Interview with REINHART KOEHLER

CHANGES IN Latin America & NPH

60 YEARS NPH International
Reinhart Koehler joined NPH Mexico in August of 1982 as a volunteer for one year. Reinhart, a trained teacher with additional university studies in pedagogy and leadership says that: “With all the time I spent in classrooms, my true teachers were Father Wasson and the children and youth of NPH. Not one day is like the other when serving the children and they always test my assumptions, challenging me to look at my approaches to problem solving in new ways and trying to find solutions outside the box.”

Reinhart believes that it is difficult even with all the media options we have today to describe what NPH is. He suggests that to fully understand the miracle that has taken place for 60 years, the true family bond that is formed day by day among all, can only be done by spending time with our children at any of our homes.

The following interview describes the major changes Reinhart has observed over the past 30 years and the challenges those changes have brought to the mission of NPH.
The Convention on the Rights of the Child pronounced in November of 1989: Of all the things that happened, this has had the most positive impact on our work. While there certainly is much to be done and still many children throughout the world do not enjoy some or all of their basic rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its promulgation is the single most important event in creating a world in which a profound cultural change took place to ensure societies truly respect and protect children.

Deinstitutionalization policies under the leadership of a large international organization: As positive as the Convention on the Rights of the Child is, this is the one aspect that has created challenges for the work of NPH. The premise of deinstitutionalization policies is that children are always better off with their family of origin than in an institution. While this is often the case, there are also many other situations where a home like NPH is the better alternative to the family of origin. The other alternative is substitute families or foster homes. What all models of alternative care have in common is that a model in and of itself does not guarantee quality care. There are wonderful foster families and there are bad foster families, and there are terrible institutions and there are organizations like NPH who create a true family environment for children, and especially offer a better alternative to large groups of siblings. The deinstitutionalization policies and those who advocate them do not distinguish between the excellent work organizations like NPH does, but simply want to do away with the model of children’s homes or villages. This is unfortunate, as the NPH children’s villages provide children with physical and emotional safety that allows the children to bond and develop a sense of belonging.

One aspect that I found lacking in the discussion of deinstitutionalization is the importance of keeping siblings together. Families in Latin America often count five, six or more children to a family. To find one adoptive family for all siblings is often impossible. Even foster families find themselves limited
to receiving a family group of five children or more. At NPH all brothers and sisters younger than sixteen years are asked to join the home, while older siblings are still given the option to join NPH if they wish to do so. To maintain family unity among siblings should be an overriding aspect when we make decisions regarding alternative care for children.

In many countries where we work, the daily crime and violence continuously threatens the wellbeing of children. At NPH, we give children back their childhood, to feel safe and engage in carefree play anytime of the day, anywhere in our home. This is absolutely essential to the children’s healthy development. In contrast to many institutions, NPH also cares for the children beyond the age of eighteen, doing what a true family does: helping them to develop their full potential, including professional or university education independent from their age. One of the negative results of the deinstitutionalization policies is that in some of the countries where NPH works, children are forced to live with relatives they hardly know, who either don’t care about the children, or neglect and abuse them.

At the core of this problem is that the policies have become dogmatic issues rather than taking a differentiated view that allows all models to function under a set of criteria and guidelines. The argument that research shows that children in institutional care lose four months of development for each year they live in an institution and that they are at higher risk of abuse may be true for many institutions, but certainly not for homes like NPH. We receive children who have been abused prior to joining our family. We see tremendous developmental delays in the children when they arrive, and we often diagnose serious health issues that have gone unattended. Within a relatively short time, most of the children catch up in their development after joining the NPH family, achieve good health, and feel safe and secure growing up. Just as there is research that claims the negative impact of institutional care (as early as Spitz), there is also research that documents the good work organizations do that fulfill criteria of excellent holistic care. The complete and loving care provided at our NPH homes ensures that children can grow up enjoying all of their rights.
**Violence and organized crime:** In most countries in which we work, we have seen an enormous increase in violence and crime. Gangs, drug cartels or simply organized groups dedicated to crime such as assassination, car theft and extortions are now dominating the societies of our countries. The public institutions are either overwhelmed or already too corrupted to effectively deal with this scourge. It has not only affected NPH in how we work and what we can do and can’t do, it also requires much more time and resources these days to provide at least some semblance of security to the homes. The prediction is that the moral fabric of the societies and their public institutions are so corrupted, that things will get worse before they get better, if they do.

One reason is that in spite of economic development and growth, the majority of those living in poverty have not benefited from that development. Rather it seems that the ranks of those living in poverty grows and the middle class is shrinking. For example, in Honduras in spite of government loan forgiveness and poverty reduction programs, the percentage of those living in poverty has slipped from 58% in 2009 to 65% in 2013. The same poverty and lack of opportunity creates a fertile environment for corruption, violence and crime. It’s a vicious cycle where one reinforces the other. While the work of NPH aims especially at developing the human resource of the nations where we work by educating children and instilling in them strong moral values so that they become positive examples and contributors to their societies, in the end our impact is stronger on the individual lives rather than the society as a whole.
**HIV/AIDS:** We became aware of the AIDS epidemic in the mid-eighties. In the early nineties, most children we received had lost their parents to this terrible disease. Especially in Haiti and Honduras, the number of HIV+ children living with our NPH Family increased dramatically. Now all HIV+ children are on anti-retroviral medication and do well physically, but we still struggle with the psychological aspects of the disease. What is the best way to tell a child that s/he is HIV+ and when is the best time to do it? How can we support HIV+ children who sooner or later might experience rejection from their peers? How do we address the moral issues of love and sexual behavior? How do we convince a teenager who flat out refuses to take his/her medicine? To this day we are searching for better answers, as each child needs an individual approach depending on his or her personality and how each one deals with the fact that s/he is HIV+. One positive aspect in the midst of the tragedies AIDS created was the warm and loving reaction of our staff in caring for HIV+ children, especially in the early years when there was a lot of misinformation and paranoia about contracting AIDS. Our staff, after receiving the training on how to ensure that no one could get infected, embraced our HIV+ children in their care just like all the others.

**Technology:** The technological development in general, and the Internet and the access to the Internet has not only changed our physical environment, but also has a profound impact on human relationships. We are ever more connected and much less related. There is a real and profound danger that human relationships will deteriorate to complete superficiality where appearance is everything and who we truly are and what we contribute to make the world a better place does not matter anymore.

The Internet technology also opened complete access to any type of information, whether good or bad, correct or incorrect. Any one of our children can download information from the Internet on a small digital device (a friend might lend a smart phone, a visitor with a tablet) without any of the adults being aware of what the child sees and reads. We have moved in general from a world where adults had a reasonable amount of control over the environment to ensure it was healthy for children, to an almost complete loss of control over the things to which our children are exposed. For this reason, the education and formation of our children in strong core values that enable them to distinguish right from wrong and good from evil, has become ever more important.
Access to drugs is a lot easier today. Children will need a much stronger sense of self, right and wrong, to set boundaries and defend themselves against the onslaught of temptations. Another temptation is to get involved in drug and arms trafficking because it pays huge amounts of money and requires little work. The risk of course, is to get killed in that activity.

Another challenge today is the desire to own technological gadgets such as smart phones, tablets and laptop computers. Starting about ten years ago as these items became available, I noticed for the first time that our children aspired to own “things” and very expensive ones albeit. Before, nobody seemed to mind to practically have nothing. What counted were the friends and the NPH family, the happiness to live in a safe and loving home. However, the fascination of these technological devices and the access they provide to the world has created certain problems where our youth are in danger to lose sight of what is truly important. The digital world has also brought gaming into our lives. These games are highly addictive and our students are in danger to waste their time and money on computer games rather than focusing on their studies.

In some of our countries, crime and violence is completely out of control. To live outside of our homes means to be exposed daily to assaults and thievery. To provide the best security possible, NPH needs to now designate a part of the budget to provide security to our operations.

Education has become more important in all of the countries in which we work. In our modern age it is more difficult to survive on manual labor alone. Fifteen years ago, a fair amount of young men and women were happy to finish a 6th grade education. Today, most children and youth show stronger interest in higher education and not only at NPH. While this is of course good, it has become more of a challenge to have access to the public universities as a lot more young people opt for a university career. Even good students find it more difficult to be accepted into the programs they wish to study. Private universities are an alternative, but very costly.
The Global Slavery Index 2013\(^3\) shows that modern slavery, which is fed by human trafficking, is a worldwide problem. There is no clear general tendency in Latin America. With the exception of Haiti, which has the second highest modern slavery score of all nations, human trafficking is more prevalent in Africa and Asia than in L.A. However, the scourge of human trafficking, which especially preys on the vulnerability of youth living in poverty looking for ways out, is a constant danger in all countries that have high rates of destitution, such as most of the countries in which we work. NPH helps prevent human trafficking as we receive children and youth who are at high risk of becoming victims of human trafficking. Also, as a part of the preparation for life in independence, we need to educate our children about the dangers of human trafficking and what they must do to avoid becoming victims.
Migration has always existed in the past but has dramatically increased over the past two years because of increasing poverty and violence. Also, while in the early years most migrants went to the United States, in the last ten years there has been an increase of migrants traveling to Spain. The most dramatic change is that now many more minors, some as young as eight years old, undertake this trip. Poverty and violence are as much a reason as is the search for parents.

Historically and even now, NPH has not been affected by the migration. In our homes in Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, the countries from where most people migrate, we have had hardly any children who were deported from the U.S. There are several reasons for this, but the most important one is that these children usually do have family that can take care of them, in part because the children’s parents working in the U.S. can send money home to provide economically for the children. There are about 100 children living at those four homes whose parents migrated to the U.S. Usually the children come to us sent by relatives when the parent that migrated to the U.S. or Spain does not send the promised money.

The role that NPH played in the past and continues to play today is twofold: NPH prevents children from migrating because at NPH they live feeling secure and loved. While many children living in the ‘barrios’ (‘slums’) cannot play outside of their homes anymore, children at the NPH homes can move freely and securely any time of the day and night. In the early evening, I can often hear the laughter of the children filtering through the trees during their carefree play. At NPH, children can live their childhood!

It is a common saying that children are the most valuable resource of any country. We help develop this resource through formation and education so that the children become productive and caring adults who have better options to find gainful employment in their home country, thus eliminating the need to emigrate.
The old cliché that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer continues. Higher energy prices have led to increased food and medicine costs. Many who hold minimum wage jobs have great difficulties to cover the most basic needs of their families. Too many have no jobs or unstable jobs, and simply try to get by day by day. The number of single parent households continues to stay at over 50% in some of the countries in which we work. If someone who lives in poverty is able to save a little, it usually is needed when someone in the family gets sick or other misfortunes happen. All of this is a fertile ground for criminal groups to recruit young people into their rank and file. What is most sad about this is that criminal gangs and organized crime are targeting younger children as early as seven years old. Children living in poverty in an unstable family environment are very vulnerable and easy prey for criminals. The violence and cruelty perpetrated by the international and national criminal gangs is unspeakable, creating an atmosphere of constant fear among the population. To give you an example, the murder rate in Honduras in 2012 was 85.1 assassinations per 100,000 inhabitants. To add perspective, this means that if Germany were to have the same murder rate then over 68,000 people would be murdered in Germany each year.
The challenges are manifold and a few have been previously mentioned. Our most important challenge is to stay relevant to the needs of vulnerable children. NPH will need to find a way to respond to the deinstitutionalization policies that are affecting us in all countries where we work. It will not be easy to find a balance in serving vulnerable children through community-based programs while maintaining what Father Wasson asked us to do: To provide a loving family for children that don’t have one.

A fundamental challenge to continue serving vulnerable children is to find contributors who will support our mission. Currently NPH serves approximately 3,200 children living in the homes and another 3,000 through community service programs (not including our medical service programs). Even though we annually serve over 100,000 children and adults in need, we are an organization that puts all of the generous gifts we receive to work for the most needy. With a two-month reserve for all operations, we put our complete trust in God that He will provide as long as we continue to do His work.

On the scale of charitable organizations, NPH is rather small in spite of a very significant impact we make. The trends for fundraising growth show that donors are likely to prefer either small, local organizations because their work is present and visible, or very large organizations because they have the funds to advertise on a much stronger scale than NPH could and would ever want to do. In Europe especially, it will be more challenging to raise funds for the work NPH does. The generation that has given us the greatest support has traditionally been the generation that has lived through WWII, the generation that knows from personal experience what it means to be orphaned, to be cold and hungry, to live in utter chaos. It’s a great challenge trying to find the same empathy in younger generations that have not had such a personal experience similar to what the children suffer we serve. We certainly will have to explore new ways to interest potential donors in our work through innovative fundraising methods.
I believe we will face more crime and violence in the countries where we work before things will get better. This will make our work very difficult in many ways while at the same time, we will be ever more needed to rescue children from situations of extreme vulnerability because they are deprived of parental or extended family care. We hope that especially through our community services, NPH will be locally recognized as such a beneficial element to the entire community that its criminal elements will refrain from attacking NPH.

All of the major challenges require strategic responses. For this reason, NPH International has restructured the way we work. We moved away from a board whose members were the same that worked in the organization, to an international board where the majority of the members are independent (not salaried). The new board’s main tasks are Governance, Mission Fulfillment and Strategic Planning. The development of the strategic plan focuses on the major issues affecting our work and how to respond to those issues mid- and long term. The ultimate authority lies with the NPHI General Assembly where all stakeholders of the NPH Community are represented.

While the many challenges are daunting, we always take heart in this: Our name “Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos” is derived from the Bible’s quote of the works of corporal mercy, where it is said that “what you did to the least of my brothers and sisters you did to me (lo que hicieron para los más pequeños de mis hermanos lo hicieron para mí)”. If we continue to put the generous help provided by donors to serve the “least of our brothers and sisters”, we trust in God that our work will help many children and adults to create a better life for themselves, their families and ultimately for the societies in which they live.

Reinhart Koehler
Board Chair, NPH International