



LAS LIBRES NEWSLETTER

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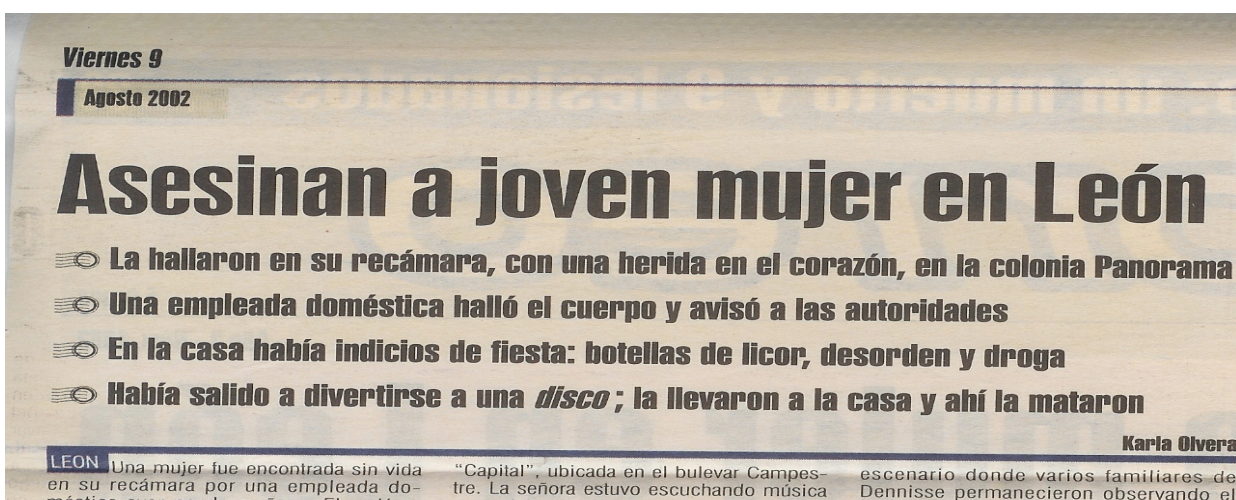
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Empowering Women to be Economically Self-Sufficient

While the door of Las Libres is always open to women in need of its services, Las Libres understands that often it is the women living in communities outside of the city, who can not easily travel to seek social, mental, and health services, who are most in need of the help of Las Libres. Every week, Las Libres travels to at least four communities to give workshops and lead discussions on various issues such as gender-based violence and violence in the home, women's human rights, reproductive and sexual health, equality, and self-esteem. Some of the women who now give these workshops are the women from the communities themselves whom Las Libres has trained. When Las Libres begins to work with a community, they often start out by introducing discussion topics alongside practical activities such as cooking classes. Workshop themes may initially be less personal to encourage women to open up and shed their insecurities, such as a talk on culture and imposed gender-roles. Gradually, the workshops become a space in which the women feel safe and free to discuss and share their personal lives and concerns with each other.

While some of the classes lead to the introduction of topics on women's rights, other classes are intended to teach the women of the communities trades that will eventually allow them to become economically self-sufficient. These classes also help to instill a feeling of pride and confidence in their work. Currently, the women in the communities of San Jose de La Luz, La Lagunilla, and Las Cruces in Salvatierra are actively involved in learning trades such as sewing and needle-work in order to make clothing to sell. Las Libres supporters in Germany, the United States, and Canada have demonstrated an interest in selling the products at a fair trade rate in their own countries to help establish a network of social trade, thereby promoting social change. Numerous women of the Las Libres' communities are also acquiring skills in cosmetology and hair styling. This training allows the women to practice the trade in their own communities or to work outside their homes in order to become economically self-sufficient. These projects have been enthusiastically embraced by the women of the communities and have been financed by INDESOL, the National Institute for Social Development.



“Young woman murdered in Leon”

February of this year brought some important advancements in women's rights in Mexico with a new federal law: *La Ley General de Acceso de Las Mujeres a una Vida Libre de Violencia*, or the Common Law Granting Women Access to a Life Free of Violence. This law strives to prevent and eradicate violence against women in Mexico. The federal law has defined three different objectives to be worked towards at the local level in order to guarantee women violence-free lives. The first is legal equality between men and women. The second is ensuring human dignity for all women. The final goal of this new law is eliminating discrimination and empowering the women of Mexico. This bill sets the standard for updating state laws on violence against women. The states were given a deadline of August 2nd, 2007 to comply with the federal mandate.

Unfortunately, the initial bill against gender violence proposed in the state of Guanajuato for *una vida libre de violencia* which was not presented until June of this year, takes a “pro-family” stance that largely overlooks the rights of women and lacks formal penalties for the perpetrators of domestic violence. This proposal focuses on keeping the family together at all costs. Women are seen as mothers and not as individuals with rights. The proposal also fails to outline the different types of violence against women, instead lumping them all into one category.

In reaction to initial proposals, Las Libres began working in collaboration with other non-governmental organizations in the state of Guanajuato, such as the NGO Victoria Diez in León, to ensure that this bill was not ratified. Through protests, press conferences, signature campaigns and meetings with government officials, the bill is now being reevaluated. The government has been forced to edit the proposed law to more accurately reflect the standards set by the federal mandate.

Las Libres and the other human rights NGOs feel it is imperative that the types of violence against women are outlined in the new bill. Six categories of violence have been proposed by the NGOs working on the reform: domestic, social, laboral, educational, institutional and homicidal. These organizations have also expressed the necessity of formal sanctions for the perpetrators of violence against women, especially in the case of domestic violence.

The state of Guanajuato is still working on updating the proposal. A new government official has been assigned this task and we are hopeful for a better outcome. Las Libres and other NGOs in Guanajuato will not stop working until the state law meticulously reflects the standards set by the federal anti gender-violence law.

Las Libres' Centro de Atención: The Las Libres Center for Direct Attention

For more than seven years, Centro Las Libres has been working to bring information on sexuality, sexual health, and sexual and reproductive rights to women and youth in diverse and marginalized areas of the state of Guanajuato. Through forums, workshops, and discussions given in local communities, schools, and in urban centers, Las Libres provides important information to the people of Guanajuato, information that is often difficult to find elsewhere. In addition to the new Las Libres office space, the founders of Las Libres and their network of professional volunteers have recently established a central and accessible location to house these types of activities. *The Centro de Atención en Violencia Sexual y Consejería en Sexualidad* (Center for Attention in Sexual Violence and Counseling in Sexuality) was initiated in July of 2007 and is funded by a US\$6,000 grant from the Angelica Fund through the Tides Foundation.



The *Centro de Atención* shares a space with the city of Guanajuato's first and only condom shop, Condón Parchis, which is in the center of downtown Guanajuato. In addition to providing informational brochures on safe sex practices and selling various methods of contraception—including emergency contraception--the store has a safe and private space in which Las Libres provides both group and individual psychological therapy for adults, youth, and children, many of whom have experienced sexual violence and abuse. Licensed, experienced psychologists and doctors lead these group therapy sessions and attend to the individual needs of the clients. In addition to serving clients of sexual abuse, the *Centro de Atención* also attends to women and girls who have been raped, some of whom have become pregnant as a result of the crime, and women and girls with unwanted pregnancies who are also seeking counseling and guidance. In a number of cases, the Center serves as a referral for further professional, medical and legal assistance, either to other Las Libres professionals or to local government social service organizations such as the DIF (*Desarrollo Integral de La Familia*, or Comprehensive Family Development). Workshops are also given for youth on sexual education at the Center, a topic that is not often covered in the home or the school system of Guanajuato. In fact, the state government of Guanajuato has recently taken actions to remove topics of sexual health from school curriculums and ban textbooks that discuss human sexuality. The Center also has an online help service where people can send in questions regarding their sexual health, relationships, sexuality, or general concerns and receive a prompt response from one of the Center's staff. Emmanuel Morales, the owner of Condón Parchis and coordinator of the *Centro de Atención*, claims that about 50 to 60 people access the online help site every week. "Most of the questions tend to be about pregnancy and birth control, as well as emergency contraception," he said. "A stigma still exists around the purchase of contraceptives such as condoms, and even though many people need them, they don't want to buy them." Occasionally, parents and teachers come to the Center or use its online services to help them approach the topics of sexuality, sexual education and health with their own children or their students.

The needs of many different people have been met in the first few months of the Center's opening and it is continuing to fill a large gap that exists in the state of Guanajuato in regards to the needs of survivors of sexual violence and youth in need of information and the protection of their sexual and reproductive rights. However, according to Emmanuel, "the Center could be doing much more with additional funds and human resources." The work of the Center and Las Libres could reach many more people with the help of additional professionals such as psychologists, doctors, and lawyers. Further donations could also help provide more informational brochures and help with the overhead costs of running the Center. The influences of both conservative politics and religion on people's abilities to exercise and express their sexual and reproductive rights in Mexico, and particularly in the state of Guanajuato, make the services offered at the Las Libres' *Centro de Atención* indispensable.

Cervantino Festival 2007



October of 2007 brought the 35th annual Cervantino Festival. This three-week celebration, which attracts performing artists from all over the world to Guanajuato's multitude of theaters, packs the streets of the city with almost 30,000 foreign and domestic tourists each year. It is an excellent opportunity to spread information on women's rights and sexual health. For the 5th consecutive year, Las Libres has participated in the festival with an information booth. Working with Emmanuel Morales from Condón Parchis and other volunteers from Las Libres' *Centro de Atención*, the booth was set up each week of the festival from Thursday through Sunday in the Truco Plaza.

The booth was equipped with brochures, posters and sexual health products from the store Condón Parchis. We passed out information on women's sexual and reproductive rights, HIV, sexual health and a variety of other topics. The Secretary of Health donated condoms for the booth. During the three weeks, over 5,000 free condoms were handed out. Also available for purchase were items like flavored condoms, lubricants, the morning-after pill and birth control pills. Emmanuel and the other volunteers working during this time were able to answer questions and clarify information for a large number of adolescents from Mexico and other parts of the world.

May Abortion Forum

Another important event organized by Las Libres in May of this year was a conference at the University of Guanajuato on the depenalization of abortion in Mexico. This three-day event, the first of its kind hosted by the University, took place in the Law School. It included lectures by Verónica Cruz Sánchez, Ángeles López from Victoria Diez (a human rights NGO in León), María Luisa Sanchez from GIRE (an abortion rights NGO in Mexico City) and several philosophy and law professors from the University of Guanajuato.



The abortion forum began the 28th of May in celebration of International Action Day for Women's Health. Las Libres and the other speakers from non-governmental organizations in Mexico began with lectures on the secular state and the sexual and reproductive rights of women in Guanajuato and Mexico City. The second day covered the significance of maternity, ethics, secularism and the Catholic Church. These topics were addressed by members of the School of Philosophy. The conference concluded with various law professors speaking on judicial perspectives on abortion, especially the ineffectiveness of criminalizing abortion as a means of controlling it.

The abortion forum at the University of Guanajuato was successful in informing the community of the situation of women and abortion in the state of Guanajuato while comparing and contrasting it to the situation in Mexico City, where abortion has recently been depenalized. It was widely attended by university students, faculty members, politicians and the general public. It is the hope of Las Libres and the other participants of the conference that Guanajuato will continue to progress in women's rights and that the forum helped to raise awareness of these issues.

The Final Push Campaign

Centro Las Libres celebrated the inauguration of its new headquarters with a ceremony on April 10th, 2007. Guests enjoyed live music and hors d'oeuvres as the new house was presented by Las Libres staff and founders. The headquarters was acquired in December 2006 and Las Libres and its committed network of volunteers and donors have been working hard to pay off the house in full. Thanks in large part to the continuous efforts of Holly Silver, the Las Libres' Fundraising and Outreach Coordinator in Portland, Oregon, Las Libres has raised a total of \$52,000 in individual donations. Generous donations towards the house were also made by The Global Fund for Women and Mr. Nion McEvoy through the Drumstick Fund of the San Francisco Foundation. Nevertheless, a balance of \$17,300 still remains on the house. In order to meet their goal of owning a safe and secure, permanent space in which to promote their mission of advancing and defending the rights of women, girls, and youth in the state of Guanajuato, Las Libres has embarked upon a "Final Push Campaign" to pay off the remaining balance of their home. The staff of Las Libres was fortunate to receive a professional training on fundraising in September from Aurora Montañó, formerly a consultant for the Mexico City-based foundation, Semillas, which has funded Las Libres activities for several years. In addition to a letter-writing campaign to solicit individual donors to help Las Libres meet its financial goal of \$17,300, Las Libres has also begun to sell beautiful greeting cards with images of Guanajuato and the women with whom they work. All proceeds of the cards will go towards the campaign. Las Libres T-shirts are also available for sale. If you would like to help support Las Libres in their "Final Push Campaign" please visit our website at <http://www.laslibres.org> and select the "Support Centro Las Libres" link. Here you will find a donation pledge form and details on how to donate. By investing in the "Final Push Campaign", you are helping to ensure that Las Libres continues to grow and service the needs of the women, girls, and youth of Guanajuato.



Las Libres Welcomes New Interns



Las Libres is also pleased to welcome two new interns to its staff, Kate Keisel-Stagnone and Leigh Tomppert. Kate is a student at Portland State University, studying international studies and public health. She has also studied in the University of Guanajuato and Cusco, Peru. Kate has worked as a volunteer at Planned Parenthood and volunteered in various Latin American countries over the past three years. Leigh has a master's degree from the University of Chicago in the social sciences and has been working and volunteering in the human rights field for five years as a researcher, writer and editor with Freedom House, the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, and Amnesty International.

Interview-Luz María Pérez Ríos, Centro Las Libres

Luz is from the community of San Jose de La Luz, Guanajuato. She began working with Centro Las Libres after a series of workshops given by Verónica Cruz Sánchez in her community.



How did you get involved with Las Libres?

Vero came to La Luz three years ago, giving a series of workshops on self-esteem and gender roles. This was the first time I had heard this type of information. It was at this time I realized I wanted to be involved in the type of work Vero was doing. I approached her after the workshop and expressed my interest in working with Centro Las Libres.

What work do you do with Las Libres?

I began working with Las Libres a year and a half ago in the community of Salvatierra giving cooking classes and assisting with workshops. In addition, I am now working in my own community of La Luz, with Vero, training the woman to make clothing and other goods to sell. The goal of this project is to empower the women of La Luz by making them economically self-sufficient.

What do you think is the most important aspect of the work that Las Libres does?

Las Libres allows the woman of rural communities, such as La Luz and Salvatierra, to realize that there are other options. Through their workshops, members of the community learn about their rights, equality and other important issues that were never talked about in school or in the home. Gaudi's work with the children of La Luz is very important. (Note: Gaudi is one of Las Libres' psychologists.) Hopefully by working with the children it will be possible to change the domestic violence patterns in the next generation.

How has your experience with Las Libres changed your personal perspective about human rights, especially pertaining to woman?

The workshops of Las Libres have allowed us, in the community of La Luz, to understand our value and worth. This also allows women to evaluate their lives and realize that if they are experiencing violence in the home that this is not normal or justified. Las Libres has shown me, and many other women, that we as women have many other options in life and that we are not limited to the stereotypical gender roles of the past.

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