

TRISH GANT

Photographer

The Pygmi Hippo
Burgoine Quay
8A Lower Teddington Road
Hampton Wick
KT1 4ER
Tel/Fax: 0181 – 943 - 9925

Children Born in Prison in Brazil: Serving Their Mother's Sentence

Imagine vast tracts of fertile land yielding fantastic wealth, giving way to massive sand dunes and endless beaches. The blue sea crashing and tumbling on the shore, the sound of the palm trees swaying, and the children's pleas are all you can hear.

Now think of the people: a huge population estimated to be more than 160 million, eking out an existence in whatever way it can. By ingeniously selling inventions, handicrafts or even themselves, they seem to manage. This rich melee of cultures built from slavery and previous invasions has evolved a strange kind of self-sufficiency born out of desperation.

Despite their problems, the people have a friendly, open manner making you feel at home immediately. Bearing no malice towards the ever-growing numbers of tourists, they recognise the huge opportunities this brings.

The future is bleak for them in many ways as they invade the cities relentlessly in the vain hope of finding work. Most of the country's wealth rests with the lucky few. The minimum monthly wage here is around \$ 120 dollars per month. Many are caught up in the serious crime spiralling ever upwards in an attempt to put food on their plates. Involved in drug dealing, homicide or prostitution, there seems no way out of the favellas lining the roadside. The women suffer at the hands of their men who often act as their pimps, selling them for the cost of a meal.

Out of the dark extremes which are Brazil, shines a small beacon of hope.

Based in Fortaleza, state of Ceará, Doctor César Barros Leal, through his love for children (he has 4 of his own) has embarked on a unique project. His aim: to reduce the misery of overcrowding in female prisons and deal with its resulting problems.

Unlike the British Penal system, all inmates have the right to carry on sexual relationships during their sentence. Even if both partners are imprisoned in different prisons, they can be together sporadically to fulfill this right.

This is not the only problem however. Many women may already be pregnant when they are sentenced. The result: children are born in prison and live out their mothers sentence with them.

The spread of disease among inmates and their offspring is rife as they are often crammed together 6 to a cell or live in close proximity to one another in communal rooms lacking washing facilities. It is vital that the general conditions in which they spend their sentences be improved for their children's sakes.

The architecture of the crèche, based on a scheme in Cuba ,and named after Dr. Leal's father Amadeu Barros Leal, was founded in 1993. Initial funding was partly by the Brazilian Government, Cesar's students and Private donations. It was built right next door to the Women's prison in Fortaleza. What makes it truly unique now is that it is a non-profit making organisation, administered with the support of the community , making it possible to employ teachers and child minders. It is also the only

project of its kind in the entire country and the only crèche outside the prison building itself which does not belong to the system. This way it maintains its independence.

Catering for youngsters up to six years old, sleeping in spotless dormitories, they are visited by their mothers by day. Inmates offer their services by cleaning and gardening on a voluntary basis. They give themselves to the project completely.

Dada, the cook, makes every effort to see that they all receive a balanced diet, while Carmelia, the coordinator, shows me that educating the children, the three R's, takes place in a spacious, shady room. A pile of toys, a record player in the corner and T.V. all given by the local community, make celebrating Christmas real. The kids happily open their presents here.

Sleeping thirty, the numbers swell as some seek shelter here at night. Strictly speaking, the children can only stay here until they are six year's old, even if their mother's sentence has not ended. They may be forced to live with an elderly relative or violent family members who cannot cope. Without the protection of their mothers, they often return to seek sanctuary from the rough life on the streets. Of course, if there is room, every effort is made to accommodate them.

Doctor Leal has great plans for the place. Expansion is no problem, he says. At the moment, he is fundraising to buy a washing machine and a mini-bus. He hopes that his youngsters will some day be able to visit relatives or see the real beauty that is Brazil.

© Trish Gant 1999

Doctor César Barros Leal is currently State Attorney and Law Lecturer in Ceará county, Brazil.

Re: Crèche Amadeu Barros Leal. Jan. 1998. Fortaleza, Ceara, Brazil.

Private Donations can be made direct to:

Creche Amadeu Barros Leal (C.G.C 12360434- 0001- 81)

Bank details:

Banco do Estado do Ceará – BEC

Agência 006 Conta 513647-2

Creche's Address:

Avenida Sargento Hermínio, S/N

Bairro Jacarecanga – CEP: 60.000

Fortaleza – Ceará – Brasil

Telephone: 00 55 85 234 7757

Fax: 00 55 85 234 32 92

E-mail: cesarbl@roadnet.com.br