

'For whom are we doing this job?'

Young Salesian missionaries from Bellflower venture beyond their comfort zone to help poor youth in Latin America.

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STAFF WRITER

Miriam Hernandez and Giovanni Garcia were raised by Spanish-speaking parents in working-class Los Angeles neighborhoods, where wealth is hardly the norm, yet most basic needs are covered. It was not until they left California that a different reality struck them.

Both had become involved at an early age in St. Dominic Savio Church's youth ministry, became youth leaders and, after graduating from high school, became lay missionaries — in Latin America.

Garcia spent nine months (August 2008-March 2009) in Guayaquil, Ecuador, at a home/educational center for homeless boys living on the streets; Miriam currently works at an educational project for low-income kids in Tijuana. Both projects are operated by the Salesians of Don Bosco.

Both Garcia and Hernandez are a result of the Salesians' outreach in Bellflower and surrounding communities, with an emphasis on youth ministry. Since 2001, the ministry's director has been Juan Carlos Montenegro, a native Ecuadorean who has a different approach toward catechizing youth.

"Catechism is not only the job of the catechism teacher, but of the community as a whole, by doing simple things such as acknowledging the youth's existence with a greeting when attending Mass, or by attending their functions," he states in his new book, "Intencionalmente Catequista" (Intentionally Catechist). "It's not about being kind just to be kind, but to love God through young people and to show it by the way we treat them."

Montenegro suggests that, rather than label the activities in which youth are often required to participate for confirmation or first Communion as "service hours," they should be called 'apostleship'. "In that way we get rid of their feeling of 'having to do it' in order to 'graduate.'"

Such an approach to catechism, he believes, could lead to the formation of missionaries, including visiting the sick, the elderly, holding multicultural encounters, serving food to the needy and promoting short mission trips — all of which are done at St. Dominic Savio.

"We should show a real intention, a real disposition to help the younger generations find Christ," writes Montenegro. "If we accomplish this, we would not only be shaping honest citizens and good Christians, but disciples and missionaries."

"There will be times when we feel like 'throwing in the towel,' but in the end we have to ask ourselves, 'For whom are we doing this job?'"

'I saw things I never saw before'

For both Garcia and Hernandez, their initial culture shock gave way to an experience that opened their eyes and hearts.

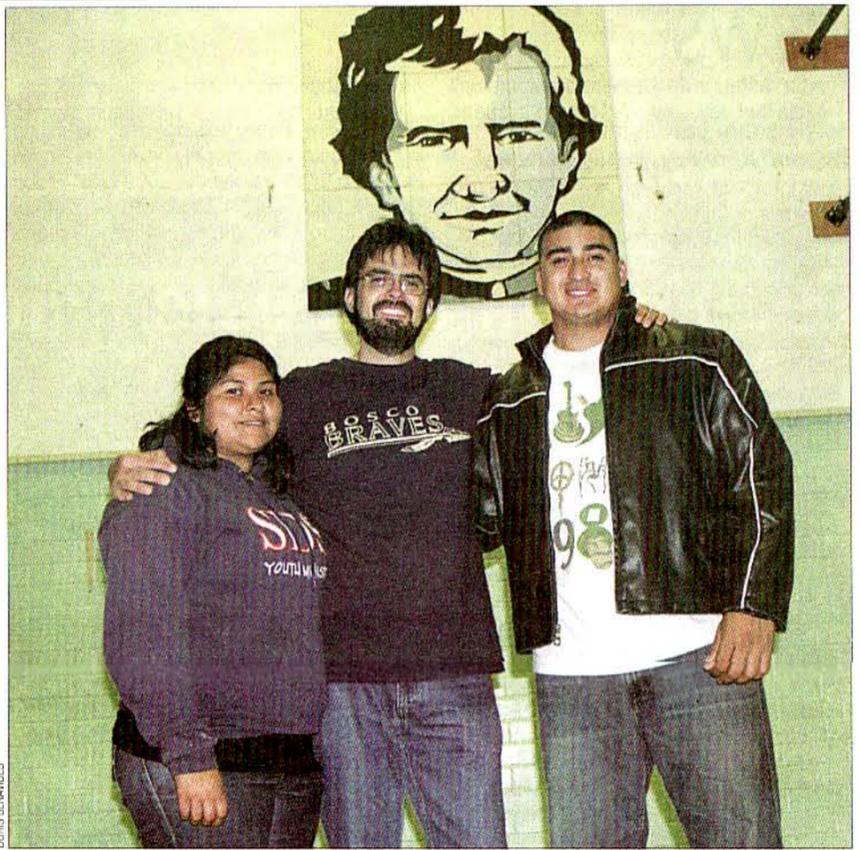
"Over there you learn what poverty is," 20-year-old Garcia told The Tidings of his ministry in Guayaquil, where he visited neighborhoods several days a week to try and persuade boys on the streets to seek education and a better life. "People who struggle here are really OK. People's garbage here could be someone's treasure there."

It wasn't just the poverty and starvation. Many of the children Garcia saw were physically and sexually abused by relatives or older men. As an escape from reality, many boys inhaled toxic glue, because they had no money to buy drugs. As a result, their lungs were packed with glue, which made it hard to breathe.

"I saw things I never saw before," Garcia noted sadly, adding that he saw the death of three boys during his stay. "One of my kids died in my arms."

But boys are boys, and the soccer ball Garcia carried with him was a perfect ice-breaker when he went out on the streets of Guayaquil in search of the boys. Some would agree to stay at the Salesians' Chicos de la Calle (Street Boys) residence, but others, who had no use for following rules, left.

Giovanni Garcia plays with children he assisted at a Salesian-run educational center for street boys in Guayaquil, Ecuador.



Juan Carlos Montenegro (center) is a mentor and a good friend for Miriam Hernandez (left) Giovanni Garcia and many other youth at St. Dominic Savio, Bellflower.

Garcia, and missionaries from other countries, struggled to understand why. They knew the kids' hours were numbered if they tried to survive living on the streets.

At one point, prior to returning to the U.S. for a short break, Garcia asked the kids what kind of presents they wanted him to bring back. "I thought they were going to ask for an Xbox or a play station, but instead they wanted socks, shoes and shoelaces. I was shocked!"

Garcia had prepared at St. Dominic Savio for his Ecuadoran work, taking shorter "mission trips" to New York and Miami where he worked with the Cuban immigrant community. But he had never seen such poverty so close-up.

"I cried a lot," he admitted. "And it was hard to answer some of the boys' questions, such as 'Where was God when my dad raped me?' All I could say was 'I'm sorry' and tried to portray God with my attitude and actions."

Garcia's own background helped prepare him, somewhat at least, for the kids in Guayaquil. His biological mother suffers from schizophrenia and is currently residing in an institution for the mentally disabled. When Garcia was 12, his father married a devout Catholic who raised him, and she has been a positive influence in the young man's life.

In fact, when Garcia became more rebellious and began hanging out with "the wrong crowd," his stepmother dropped him at Savio's Youth Center. There Garcia said he found friends to whom he could relate. Montenegro became his mentor and friend.

"We have a great relationship," Garcia smiled. "I met his family in Ecuador. They're the type of people that never give up on you."

At Savio, Garcia discovered and developed his leadership skills, which his step-

mother, Margarita Camarena, had already noticed. "He just needed a lot of love to help him build his self-esteem," she told The Tidings. "He suffered a lot in his early years, but he gained emotional maturity with his experience in Ecuador and with Juan Carlos' friendship and guidance."

"Now I'm more appreciative of everything I have," said Garcia, who returned with a compelling need to pursue a career as a firefighter. He is now working as an auxiliary firefighter and taking classes at Cypress College.

Reason and kindness

"Reasoning is one of the most powerful weapons available to youth ministers or catechism teachers," says Montenegro in addressing the "Salesian style" based on reason, religion and kindness. "Youth are intelligent and it is easier to help them and guide them when you explain to them the effects of perseverance, responsibility and of acting irresponsibly."

"He (Montenegro) is there for me whenever I need his advice," 19-year-old Miriam Hernandez told The Tidings in a phone conversation from her office at the Proyecto Salesiano Tijuana (Tijuana Salesian Project), where she has been on a mission since last August.

Hernandez started attending the Spanish youth group (one of seven youth groups at St. Dominic Savio) at age 11, inspired by an older sister who already attended the meetings where they learned about hot topics such as dating and marriage.

Admitting that on occasions she has made "dumb choices," she said attending the meetings and guiding others has helped her

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become more aware and discerning about what's better for her life. "You get the tools here," she asserted.

The youth group also was a safe haven during the difficult times. What she believed was her close-knit family took a hit when her father left his wife and six children behind when she was 15 years old. The separation led to a family division and financial uncertainty. "It broke my heart," she said.

Hernandez found comfort in sharing and supporting peers who were going through similar circumstances. Years later she attended a Salesian Leaders Youth Congress, where she understood even better the mission of the Salesians of educating younger generations to transform them into agents of change. Eventually, she became a youth counselor.

She spent a year at Cerritos College, but felt like something was still missing. She had also tasted the missionary life in previous short mission trips to Miami and Tijuana. Now she pictured herself being in Tijuana and asked God to "put it all together" for her.

When she arrived in Tijuana she thought she would improve her counseling skills, but instead she was asked to support the only teacher at the K-6 one-room transitional school for low-income children. She also helps with office duties at the Salesian Oratory.

The first days were shocking, she said — like the door of poverty was slammed on her face. "Rich are really rich (in Tijuana) and poor are really poor," she noted. Her cell phone did not get a signal at her workplace. The only one she could call was God.

"I learned He is everywhere: in the people

that come to the oratory, in the kids I work with, in the youth, or in the people I see on the streets," she said on a video posted on Savio's Web site.

The 6:30 a.m. group prayer and meditation at the house she shares with other 11 volunteers (Austrian, Czech and Mexican) and eight priests has helped. And having lunch with local Catholic families every day has increased her knowledge of the culture and traditions, which she'd ignored to a certain extent, although being of Mexican descent.

She has become more patient, more open-minded, more flexible. "It has been a school of life," she remarked.

When she returns home this summer, she plans to go back to school. "It's a must do," she said. She also wants to get more involved with the Salesians.

Early this month, on a one-week break to visit her family and share her experience with Savio's community, junior high students at the Spanish youth group meeting bombarded her with questions.

"Why do this?" "Do you have any regrets?" "When you end the year, are you going back to school?" "Do you get along with the other volunteers?" "Can you use your cell phone to call or text?"

Hernandez answered as best she could, and her audience appreciated her experience, even if it sounded beyond their own reach.

"It's cool, but I couldn't be away from my family that long," said Shantell Martinez, 16, and her friend Alecxia Patino, 15.

"I feel a lot of respect for what she's doing, and I kinda do like it because you learn more about God, but then you miss out a lot

of things," said freshman Nestor Calderon.

Sophomore Tony Barrientos thought it was interesting because it's about trying something new. And Maria Carrillo, 15, thought "it's great to help people" like that. But neither of them thought it was an experience for them.

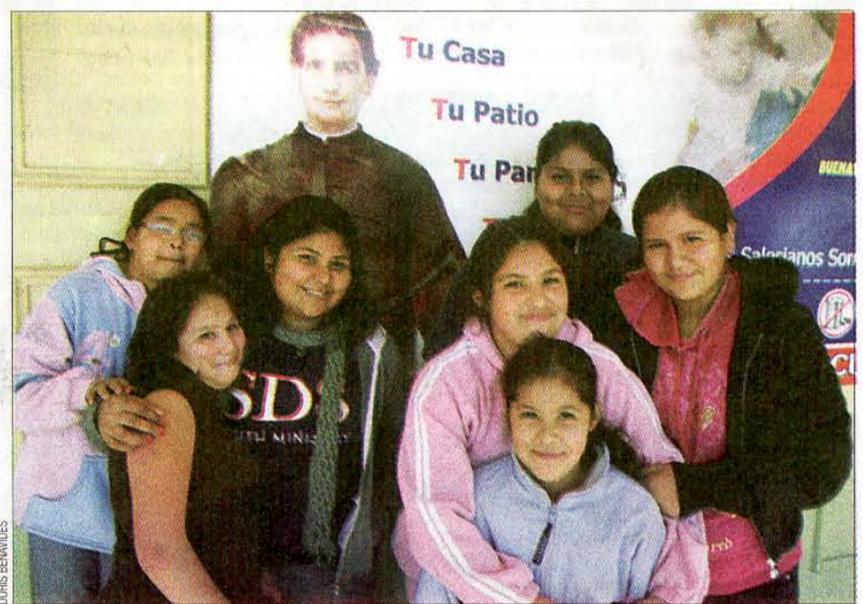
"I'm glad she's doing it," said Giovanni Garcia about her friend Miriam. "You get to do things you never imagined you could do."

"It's just about getting out of your comfort zone," said Hernandez.

"Missions motivate and challenge you to

become a different person," Montenegro told The Tidings. "Youth live situations that show a reality they are not used to deal with. It's really not a matter or a test to check what we do, but who we are — if we really are who we say we are." **SP**

For information about St. Dominic Savio's Youth Ministry, call Juan Carlos Montenegro, at (562) 920-7796, ext. 213, email youthministry@saintdominicsavio.org or visit www.saintdominicsavio.org/youth.



Miriam Hernandez with some of the kids she helps assist at the Proyecto Salesiano Tijuana.