the company made a small profit selling them to Colombian stores, it had another, more important objective: Arciniegas had designed a program—based on her own time in therapy and advice from counsellors—to help the women make better life choices when they get out of jail.

As she watched the 2002 newscast about the child soldiers, a seed was born in Arciniegas’ mind. She had just won \$4,000 from Colombia’s Citybank for her work with the female inmates, and she used that money, plus funding from the relief organization OIM, to establish a pilot program outside of the prison that employed 70 former child soldiers. They were 16 or older and went to school when they were not working with Arciniegas.

In a small factory, she taught the former combatants how to make cards and run small businesses. At the same time, Arciniegas also counselled them. It was a challenge at first, as her charges included not only former FARC combatants but also some from opposing forces in the conflict. As one of the former child soldiers says: “I could feel their hatred toward me, and my hatred for them seethed inside of me. But I learned to deal with it, as did they. We all had one thing in common,” the boy, who asked that he not be named, adds. “We had lost our childhoods to war.”

One of the keys to Arciniegas’ success is that she understands that loss of innocence. “Like so many of the women and children I have worked with, I was two people,” she says. “I was a hurting child on the inside and a woman with hopes and dreams on the outside.”

The pilot was so successful that Arciniegas turned it into a full program with funding from OIM and another Colombian foundation. Then, in 2006, she established a non-profit arm of her company called Fundación Imaginación (fundacionimaginacion.org) in order to access resources to pay for additional programs for the ex-combatants. Apart from a small amount for administrative costs, all the proceeds from the cards and gift items go to support counselling and job-skills programs. The women in the prison still make some of the products, but ex-child soldiers in both Bogotá and Medellín make the rest. The estimated 30,000 cards and 5,000 wall hangings that are

produced each year are sold by fair-trade companies in North America as well as in Colombian stationery stores.

Sadly, Colombia still has an estimated 11,000 children fighting in the war. But Arciniegas has helped around 500 child soldiers and 200 former female inmates—as well as more than 300 others, including at-risk youth, former soldiers and victims of the conflict—to start productive lives back in their communities. Many of them have gone on to run small businesses of their own. Others work in offices and factories, and still others continue to work for Fundación Imaginación. Prior to meeting Arciniegas in the prison 12 years ago, Nora, then 25, had only known one job in her life: managing a cocaine distribution line. Today, she manages Fundación Imaginación’s distribution line instead. “Adriana has taken a population of Colombians who had been written off as not having much of a place in society,” says Yury Wu, Fundación Imaginación’s Canadian representative, “and given them a peaceful purpose.”

Bernardo Restrepo, 32, is one of many former child soldiers whose lives have been transformed by Arciniegas. He grew up in the Uraba region of Colombia, known for its banana plantations and leftist political leanings. At the age of 12, Restrepo officially joined FARC. By age 15, he was in charge of recruiting children from the region into the conflict. By the time he was 25 and arrested by government forces in Medellín, he claims he had indoctrinated more than 3,000 children into war.

Restrepo was sentenced to 40 years in prison for being part of an organization seeking to violently overthrow the government. When he was in jail, he reflected on his crimes and the children he had sent into war, and he made a vow of his own: If he ever got out, he would lead a different life. Restrepo started a movement in the prison that saw more than 100 former FARC members making vows of peace and apologizing to their victims via the media. In 2006, he met Arciniegas when she visited the men in prison.

The next year, Restrepo’s sentence was commuted to six years. When he got out, he called Arciniegas, who hired him in the newly opened Medellín office of Fundación Imaginación. Today, Restrepo manages the office and does outreach, telling children his life story and encouraging them to stay in school. While he had made the vow to lead a different life if he were ever released, he says that without Arciniegas, it would have been challenging to keep it because he was being actively recruited by a paramilitary group in jail. Arciniegas took a chance that Restrepo was capable of something other than war. “I owe Adriana my life. Without her, many of us would be dead,” concludes Restrepo. “She is the angel of Colombia.” □