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Víctimas or sobrevivientes? Are the people injured by firearms because of political, social or common violence to be considered victims or survivors? Survivor is the politically correct term used nowadays in cases of rape, assault and other forms of violence. At what point does one transform oneself from victim to survivor? Does every victim have the opportunity to become a survivor? There are certainly no definitive answers to these questions. I agree with many people that the term survivor is preferable to victim. Survivor implies empowerment and having overcome the stigmatization involved with being a victim.

Recently, I was in Guatemala collaborating with a group of organizations that work on firearm-related issues from a variety of standpoints. One of these groups was working directly with those individuals seriously injured by gun violence. Just before traveling to Guatemala, I had attended the Handgun Epidemic Lowering Plan (HELP) national meeting in San Francisco. At this meeting I kept hearing the word survivor being used when referring to the surviving victims of gun violence. In Guatemala, I noticed that the word sobreviviente, Spanish for survivor, was never used. Instead víctima was the common term. I began to wonder whether or not the transformation from victim to survivor was a question of opportunity or just a change in wording.

Guatemala in Context

In the aftermath of three decades of civil strife and armed conflict, Guatemalans are involved in the process of rebuilding society. As a result of the war, thousands of Guatemalans are permanently disabled in all sectors of society. Many others are physically disabled for other reasons not related directly to the armed conflict. The leading causes of physical disability in Guatemala are birth defects due to malnutrition, transit accidents, work-related accidents and gunshot wounds. Wheeled Mobility International estimates that over 55,000 physically disabled persons need to use wheel chairs in Guatemala. Of this group 20,000 are young adults and children who require a chair for active use at school, work and for social integration.

These figures made me think of my childhood friend in California who was paralyzed from the waist down from a bullet wound to the spinal cord, the years of rehabilitation and thousands upon thousands of dollars spent along the way. How could any, except for the most wealthy, Guatemalans obtain access to such care and resources? In my years of work and travel in Central America my only contact with the disabled had been in the street with the "untouchable" street beggars and shoe shine boys.

Due to poor or nonexistent medical care, rehabilitation programs, therapeutic devices, housing, education and vocational opportunities many disabled persons

live a secluded life with family members or live, beg and die in the street in Guatemala. Although many, but not all, families are loving and supportive there is little hope of a productive future and an independent life style for a disabled person. For a person in a wheel chair, the many dirt and cobblestone roads and lack of access to most public buildings make Guatemala a difficult place to be a survivor of gun violence. Interestingly, the United States embassy in Guatemala City is not wheelchair accessible.

The relationship between the use of firearms and disability is simple and very visible in Guatemala. Many of the people who don't die from gun violence become permanently disabled. I have not been able to obtain any precise figures on the numbers of Guatemalans disabled from bullet wounds. My guess is that these statistics don't exist. What I have been able to obtain are statistics on the deaths and injuries in Guatemala due to firearms for the years 1995, 1996 and 1997. It is safe to assume that the figures presented in the table below under-represent the problem, especially in rural areas.

Firearms Related	1995	1996	1997
Deaths	2,295	2,403	2,748
Injuries	2,831	3,148	3,554

Source: 1995 and 1996 Guatemalan National Police. 1997 Guatemalan National Police and National Civilian Police.

The rate of death and injury caused by gun violence is increasing despite the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996. Between January 1, 1999 and February 15, 1999 the *Instituto Guatemalteco de Seguridad Social* (IGSS) reported that 37 individuals had been admitted to the IGSS hospital with bullet wounds, 34 males and 3 females. Thirty-seven may not seem like an alarming number, but take into account that this is just one hospital in the capital city.

Unless these victims/survivors of gun violence in Guatemala come from wealthy families, the resources to treat and rehabilitate them are minimal. Most of the seriously wounded are not eligible for assistance from war victim funds established through international support mechanisms. While I am not an expert on the subject of war victim funds, I understand that to obtain access one must be an ex-combatant or civilian directly affected by violence taking place during combat or a victim of a landmine explosion. During my last visit to Guatemala, I met three people who had lost family members to gun violence over the years: a wealthy aristocrat, a middle-class son of a former mayor in the department of El Progreso and a young man from the Achí ethnic group. The first was killed for money, the second because of politics and the third because of ethnicity. None of these deaths can be directly attributed to "war" and yet these are the reasons for most violent deaths in Guatemala, not by being caught in the middle of combat or mine fields.

Despite the highly discouraging environment in Guatemala, and Central America in general, for reducing the levels of violence caused by firearms and treating the victims of violence, I did meet with an organization that demonstrated hope for the future. Through my participation in the Prep Com network for a global campaign on small arms and light weapons I came in contact with an organization named Transitions that works with disabled persons including those disabled by

gun violence. John Bell and Alex Gálvez co-direct the Transitions center in Antigua, Guatemala. Before going into the work of Transitions I will explain how it all began.

In 1993, John Bell a special education teacher from Maryland, USA with an M.A. from the American University was studying Spanish in Antigua, Guatemala. While studying he volunteered his time at a local hospital for the chronically ill and disabled called *Obras de Hermano Pedro*. Here he met for the first time a young man from Guatemala City who had been paralyzed from the waist down after being caught in the crossfire of a street fight, Alex Gálvez. Alex was suffering from many of the complications that paraplegics go through: pressure ulcers (bed sores) from immobility, urinary infections and extreme depression. After several months of friendship with Alex, John began to notice that Alex's pressure ulcers were getting worse. This type of ulcer can develop to the point where the entire immune system is poisoned. Alex needed an operation or he was going to die.

Luckily, John managed to get Alex to the United States and succeeded in getting a doctor to donate the surgery. Alex was fortunate to then spend the next year and half in the United States in rehabilitation. After his successful rehabilitation and incorporation into a wheelchair, Alex, along with John realized that most Guatemalans in similar situations would never have the opportunity to go to the US for treatment. With this in mind, both men returned to Antigua to start Transitions, a Guatemalan disabilities association.

Community-based approach

Transitions is in fact two different entities: an Independent Living Center and the *Asociación Transiciones de la Antigua Guatemala*. The Independent Living Center (ILC) was established immediately upon John and Alex's return to Guatemala. The *Asociación* is a broader ongoing project that only obtained legal recognition as a civil society association in December 1998. Often the work of the *Asociación* and that of the ILC are indistinguishable, but it appears that this will change over time.

The ILC is a large, yellow, two-story house in the Calendaria neighborhood of Antigua, Guatemala that is home, school and work to twelve Guatemalan males between the ages of 15 and 30. Five of the young men were paralyzed by bullet wounds, others by car accidents or polio. The men find themselves in a variety of states both emotionally and physically. Some are empowered and independent, while others are still learning to deal with their disability or awaiting an important operation. Each bedroom is host to about two or three individuals.

One of the greatest problems for the disabled in Guatemala is the ability to continue with their education when schools are very distant and have very little wheelchair access. At the Transitions ILC, the group receives classes every morning from a retired teacher. The kitchen and a small formica black board serve as classroom. Some of the individuals who have been at the ILC for a long time and are quite empowered actually attend school in the afternoon or evening to either finish their high school diploma or take advantage of the presence of the many foreigners in Antigua to learn English. Transitions often pays for the individual's studies if he or she does not consume much of the ILC's resources in health care costs.

Aside from sharing in the daily chores of cooking, washing dishes, laundry and cleaning the ILC has two fledgling micro-enterprise projects intended to create a level of self sufficiency. The first is a wheel chair repair shop fully equipped with donated tools. The hope is that this will evolve into a full-blown wheel chair production facility located in another part of town. Transitions often finds old used wheel chairs and reconditions or modifies them so that small children paralyzed by spina-bifida can be mobile.

The second micro-enterprise project is a desktop publishing and printing business. John Bell brought several Macintosh computers to Guatemala and Alex has become the aspiring graphic artist. The idea here is to obtain contracts with embassies, development agencies and visiting medical brigades to produce informational materials. The costs recovered will contribute to the ILC and the computer training of those living there. One of the many obstacles for disabled people around the world is employment opportunities. The desktop publishing enterprise is hoped to be a launching pad to professional computer careers for many of the ILC's inhabitants.

Besides wheel chair maintenance and computer skills, the young men in the ILC learn preventative health care and hygiene as well as skills for social development. ILC veterans are encouraged to be peer counselors to newcomers. During my visit to the ILC, I observed individuals who had made the transformation from victim to survivor and others who had not. Regardless of their physical or mental state, when the Transitions gang hits the cobble stone streets of Antigua in their wheel chairs, heading for a game of wheel chair basketball or to the park, they carry their heads high and enjoy the respect of the community.

Transitions' motto is "One person, one need at a time". Not only do they individualize treatment and rehabilitation through the Independent Living Center, but they also do the same through extension work in the greater Guatemala City region. John Bell is the case manager for an additional 30 paraplegics mostly in Guatemala City. Twenty-five percent of these individuals were disabled by bullet wounds to the spinal cord. Alex and some of the other more mature survivors living at the ILC help with extension work, but can't mobilize themselves without John until they obtain hand controls for the Transitions van. This extension work and the other broader activities of Transitions fall under the coordination of *Asociación* of which Alex is president and another young man paralyzed by gun violence, José David Lara, is secretary. The board of directors of the *Asociación* consists of three men and four women, including Alex and José David. One of the *Asociación's* greatest achievements has been convincing the municipal government of Antigua to build dozens of sidewalk ramps for wheelchair access in the city. While no women reside in the ILC, they are beneficiaries of the outreach work and participate actively in the *Asociación*. When and if Transitions can afford to do so they would like to establish a separate ILC to meet the needs of young women and girls.

Not only does Transitions help the persons in its outreach program and at the ILC, but they also give back to the community. Recently they have been involved in providing medical support and wheelchairs to young children struck by spina-bifida, (a paralyzing birth defect affecting many Guatemalan children due to the malnutrition of the mother at the time of conception).

Supporting this US \$3,000 per month venture of outreach and the ILC is a constant battle. The income generating projects are in their infancy, so Transitions depends on many individual supporters from the United States and Canada along with ad hoc support from Rotary Clubs in the US, Franciscan Charities and other foundations. On the corporate side, British Petroleum helped with some start up funds for the desktop publishing business and United Airlines has donated airfares on several occasions.

Another way Transitions obtains resources is by assisting visiting medical brigades with logistics and translation in exchange for cash and medical supply donations. Many visiting doctors donate their services to Transitions' outreach program, but of course this is only temporary. Unfortunately, the organization has not been able to obtain much financial support from within Guatemala. The truly grassroots, need-based nature of Transitions' work creates a hand to mouth situation. When I was there in the middle of February 1999, John and Alex had just raised the funds to cover January's expenses for outreach and the ILC.

Despite the problems involved with keeping afloat economically, Transitions continues expanding its work in small increments. As with many organizations, good work is rewarded with more work. In the near future, given adequate funding, Transitions plans to:

- Expand its outreach to 10-15 more individuals. This will be made possible by the training of Alex and other members of the Asociación to be mobile case managers in the field. Once hand controls are installed in Transitions van, this will be feasible.
- Transform the wheelchair workshop into a wheelchair production facility used for the vocational training of disabled persons and as a source of income generation.
- Develop true production capacity from the desktop publishing venture. This venture is also a source of vocational training and income generation.
- Help other groups start much needed ILC's in other parts of Guatemala through workshops and information sharing. Transitions can only attend to so many needs. Other organizations must step forward.
- Participate in the emerging national campaign against firearm violence.

The Faces of Transitions

Alex Gálvez, co-director of the ILC and President of the Asociación de Transiciones de la Antigua Guatemala repairing a wheelchair in the workshop.

Alexander Gálvez, 26, is the co-director of the Transitions ILC and the president of the Asociación. He was left paralyzed by a stray bullet during a street fight in Guatemala City in 1993. Besides helping oversee the overall work of Transitions, he is a painter and in charge of the desktop publishing venture. Soon Alex will conclude his high school studies. He has received training on wheelchair production and repair at San Francisco State University in San Francisco, California.

José David Lara, Secretary of the Asociación.

José David Lara, 24, was paralyzed in 1989 by stray gunfire that was destined for his best friend who died in that incident. José David is the secretary of the Asociación and involved in coordinating the cooperation between Transitions and the visiting medical brigades. He is undertaking English studies and will soon receive training on wheelchair design at San Francisco State University so that he may assume a leadership role in the wheelchair production facility.

Julio Cesar Ramirez, awaiting surgery.

Julio Cesar Ramirez, 17, was paralyzed a year and a half ago by a gunshot wound he received while working as a truck driver's assistant in the northern Guatemala department of Petén. Petén is famous for its Mayan ruins at Tikal. As of late February, Julio Cesar was awaiting surgery for pressure ulcers and was still in the beginning of his rehabilitation process physically and mentally.

Transitions and the National Campaign against Firearm Violence

Recently, through its participation in the Prep Com network for a global campaign on small arms, Transitions became involved in a proposal for a Guatemalan campaign against firearm violence along with the Institute of Education for Sustainable Development (IEPADES), Acción Ciudadana, Luciérnaga and the national political cartoonist José Manuel Chacón. This campaign could include activities such as:

- Public information campaign on firearm risks and safety as well as the impact firearms are having on Guatemala in human and economic terms
- Concert for youth against violence
- Lobbying for civil society participation in the reforms to the laws on arms and munitions sitting before the Guatemalan legislature
- A firearm registration campaign combined with a voluntary weapons collection pilot project where firearms are exchanged for a combination of individual material and community development incentives and the destroyed publicly
- Increased assistance for the victims and survivors of gun violence

If the necessary financial support is obtained to implement this campaign Transitions could play a major role in the public information campaign by providing testimony in elementary schools, on television and through short spots at movie theatres. The campaign could also provide resources to expand Transitions' outreach to the victims of gun violence and thus draw increased attention to the resulting public health problem. Transitions' has also offered its desktop publishing services to produce campaign materials such as brochures and

posters. This way Transitions could generate additional resources for the ILC and also provide very practical training for the group.

The International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) owes a great deal of success to the testimony provided by landmine survivors. While de-mining continues in Guatemala, the firearm violence problem is much greater. The participation and testimony of the gun violence survivors at Transitions could prove to be very important.

Firearm Violence Survivors and the International Action Network on Small Arms

I just mentioned that the participation of landmine survivors was critical to the success of the international ban on landmines. I believe the will hold true for the emerging International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) to be launched in May 1999 at the Hague Appeal for Peace in the Netherlands. IANSA does not yet have a catchy campaign theme such as "ban landmines". However, it does link groups from the fields of arms control, peace-building, development, humanitarian relief, international humanitarian law, the environment and others under the assumption that the excessive proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons halts social, economic and political development on a global scale.

While the diversity of this coalition is welcomed the task of coordinating a global plan of action will be quite difficult. Given this situation, it would be logical for IANSA to begin with a substantial focus on the survivors of gun violence whether they come from post-conflict societies or not for three key reasons. First of all, this focus contributes to the humanization of the global problem of violence carried out with firearms. Second, survivor/victim assistance is something that can be carried out at the grassroots level and has demonstrated to be effective in many cases. Third, just about everyone, including the arms and munitions producers and pro-gun lobbies, would support treating the victims of gun violence. Why not begin where consensus is greatest even among potential adversaries?

Victim/survivor assistance is already taking place all over the world, but there just isn't enough of it, especially in the developing world. Within the Prep Com network, one of the several precursor movements that developed into IANSA, there are several victim/survivor assistance organizations in addition to Transitions: The Trauma Foundation of San Francisco-California, People with Disabilities Uganda, Instituto para la Persona Discapacitada-Peru, Associacio do Jovem Aprendiz-Brazil, The Center for Self-Reliance-Bosnia and others that I have surely forgotten. Many of these organizations only attend to small geographic areas within their countries. Transitions interfaces directly with fifty or so individuals of which only a percentage are survivors of firearm violence. In order to give the growing number of victims of gun violence a chance to succeed in society this the type of work carried by Transitions must be broadened to reach more people and this means more financial resources must be allocated.

Treating and rehabilitating the survivors of gun violence is not a political issue it is a moral obligation, especially when they are innocent women and children. Yes, it is dealing with the symptoms of the injustice that causes violence, but if we provide the opportunity for victims to transform into survivors and contribute

to society then we are beginning to get at the root causes that cause war and social violence.

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