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SUCCESS STORY

Tania Begins Her Life Anew

"I have fallen down and have been crushed, but I have overcome. It is not easy to start from nothing but I have a great desire to become a better person."
Tania, Child Ex-combatant

Photo: Karen Mora

Tania at Work

Tania, (not her real name) is 18 years old. At 13, she left home to join an illegal armed group, hoping to escape her abusive stepfather. But safety and a better life with the group proved to be only an illusion. Today, two years after she fled the group, she is full of joy and optimism. She now is committed to "becoming a better person."

With the illegal group, Tania was forced to become a bearer, carrying very heavy loads for long days and nights. She never had a permanent place to live, and ate only when and what she could. She considered trying to escape, but lost hope, believing that she would spend the rest of her life as a bearer.

Ironically, Tania's deliverance came when she was shot in a battle. After her wounding, she was hospitalized. Then only 16, and deeply frightened, she sought help from a nurse, who contacted her family.

Since membership in the group offered her no real freedom or opportunity, Tania decided to risk returning home. At first, the reunion with her family brought mostly recriminations and blame, not joy and welcome.

Soon after her homecoming, the family sought help from the Colombian Human Rights Ombudsman's Office. This agency helped Tania join the Assistance Program for Child Ex-combatants of the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (ICBF in Spanish), funded (in part) with support from USAID/Colombia. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) provides technical assistance to the program.

It has been very difficult for Tania to overcome her terrible experiences. Psychologically, she is still affected by painful memories and terrors; physically, she still suffers lingering pain from her bullet wound. However, Tania is catching up academically with her peers and is in the 10th grade. She works full-time and receives vocational training at night.

Tania's days are long and challenging. Up at 5:30 A.M., she breakfasts and sets off to work. Back home by 5:30 in the afternoon, she takes a break and does her homework. School starts at 6:30 P.M., and lasts until 10:00 P.M. Tania sums up her feelings: "I have fallen down and have been crushed, but I have overcome. It is not easy to start from nothing but I have a great desire to become a better person."

At 18, Tania transferred to a Reintegration Program run by the Ministry of the Interior and Justice. She will continue in the program until 2007. After she graduates from high school, her goal is to study for a career that will allow her to help children and youngsters who experience hardships similar to her own. She is confident that only through such hard work, honesty, and respect for others will people accept these youngsters back into society. She is living proof of it.

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