

GUATEMALA - 2025

GUATEMALA – ESTUDIA CON AMOR

Estudia Con Amor started as a girls' scholarship program in Guatemala, initiated and run by Compassion Beyond Borders (CBB). In 2016 we began a symbiotic relationship, with CBB raising funds and Global Pearls handling the oversight of the program. At that time, CBB was sponsoring the education of 35 girls in Guatemala. With the addition of funds from Global Pearls, we now support 159 students, and we've grown in scope as well. Although CBB no longer exists, Global Pearls continues to support this worthy program.

SANDRA – OUR HERO



The starting point for any of our projects is a local hero, whom we call a changemaker, and in Guatemala that is Sandra Alonzo Pac. Sandra had a difficult childhood. Her father worked 12-14 hours a day but earned very little laboring in fields owned by others. They lived in the hills without electricity or running water and the closest public water was far away. Sandra and her 7 siblings left home at 3:00am each morning to collect water, returning by 7:00am to prep for school. She didn't own a pair of shoes and the road was hard on her bare feet so they often bled. School only lasted until lunch (typically a tortilla or a potato) and then she worked the rest of the day doing household chores and fieldwork. The days were difficult for such a small child.

At the age of 9, after completing 3rd grade, she was forced to drop out of school and work full-time caring for another family's children and providing labor for their donut business. The woman in this family beat Sandra and was verbally abusive, but this was not new for Sandra since her father, too, was an abusive alcoholic. Despite having to formally end school, she didn't stop dreaming of getting an education. She worked 5 days per week and used some of her earnings to buy books so she could study as much as possible on weekends.

Eventually she married Carlos, also a victim of severe childhood abuse. It was so bad, in fact, that he ran away from home at the age of 6 and survived on the dangerous streets of Xela through the rest of his childhood. They have four children – two girls and two boys – and when her daughters were selected to receive CBB scholarships, Sandra's life changed in so many ways. She was thrilled that her daughters would have educational opportunities that she was denied, but there was more...

When Lawrence, the founder and director of CBB, found out his original partner in Guatemala was stealing funds, he decided to put Sandra in charge of the program. What a fabulous decision that was! Sandra says it was Lawrence who taught her how important love is in the life of every human being. "He taught me that my virtues were precious and that I could help and fight for the boys and girls who would come into my life. I remember him with a lot of love and gratitude."

Sandra says that if she had the choice, she would choose her difficult childhood again without hesitation because her struggles made her a “brave warrior woman” with a lot of love and compassion for those who are suffering. “My heart cannot ignore anyone who needs a helping hand or a hug of hope and love, because I put myself in their place and I feel satisfied when I give hope to a boy or girl and teach them that their value is infinite.” She wants them to know they are loved and are not alone – that she is there and will fight for them. She also teaches them how important it is for them, in turn, to be loving and respectful of others.

ENTER GLOBAL PEARLS

We believe that when we have really amazing partners, we should put our trust in them. We let **them** decide the best way to achieve their goals. Thus, when Global Pearls first started working with Sandra in partnership with CBB, the first thing we asked her was what do **you** want to do with the program? What do **you** want it to look like? Although all donations from former CBB donors continue to go only towards the education of girls, we added our own funds which allowed some major additions: we enrolled boys in the program (Sandra’s most urgent request), targeted more impoverished children than CBB was able to handle, started after-school tutoring, added support for secondary school or trade school, and are now working to make the program more wholistic through activities that emphasize psychological health.

“Ever since Sandra started working with Global Pearls, she has had a smile on her face.” - Carlos

On our last trip to Guatemala, Sandra’s husband asked to meet with us privately. He wanted to thank us. He said ever since Sandra started working with Global Pearls, she has had a smile on her face. She loves the freedom we have given her to meet the educational, physical, and emotional needs of the child laborers and mothers whom she loves so deeply, and that has brought joy into her life.



WHY BOYS???

When we first began working with Sandra and told her she was in charge of the program – to just let us know if there were any changes she wanted to make – she was hesitant; not sure if we really meant it. She timidly asked if she could add some boys. Adding boys was her highest priority. For those of us who have been intimately connected with CBB, this might feel surprising or even wrong, but there are several reasons for it.

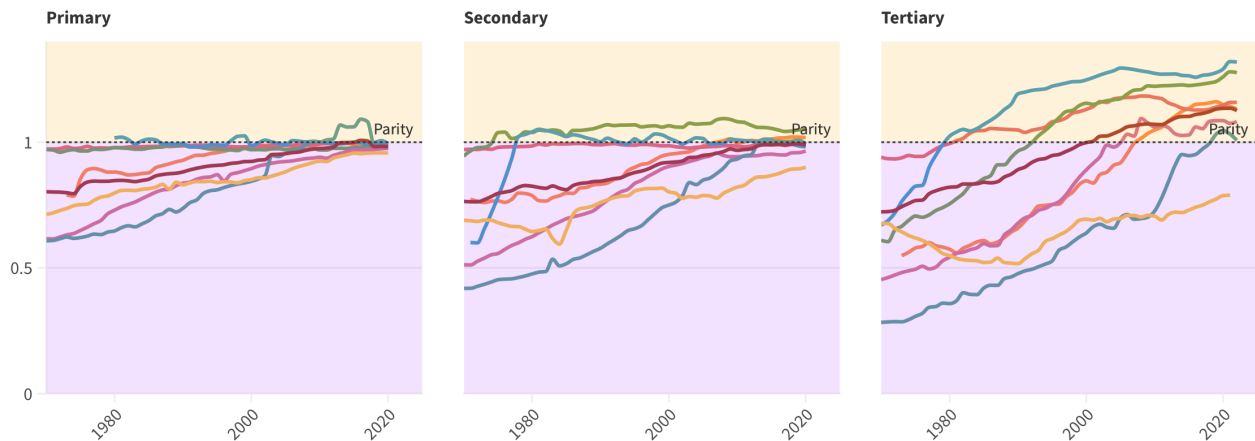
- 1) The U.N. began publishing studies in the mid-seventies claiming that educating a girl was one of the most effective ways to help an entire community. Soon, governments and humanitarian organizations like CBB put a tremendous focus on giving girls access to education. These efforts were very successful, such that

gender-parity in education has become a reality in most countries. In fact, when it comes to tertiary education, girls exceed boys everywhere except sub-Saharan Africa.

School enrollment, primary, secondary, and tertiary (gross), gender parity index (GPI)

Orange area indicates more girls were enrolled in school; purple area indicates more boys were enrolled in school.

East Asia & Pacific Europe & Central Asia Latin America & Caribbean Middle East & North Africa North America South Asia Sub-Saharan Africa World



Source: [Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics. Retrieved from World Bank Gender Data Portal \(SE.ENR.PRIM.FM.ZS; SE.ENR.SECO.FM.ZS; SE.ENR.TERT.FM.ZS\)](#)

- 2) Among child laborers, young boys are typically able to earn more money than young girls, so parents are actually more inclined to send their daughters to school while their sons work – at least in primary school. We have boys at the primary school age, for example, working 12-hour days carrying loads of bricks for about \$9 per day – an income no girl can match. Thus, impoverished young boys also need help accessing an education. (When a girl reaches puberty this dynamic often changes as girls are married off.)
- 3) The more economically impoverished a community is, the more dependent individuals are on family and community for survival. Restricting help to girls makes sense when boys are able to attend school and girls are not, but when poverty keeps both boys and girls out of school, targeting help just to the girl can create jealousy and pain within a family and among neighbors. Our good intentions might do more damage than good – disrupting family and community relationships. For this reason, even a girl we sponsor in Kenya, from a tribe where abuses against girls like FGM and forced child marriage are prevalent, wants to study psychology to help... the boy-child!!! “So much attention has been diverted to the girl-child,” she says, “It has reached a point where the boy-child is prone to more danger.” At Global Pearls, we believe it is important to consider family and community dynamics as we work to improve lives with our programs.

We now have 159 students – 96 girls and 63 boys.

Meet CJ (name changed for privacy)

CJ is about 12 years old but has never been to school. He worked as a child laborer in a metal shop, and his bosses were physically abusive. One day one of his bosses attempted to rape him and he told his father. His dad died a few days later, and CJ convinced himself it was his fault – that sharing his ordeal caused his father unbearable stress. CJ was full of despair, but when CJ’s sister was added to the Estudia Con Amor program, he finally felt a glimmer of hope and asked if he, too, could join. He is starting first grade this year, and he is thrilled!

CHILD LABORERS

Child laborers cannot attend school even when they are given a scholarship. Their poverty is so great, taking time away from work to attend school can threaten their survival. As a result, CBB was not able to help the poorest children in the community – only those who had a parent with enough work to support the child.



Working with child laborers was important to Sandra because she and her husband were child laborers themselves, so that was another change she wanted to make. It is extremely difficult to win the trust of such children because

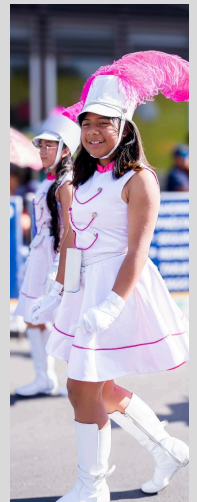
- it is illegal for children to work in the mines, so they fear attention from anyone outside their community
- street children, who typically survive shining shoes or washing cars with a bucket, fear they will be taken to orphanages which are notorious for physical and sexual abuse by older kids.

Sandra and Carlos are the perfect people to win the trust of these children because they've lived similar lives and know how to connect.

Winning trust was the first step, but how do families survive without the full-time workhours of the children? For that, we started giving monthly food baskets to the families of our child laborers filled with some basic staples – rice, beans, oil, pasta, oatmeal, and, when we can afford it, vegetables and eggs. It is just enough to offset their lost income, giving them the ability to take advantage of an educational scholarship.

Meet SA (name changed for privacy)

SA (now 6th grade) and her sister (4th grade) survive with their mother on the streets of Xela by washing cars. They carry a bucket of water and sponge and try to find someone willing to pay them a little to wash their cars. (We have several car-washing families in the program, and they are the most economically insecure of all our families). They ended up in this predicament because the father was extremely abusive. When he started sexually abusing SA at just 7 years old, the mother fled with her daughters to protect them. But without an education, no resources, and no family she could turn to, car-washing was her only opportunity. The Estudia Con Amor program has been a godsend to this family, and SA was able to go back to school in the 3rd grade because of our sponsorship. The girls don't take the opportunity for granted. Last year, both SA and her sister had the highest grades in their respective classes, and, as a result, they were given the honor of leading their classes in the Independence Day Parade.



AFTER-SCHOOL TUTORING

Scholarships are a big help, but our students often struggle to understand their lessons, and with illiterate mothers they have no one to turn to for help. Many of our children struggled to pass from one grade to the next and often dropped out of school from discouragement. Now about 40% of our children are taking advantage of our after-school tutoring, and their school progress has greatly improved (the others either live too far away or must work). Not only are these sessions important for their academic performance, but it also gives Sandra and her team opportunities to regularly extend love and encouragement to the kids.

TRADE SCHOOL



CBB scholarships always ended with primary school due to funding limitations. But now we let children continue to secondary school or trade school (their choice). Although some children choose to end their schooling after primary school and work full-time to support their families, many have chosen to continue their educations. We started offering trade school in 2025, and it is proving to be quite popular because it quickly has a big impact on their earning potential. Each child can choose a trade that interests him/her, and we now have students studying to be chefs, seamstresses, beauticians, barbers, mechanics... Sandra says our trade school children have grown tremendously in confidence, are dreaming big dreams, and are full of joy.

Meet L (name changed for privacy)

The stories of our children always start with a mother... L's mother was sold at age 13 for about \$100-worth of potatoes. She was sold as a household servant, but it was also understood that her "owner" would use her in other ways. She was abused both physically and sexually, and soon she was pregnant with L. When L was born, the mother escaped to another village where she worked at anything she could find – cleaning houses, collecting wood from the mountains, preparing agricultural fields and harvesting corn... She was determined that L would attend school, and she even learned to read alongside her daughter!



They currently live with others in a tiny house in a very rough neighborhood, and the mother's earnings average only 9 Quetzales per day – a little more than a dollar. The higher cost of education after primary school proved prohibitive with her low income, but that's when they met Sandra. L was soon added to our trade school program. L is excited about becoming a seamstress, so she gets up very early to walk 1 ½ hours each way to and from trade school. She carries her uniform and shoes to school because the roads are very dusty and she wants to look clean and respectful at school. L dreams of starting her own business after technical school and employing her mother so they can finally have stable work. She is incredibly dedicated to achieving her goals, and we are delighted to help her realize her dream!

MENTAL & EMOTIONAL HEALTH

Our goal with the Estudia Con Amor program is to help child laborers escape a life of suffering. Education is an important tool to achieve that goal, but it isn't enough. Almost all our children have faced severe and prolonged trauma. Food insecurity is common - some of our children hadn't eaten in four days when they came to us. More than half have experienced sexual abuse, including a girl who was gang raped and left for dead at the age of five! They are routinely mistreated simply for being poor or indigenous.





Overcoming trauma and severe poverty requires a certain amount of confidence and mental/emotional health, and this is necessary if we want their education to really have a positive impact in their lives. Time and again we have witnessed the power that joy has to foster healing and change a life. Laughter, love, and hope all grow from joyful experiences. We are therefore putting a greater emphasis on bringing joy and healing into the lives of the children. Pinata parties, trips to the zoo or movies, ice cream, and other activities have been added as a regular part of our program.

We even experimented this year by taking eight middle school kids in our “former street child” group on a three-day trip to Antigua, the most beautiful city in Guatemala. The three days were filled with fun activities: a hike up a volcano to roast marshmallows over a volcanic vent, a visit to an old hotel/museum, a chance to explore key sites like Central Park, the famous yellow arch... And, of course, there was more food than they had ever dreamed of – fried chicken, pizza, and more fried chicken. For breakfast there were eggs, chorizo, tortillas, and oatmeal. They couldn’t stop talking about how good the food was! There were also a lot of group discussion sessions – about hygiene, and emotions, and their dreams for the future. We wanted the kids to get out of their daily survival mode to really think about what they wanted in the future and how to achieve those dreams.

“It’s a love I’ve never experienced before.”



We were encouraged by the comments we heard:

- Two boys, practically in tears, said, “I’ve never seen a place so beautiful in my life.”
- A girl said, “It was like living in a fairy tale dream.”
- One boy said knowing that we love him makes him not give up, even though working shining shoes and in the field has not been easy, he does not give up because we are his example.
- A girl said, “I’ve never been treated the way this organization treats me. It’s a love I’ve never experienced before.”

Not only are love and laughter healing forces in the lives of these children, the bonding and sense of community that develop from these activities are equally powerful. Children who work in the mines laugh with shoe shiners; children who sell gum on the streets sit with car washers. While educational scholarships are what brought these kids together, it is experiencing joy side-by-side that keeps them bonded as an Estudia con Amor family.

“With all the poverty, the instinct to meet material needs is strong. But sometimes, as humans, we need beauty, something that touches the heart and soul, even more. I am glad you all consider joy an important element of your program.” - A donor.

Front – Taking a break from field work for after-school tutoring
Back – Heading home after their first excursion to a movie theater

