Fénix 2021 mid-year report

The stress and anxiety generated by this long drawn-out pandemic, compounded by lack of jobs, increased poverty and growing violence on the streets, have taken a toll on everyone, but they have also pushed many Fénix girls to think more deeply about their roles in society, their future and their capacity to care for others.

Some have been energized by the situation and become even more determined to excel in their studies or their jobs and to help support people even worse affected by the crisis.

Lizeth Angélica says: “*Our sense of humanity and solidarity has flourished unexpectedly . . . whilst studying has helped me to center all my energy and think more deeply about things that make me ask questions, which I enjoy: I want to learn more and to be able to offer coherent contributions, to debate better . . . studying Social Work has, I feel, allowed me to connect more with myself and with the context in which I live, to begin to understand the causes of many problems*”.

She is now soon to start her fourth semester, helped by the very generous support of an English ‘godmother’ who pays her university fees.

It is one of the unexpected discoveries of Fénix´ development, that for a girl who had always felt abandoned and unwanted, to have people that care about her, trust in her abilities, delight in her progress, and will dig into their own pockets to fund her education, is an immense motivator and source of pride and self-confidence.

“*When you showed confidence in me I began to feel confidence in myself*” (Viviana, now a doctor fighting Covid).

Lady Johana continues with her psychology degree and with her work in the country´s leading HIV/AIDS education, prevention, testing and treatment organization. Kilyam is a nurse in Amazonas at the front line of the struggle to treat and to stop the spread of Covid.

Working on the front lines of society can be satisfying but exhausting. Disney, a Social Worker coordinating the community programmes of sister organization Fundación Procrear writes: “*I have suffered a lot of anxiety, due to the violence generated by the protest marches and the general strike, but also because in my job I have had to face very difficult cases: if before the pandemic there were severe poverty related problems, now they have intensified and we can do little more than provide short term solutions, and until there are structural changes it is very difficult even to ensure basic needs.*”

To ensure the basic needs of some members the foundation provides small additional monthly subsidies to five girls, apart from academic costs, and occasional emergency grants for those who need urgent help to cover food and rent, now that so many businesses have closed and the pre-pandemic standby shifts as waitresses or sales girls have largely dried up.

At the beginning of the year Angélica Abril needed temporary help to allow her to take a room away from her home after a distressing incident of family violence. Just a few months of distance allowed her to re-establish relations with her parents with greater mutual respect and tolerance.

She continues working hard towards her Higher Education Diploma in physical education with good grades of 80% and upwards, is about to start the fourth semester, and says she only takes time away from classes to join the protest marches demanding a free education and a social support system to ensure no-one goes hungry.

This takes courage: several hundred demonstrators have been killed or never seen again after capture by police or paramilitary gunmen, and hundreds more have been injured in beatings with clubs and rifle-butts, often caught on cellphone video. The riot police are also accused of using rape to intimidate and brutalise girls who they catch on the marches.

Constant shooting, teargas and baton charges by government forces and showers of stones in response have frequently turned large areas of Bogotá, as well as Cali, Medellín and other cities, into battle-grounds, where shops and businesses are boarded up against looters, streets are barricaded, and no public transport can run.

Widespread unemployment and the general climate of violence and lawlessness, have contributed to surges in muggings, looting, murders and property crimes, and added to the fear and anxiety felt by so many.

For many Fénix girls their stress and anxiety have required help, with Ezana´s and Beatriz’ Saturday classes and workshops on Zoom gradually turning more and more into a support group in which they can share feelings and strategies for handling desperation. Some need more individual help for severe depression, which can threaten their well-being.

Angélica Abril says she has a friend who is a psychologist and provides her with counselling support while others have regular meetings or Skype or telephone consultations with Fénix psychologist Deyanire.

Lorena talks each Sunday on Zoom with Timothy to let go everything that built up over the week, eventually agreeing to see a psychiatrist for medication for depression and insomnia. She has continued with her SENA course in machinery maintenance, and has now begun thinking ahead to what should follow after graduation in another year: a possibility that enthuses her is to combine it with a degree in industrial psychology. She has managed to find weekend shift work in a sales stall, to help meet the deficit in the household budget since her father abandoned the family in May. Despite the odds, her resilience, will power and Fénix´ support keep her going.

Kenyerlith, after the traumatic experiences of becoming a refugee from poverty and violence in her native Venezuela and facing poverty and xenophobia in Colombia, has also had a spell of feeling overwhelmingly dispirited and sad, dropped out of her job and says she could hardly get out of bed. Though she had continued taking SENA courses she now describes a lack of interest and energy for doing anything, but with the insight and ability to describe symptoms of clinical depression that indicate she will be able to profit from medication, psychotherapy and group support.

Others, despite the difficulties, have taken significant steps forward. Indira says she learned greatly from looking after her mother and her grandmother in their final months of life, and found she has innate ability to work with the elderly. She could not get a place at the very competitive National University, so applied for a course to qualify in care of older people at the San Pedro Claver School of Health where six Fénix members have already studied. She was accepted and starts in August. Another kind Fénix supporter in the USA is covering her fees and costs.

Several girls have decided that given the deteriorating situation in Colombia they prefer to continue their courses and practice in the United States, where Yennifer is in the process of getting get her nursing degree registered and Zarina her degree in dentistry while taking a university course and saving towards her return to Colombia. Gloria Lizeth and Eunice also continue improving their English there and saving up.

Sandra, now well qualified by experience and her ‘Tecnólogo’ qualification, has been able to get a restaurant job and hopes soon to go on to a full degree.

Oriana, now in her third year of a degree in Community Education and Human Rights, has continued to be active in the peace and human rights movement, helping document abuses by government forces, in itself stressing and depressing. She expects to join the new Fénix support group on Sundays, to help girls cope with the often overwhelming effects of the combined crises.

It is a heartening sign that so many recognize the need to support each other and can share their feelings in the safe environment of Fénix groups.

As an organization, Fénix continues in this way to develop and to adapt to changing needs. Members display remarkable strengths, flexibility and optimism that should ensure they can weather Colombia´s storm and emerge stronger.

What they achieve is only possible because of the unfailing help of so many friends of Fénix.

Lizeth Angélica writes: “*I want to thank everyone who supports the foundation so that it can continue in its task of transforming young people who, like me, at some point in our lives have lived through situations of vulnerability, but now count on a second family that believes in our abilities, respects us and expects the best of us all.”*

She speaks for all of us.

We are particularly grateful to Kate Seal, Regina Yando, Malcolm Deas, Alison Wood, Children of Colombia, Juan Manuel Castro, Doug Farah, Alan Riding, and David Lloyd for their unswerving support.

We wish you all safety, health and hope, in the knowledge that your support is transforming the lives of young people.

Beatriz and Timothy