

Nuestro Hogar in Pifo, Ecuador

by Joyce Gallardo

Inspired by the Insights of Dr. Emmi Pikler

In the brilliant morning sunshine of la sierra (the highlands), the fields and gardens along the road leading to Nuestro Hogar sparkled greenly, while the distant peaks of the Andes were royally adorned in soft purple hues. "It is a perfect morning for a walk," said Maria del Carmen Vasquez, director of Nuestro Hogar, as she greeted me warmly at the top of the road. She and the older children went for a long walk every morning at the same time, regardless of the weather, Maria del Carmen told me.



As we walked along the path to the house, I saw the three older children run to the gate to greet her. "They know of your visit and are very excited," she said as she squatted down to greet each child at his eye level, taking his hand or touching him lightly on the shoulder. She spoke softly and clearly as she told them that she had come to take them for their walk. "This is Senora Gallardo, our visitor. She has brought us bread to eat and flowers to decorate our house." The children very gently touched the roses I had brought and wanted to smell them in turn. Their eyes lit up as they smelled the fresh-baked bread. "Para el almuerzo," (for lunch) I told them. I noticed that their speech was limited and that they basically repeated key words from sentences which Maria del Car-

men spoke, e.g. pan (bread), flores (flowers). I watched as they gaily went off on their walk, stopping frequently to touch the long, waving leaves of the corn stalks growing along the edge of the garden. The children know and love this lush organic garden well, for they help the adults harvest and prepare fresh vegetables from it daily for their meals.

Eleven children live with their caretakers in the house known as Nuestro Hogar (Our Home), located 25km east of Quito, the capital city of Ecuador. Maria del Carmen, who is Ecuadorian, and her husband, Etienne, who is French, have owned this organic farm for twenty years. When the private school where Maria del Carmen had taught for many years closed its doors, she and Etienne, who was an administrator at the school, worked together to realize the dream of creating a home on the natural, healing environment of their farm for children 0-4 years who were living in situations of extreme vulnerability. With their own resources, they specially designed and built this beautiful two-story home of wood and natural materials to receive the children. Maria del Carmen worked tirelessly for two years with government agencies in Ecuador to legally create a foundation, known as AMI, Amigos de la Vida, (Friends of Life), a nonprofit organization, of which Nuestro Hogar is a part.

AMI is part of a network of diverse institutions of the Metropolitan District of Quito. Within this network they have an opportunity to demonstrate the uniqueness of Nuestro Hogar and possibly influence policies affecting the lives of young children in Ecuador. They have translated pamphlets from Loczy into Spanish and made them available to the general public. Together with the Metropolitan District of Quito, Nuestro Hogar organized an international conference in 2005 entitled Early Childhood – A Social and Political Responsibility. They are planning a second conference in 2007.

Nuestro Hogar is a way of life for Maria del Carmen and Etienne – a synthesis of years of experience working with children. "It is not a methodology nor a school of thought," they told me during a previous visit here. "We share what we are and what we have." Maria del Carmen added emphatically, "This is not a charity. We work out of a conscious respect for the dignity of humanity and we honor the life of our children. Nuestro Hogar is a demonstration that it is totally possible to treat all children, and especially these children from marginalized sectors of our society, with unconditional love, respect and dignity during this most delicate stage of childhood, birth to four."

Nuestro Hogar was inaugurated in January 2004. The caregivers had been trained for six months. The inspiration for their training came out of the work of Loczy, the residential home for children in Budapest, Hungary, founded in 1946 after World War II by pediatrician Emmi Pikler. Loczy is not only a model for the respectful care of young children in residential homes in Europe and now in South America; it is becoming a model for Waldorf early childhood educators in Europe and the U.S. for our work with children from 0-three. Many of the insights of Emmi Pikler are compatible with those of Rudolf Steiner. Maria del Carmen and Etienne have visited Loczy and have attended trainings there. Nuestro Hogar is endorsed and recognized by L'Association Internationale PIKLER (Loczy).



I was struck by the many similarities to Loczy in the physical environment of Nuestro Hogar and in the manner in which the caregivers here walk slowly and deliberately amongst the children, speaking in soft, clear, gentle voices to them and always stooping down to their level. There were low, little fences and gates separating the play areas outdoors. Sand was mounded high in the sandbox, inviting children to come dig. Two children were climbing up the jungle gym. Since the climate is temperate all year round, the children spend most of their time outdoors. In the house there were low wooden tables and stools for play and for eating. The children's little wooden beds were beautifully handcrafted, as were their neat little cubbies. The indoor play area was inviting, clean and well-ordered. Hardwood floors and wood ceiling beams shone softly in the sunlight that streamed through the windows. The delicious aroma of lunch cooking wafted through the house. It felt inviting – like a home where people lived and loved.

As I sat as unobtrusively as possible on a little stool in the corner of the room, I observed Galo, who was almost three, trying to put on his shoes. He was grunting and whining loudly in his struggle. His caregiver encouraged him in a soft voice, but did not offer her help. He managed to get one shoe on and struggled with the other, all the while receiving encouragement from his caretaker. Finally, the two shoes were on with a bit of help from the caretaker at the end and Galo ran off happily to play. Another child was struggling to put on his sock. Proudly, he showed me that he was able to do it.

Outside, two children were watching the gardener dig and rake the soil. A little bird hopped across the mat where a baby 10 months old lay on his back playing with his hands, half in the shade, half in the sun. Maria del Carmen told me this morning that this baby had been found in the trash when he was newborn. His caregiver came to announce to him that she was going to pick him up. She took him tenderly in her arms and tied a bib on him. She gave him food from a glass to drink. Some children watched from the other side of the fence. They, too, were thirsty. The nurse gave her undivided attention to the baby and spoke quietly to him as he drank. When he was finished drinking, she put him down in his crib, announcing to him first what she was going to do.

Diego had been whining and crying all morning. He didn't want the caregiver to leave his side. She told him that she had to go into the house to help another child. He continued to scream and cry, and the caregiver spoke to him in a low, calm voice, stooping down to soothe him with her words and her hands.

Another caretaker called the children inside to fetch their bibs and bring them to her to tie. When the bibs were on, each child was given freshly-made pineapple juice in a plastic pitcher to carry outside to drink. The children sat down together at a table on little stools they had carried out for themselves, and poured their own juice into plastic glasses that were already on the table. One little girl sat by herself at a small table on a wooden base with a bench. She was not yet ready to join the other children at the table, so was given her own special table. (This is also done at Loczy.) The caretaker sat nearby.

Afterwards, the children washed their hands with a washcloth in a small rubber basin. The caretaker helped them to dry their hands, giving her whole attention to each child in turn. She untied their bibs and the children brought them inside to hang on a hook where all the bibs were hung. Luis proudly collected all the glasses and pitchers, put them into a basin and carried it into the house, with the caretaker close by.

A peaceful, calm environment such as this, with predictability, consistency and continuity has not been a part of these children's young lives. When they arrived, they manifested signs of aggression, boredom, hyperactivity, lack of concentration and other mental and physical difficulties as a result of the often stressful and unprotected environment into which they had been born. This lack of protection and nourishment of their lower, physical senses of life, touch, movement and balance has profoundly affected the children. Here at Nuestro Hogar, they have come to rely on the rhythm of each day to always be the same. At Nuestro Hogar, indoors and out, in the work of the adults and in the play and movement of the children around them, there is a rhythmical, orderly hum of activity that is nourishing and healing to the damaged lower senses of these children. Etienne strongly feels that the farm work that goes on around the children is fundamental to this healing process. The children see and know that the adults care for the land, the animals and the plants with consistency, love, and devotion, and the adults also care for the children with consistency, love and devotion.

Galo goes running gleefully to his caretaker when she tells him that she is going to change his diaper. He knows that this is his own special time with his caregiver and that she will be there just for him. She tells him what she will do, step by step. He anticipates her every move and cooperates with her. Galo repeats the words, pie, pene, agua, toalla (foot, penis, water, towel)...as the caretaker tells him what part of his body she will wash. As she dries him gently with the towel, he repeats again as she tells him how she will dry him. She diapers and dresses him slowly .with a firm but delicate touch as he stands, talking softly to him all the while.

Luis came to hug the caregiver's legs when she stood up. She laughed, "Oh Luis, you are hugging my legs!" and bent down to give him a hug, He hugged her, smiling, and she told him she was going to stand up. He let go and ran off.



The verbal communication of the caregiver with the children is not only important, but essential here at Nuestro Hogar. The role of the adult is most crucial in the development of the speech in the children, as many come with neurological damage, self-destructive tendencies, and emotional and psychological problems. "The older children did not speak when they arrived," Maria del Carmen told me. "If they did say something, it was an imitation of the violence they had experienced around them. Several months passed before they made sounds, or spoke syllables or elemental phrases. "It has been a process..." She continued, "In time, with consistent demonstration of unconditional love and the building of trust in their relationships with the adults around them, the children were able

to begin to utter sounds. We tell the children what we are going to do and we do it. We do what we say. We do not employ therapy at Nuestro Hogar for speech difficulties. Through respectful caregiving and unconditional love and acceptance of the child, he develops trust and confidence in himself and in the adults around him. Speech development naturally follows." Recording of this development is meticulous. A careful record of the children's growth and development is kept. The caretakers record their daily observations of each child out of their daily experiences with them.

One of Nuestro Hogar's objectives is to first support the process of the reintegration of the families of the children who live there, rather than first seek adoptive families. They try to locate children's families and

strive to develop relationships with parents. Conversation and short visits are encouraged in the beginning of the process. Workshops for families and professionals focusing on child development from pre-natal to birth, the authentic needs of the child from birth to four, and the child with special needs are held at Nuestro Hogar. The parents may observe how their children are cared for with respect and dignity and observe the caring relationships between children and caregivers here. Later in the process, the parents' visit with their child is facilitated, with Maria del Carmen always present. It may take months before the return of the child to her family can actually take place. In some cases it may not take place at all and another solution must be sought. The way is very carefully planned with a social worker and with Child Protection Services and other institutions.

The older children returned with Maria del Carmen from their morning walk. It was lunchtime and the younger children were already seated at the table waiting. I waved good-bye, "Adios, niños. Adios." The bread I had brought had been sliced for the meal and was in the center of the table. One of the children turned toward me with a big smile on his face and pointed to the bread. "Pan!" he exclaimed, as he took a hearty bite of his slice.

The sun was high in the sky when I left. The fields and gardens along the road to Nuestro Hogar shone even more greenly and the mountain peaks were royally cloaked in deep purple. That was in early July. Now, back home in North America, I am inspired daily in my work with the young children in my care by what I saw at Nuestro Hogar...the courage, sacrifice, dedication and spirit of generosity of a true Michaelic deed.

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