

**Showing God's love;
Shelter in Peru jungle reaches out to children**

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

LAM News Service

Iquitos, Peru (LAMNS)—Billy Clark can hardly get inside the gate before he is mobbed by dozens of adolescent boys who want to shake his hand, get a pat on the back or receive a quick hug.

Billy, who is already running a little late to greet an out-of-town visitor, is further delayed as he stops and greets each boy who comes up to him, exchanging a few words or a light, friendly punch.

These boys are semi-abandoned kids, expelled from their homes each morning because their mothers cannot afford to feed them and allowed back in only as darkness falls over this steamy, isolated jungle town in the Peruvian Amazon region. Billy Clark is a missionary with the Latin America mission working with Peru's Union Biblica to provide services and the Christian Gospel to street children here and throughout the country. He lives in Lima with his family.



While a third-generation missionary in Peru where he was born and raised, Billy also counts close ties to several U.S. locations such as Pasadena, California, where he taught school and attended Lake Avenue Congregational Church, Fredricksburg, Virginia, where he and his Peruvian wife Yashmin lived and worked in New Life in Christ Church, and Houghton, New York, where he graduated from college.

“The boys live in the marginal areas, mostly with single moms,” says Javier Villacis Fajado, the director of Union Biblica's Iquitos centers. “The mothers work in the market and are poor, so they don't have any money to put them into school or to feed them. We try to supply their needs so they don't spend time on the streets.”

“They are here mostly because of abuse and poverty,” Billy explains. “There is a lot of prostitution here in Iquitos with a lot of sex tourism. Some of the kids become prostitutes themselves.”

Billy tells of one boy, Americo, who was kicked out of his home at seven years of age and wandered from town to town up and down the jungle rivers for over five years. In and out of jail, he lived on the streets and kept moving. Finally Javier invited him to a Christian camp where, at the last evening campfire, each camper was invited to take a stick from a pile of wood and throw it into the campfire as a sign of whatever burden he wanted to discard.

“Americo picked up the whole stack and, breaking down into tears, threw it into the fire,” Billy said. “A few days later, you could see the change in his face. He said that God had changed him.”

“Ever since, he has been quiet but faithful and is living in our new residence building.”

Desperate mothers are more inclined to kick boys out of the house when they can't cope or can't afford them Billy says. “Boys have a better chance of survival,” he explained.

“The mothers who put the children out are often abused women who have been treated like garbage,” Billy says. “They have nothing so they have to put their child on the street. The first to go is the oldest boy. The girls are kept until the situation worsens. Many of the girls end up in prostitution, or at best as maids.”

“You can spot a street boy a mile away,” Billy reflects. “You can see their ragged clothing at a distance, they haven't bathed in a month or two so they smell, and their teeth are bad.”

The most telling sign is “the look in their eyes. They have a complete lack of trust and self esteem.”

The boys at the Union Biblica center in Iquitos eat at least two meals a day there, receive tutoring for their school work, take baths, do chores around the center and participate in Bible studies. The rest of their time there is free, but at least they are off of the streets.



“We are all they have,” says Billy. “They often don't have a mother or father, and they have a lot of anger against the men in their life because of the abuse.”

“We try to point them to the love of Christ, but when we tell them that God loves them, we run into another problem. They have not had any love at home and they associate love with sex. It brings they horrible images.”

“We show them the love of God through the example of the staff workers,” Billy says. “It takes a long time, but we are eventually able to establish a rapport and then we are able to tell them about God's love.”

Billy says that working with about 200 children in Iquitos is slow methodical work. “We cannot use an altar call with kids who are so complex”

Union Biblica operates a number of centers for street children in Lima, Iquitos and other towns throughout Peru. While most of the operating funds come from various enterprises that the organization runs in the country, funds for capital improvements such as the construction of a new residence in Iquitos and a residential building at Puerto Alegria, a center operated up river from Iquitos in the Amazon Basin, come mostly from donors in the United States and Europe.

“We can use some short-term volunteer missionaries who speak Spanish and could come for two or three months as interpreters for work teams,” Billy says. Prospective missionaries may contact the Latin America Mission for more information.

Latin America Mission works in partnership with churches and Christian agencies throughout Latin America and supports missionaries and projects in many Latin countries as well as in Spain. LAM is seeking to place new missionaries throughout the region. The U.S. headquarters can be reached at Latin America Mission, Box 52-7900, Miami, FL 33152, by e-mail at info@lam.org, or by calling 1-800-275-8410. The mission’s web site may be found at <http://www.lam.org>. LAM’s Canadian office is at 3075 Ridgeway Drive, Unit 14, Mississauga, ON L5L 5M6.

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