**Fundación Social Fénix** 

 **2021 Report**

 **Lockdowns, protests and riots, street violence, curfews, job losses, classes online, fear of disease, the proximity of death, increased cost of living and decreased income and opportunities, have all made the past year extremely daunting and stressful. But Fénix members have gained surprising strength and determination, with great achievements and advances, growth in insight and self-knowledge, and improved family relations.**

 The second half of 2021 saw exceptional academic results: Lizeth Angélica had to take many classes online and look after her young child. *“I learned how to divide my time between studies and my son and his emotional well-being”.* There were even difficulties in finding food, as shops were often sold out, and she had to cook with whatever was available. But despite this, Angélica finished the fourth semester of her degree in social work with an excellent grade point average of 4.63/5 (93%), at the top of her class.

Indira, after finishing high school, went on to a ‘técnico’ (higher education certificate) to qualify in the care of older adults, and has finished the first semester at the head of her class with a high average of 4.3/5. Her fees and costs are paid by a Fénix supporter in the USA, whose generous donation also covered a new laptop computer needed for the course. *“I love serving others and the health care area.”* Progressing into this more demanding mode of studies, however, and deaths in the family, had been stressful but she says “*the classes on Saturdays and sharing with other Fénix girls were a relief*”.

The main purpose of Beatriz’ Saturday classes (still online for now) is to encourage girls to read - mainly books and relevant news reports -, making reading a habit and a part of life beyond the drudgery of required reading for school; and, secondly, to broaden the girls' horizons and make them aware of important things that are happening in Colombia but also beyond.  Thus, in addition to reading about Colombia (primarily Alfredo Molano's *Cartas a Antonia*and reports about various forms of inequality in the country), this year the group read about and discussed the very different situation of girls and women in Iceland and in Afghanistan under the Taliban, the Glasgow Climate Conference and environmental issues, sexual violence, outstanding women such as Jane Goodall and Malala, the situation in Venezuela and the plight of Venezuelan immigrants in Colombia, as well as other contemporary issues.

Ezana unfortunately had to suspend English classes to go to the US where his mother was seriously ill and later died. Our sympathy goes to Ezana and his family.

As the classes became more and more also a safe place to share personal difficulties and fears, psychologist Deyanire proposed a separate time for a support group, and during recent months every 14 days we have held a Sunday Zoom meeting for those who need to talk out feelings and frustrations, to share experiences, to seek advice and to give counsel to others. Deyanire says *“the pandemic generally brought to the surface problems like depression and anxiety and in family dynamics incidents of violence far stronger because of the lockdown, and to which the girls were not immune”.*

Sandra had problems participating in the group and in classes because of her decrepit mobile phone so, with contributions from several local donors, we bought her a new one. She is working in a restaurant and hoping next year to put the credits from her higher education diploma towards a full degree.

Oriana is over half way towards her degree in Community Education and Human Rights, completing the sixth semester with very good grades, and elected as student representative to her university’s academic council. She continues to work energetically in a peace movement that is more than ever necessary as the rates have climbed for violent crime and killings, particularly of community and labour leaders, environmental defenders and human rights workers. The police are widely distrusted and feared because of the overwhelming evidence of their involvement in hundreds of cases of unlawful killings, rapes, disappearances and torture during the widespread protest marches and street skirmishes earlier in the year.

Despite the five-year-old peace treaty with the FARC rebels, large areas of the country have again become no-go areas as other guerrillas, right-wing paramilitary gangs and large drug trafficking organisations battle for control.

Fénix girls aim to become agents of change, educators, carers and leaders, who can contribute to improving a society beset by violence and inequality.

Lady Johana is firmly positioning herself in the health field. While completing the fourth semester of a psychology degree, with a high GPA of 4.46/5, she has held a post in health monitoring for the north Bogotá hospital network, also working with HIV prevention organisations and participating in research on PrEP (Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis) in Cali.

Equally working and studying at the same time is Angélica Abril, now over half way through her higher education diploma in physical education, Angélica Abril finished this trimester of classes as a straight A student, with a grade point average of 45/5 while working as a ‘recreacionista’ in children’s sport and games. She has had ups and downs in family life, leaving her parent´s home for a while because of ill-treatment. Now, she says, relations have much improved. She too plans to use the diploma course as a stepping stone to a full degree.

Kenyerlith, a Venezuelan refugee, had her downs as depression overcame her when her stepfather threw her and her mother out of the house, threatening them with violence. They had to move repeatedly and to look for legal protection. She has stabilised now in psychotherapy with Deyanire, and is taking a cram course to prepare for university entrance exams in March. She wants to study graphic design. This may not be in the spectrum of careers that Fénix normally supports, but her high intelligence, generous spirit, unfailing participation in classes and support group, and her precarious situation of extreme vulnerability mean we will do our best to help her gain a scholarship.

*“This was one of the most difficult years of my life.”* A victim of violence, Lorena at first left home to stay with a friend, felt unable to keep going with her SENA technical course and took a job to pay her own way. On returning home she worked hard at successfully smoothing out family relations, and was overjoyed with her parents´ birthday present: an Akita puppy to fill the gap left by the death of her beloved pet dog. In the coming year she plans to take an intensive English language qualification.

Viviana continues as a doctor in a major health care company, with a hugely increased work load because of Covid, and is applying for a residency in gynecology.

Disney is a full-time social worker with a sister organization that attends society´s most vulnerable people, especially foreign refugees, victims of drugs, violence, homelessness and sexual exploitation and the children of women in prostitution in central Bogotá: exhausting and stressful work that she loves.

To qualify in these caring professions requires long, disciplined studying, smoothing out background family problems, and the money to pay for fees, books, uniforms, materials, internet, fares, rent, and food. For providing these funds that make these girls’ education possible, our deepest thanks go to David Veit, Malcom Deas, Regina Yando, Kate Seal, Alison Wood, Children of Colombia, Juan Manuel Castro, Doug Farah, Alan Riding, David Lloyd, Camille Marquand, Tova Solo, Carmenza Patiño, María Eugenia Díaz, and all other donors.

From these donations, for girls without part time jobs or adequate family support, Fénix provides subsidies for bus-fares, internet and, in some cases, for food and rent.

As the year came to a close and the semester´s extraordinarily good mark sheets came in, Beatriz and Maria Eugenia treated a group of girls to an outing, to a cinema to see the new Disney film ‘Encanto’ and to eat ice

cream.

Despite the strains caused by the pandemic it has

been a generally successful year and we all go into the new

year with high hopes and determination to make it even

better.

*“Our thanks go to the people who believe in us and*

*our personal and professional commitment to becoming*

*better people and contributing to a better country”.* (Indira)

With our best wishes for a far better 2022,

Beatriz and Timothy