

We Don't Quit

Nelly C. Albancando Comer

Mikuitapash namikushpa punuitapash napunushpa imata rimashka kashpapash pihuan kashpapash amayuyashpa rimanan canchi.

Although we are without food or sleep, we have to finish what we have begun, in order to see the results of our efforts.

—my father, Luis Enrique Albancando

Where I Am From

I thank my parents for their guidance and support and for teaching me not to give up. I am indigent Kichwa, and we don't quit.

I was born in Bogota, Colombia. My parents are native Ecuadorian Kichwa. They preserved the customs, traditions, and language of our Kichwa culture. They are artisans, farmers, and merchants of their products.

In 1960, they went to Colombia seeking new opportunities in life. My mom, Rose Elena, often says, "We traveled with a few things, a basket of cereal and some clothes." My father got a job as a weaver. Gradually, he was able to save and build his own loom. He began to work independently, making shawls, tablecloths, and blankets, which he sold to tourists who visited the city.

A Struggle for Native Rights

Sometimes there were problems. My father, along with other Ecuadorian artisans, gathered to talk about the mistreatment they faced. Sometimes they were



The author with children from the Kichwa pre-school. Below, Nelly's parents and children before she was born.

not treated in hospitals. Native children who were born in Colombia were ridiculed for their long hair, their clothes, and their physical traits.

After a long political battle, native communities won some rights in 1991. But the leaders of the Kichwa people continued to meet to claim their full rights. One project we worked on was a pre-school for the indigenous communities living

in Bogota. I volunteered to work on the project. I wanted the children to have a safe place to play and learn and preserve their culture.

The sector where these children lived was a depressed place. People used drugs. There was prostitution, vandalism, and violence. Parents did not have safe places where they could leave children while they went to work as street vendors.

Although I was a little worried about my economic situation, I



accepted the task. To earn money, I sold handicrafts and accessories which I wove on a handloom with my parents, but sales were not good every day. For this reason, I sometimes felt very discouraged. When I felt doubt about my work, I remembered the images of the Kichwa children growing up in the city, playing in the street, sometimes sick, without adequate food, and facing many dangers while their parents worked. Most sad of all, these children had very little knowledge of their Kichwa origins.



One of the Kichwa pre-schoolers.

We had many setbacks trying to start our kindergarten. But we finally opened. To our surprise, 120 children enrolled. On October 25, 2010, we opened the doors of our pre-school for the first time. In our language, we say “Wawakunapak Yachahuna Wasy.” This means, “House of Learning for Children.” It was like a dream. After much effort, we opened a school that would keep our customs and traditions alive.

I shared with the children traditional dances, ancestral games, songs, food, culture, use of plants in natural medicine, and the values we had

learned from our parents. Each day, I enjoyed the children’s company. I enjoyed seeing their development. I most enjoyed dancing with them because we all moved together to the beat of the music. We held hands, and so we shared. They were unforgettable days of my life.

I still feel their hugs and kisses on my last day of work. I told one of my children, “I will not be here tomorrow. I will travel. I love you. Do not forget me. One day I will return, and seek you. You are a good boy.”

Keeping Kichwa Culture Alive

My mom told me, “You can do it. You can help this project. You know how children suffer there in the streets. I’m embroidering some blouses. Your dad is going to sell ‘papayuelas’ and pumpkins. We will sell these things. Do not worry. We’ll get by somehow.”

In this way, I got encouragement. And every time I saw my children (I think of them as “my” children), I saw in their eyes that they had hopes that something better would come to them.

I started researching about Kichwa techniques for raising children. I learned about the lullabies, games, celebrations, dances, and styles of parenting in the first five years of life. I wanted our pre-school to include Kichwa traditions and customs. Life for the Kichwa in the city was so hard, we sometimes ignored our own culture.

EXTRA!

Read another story about cultural resilience. “Women are the Backbone of the Somali Community” is by Mohamed J. Farah, and you can find it at <www.nelrc.org/changeagent/extras>.

Nelly Cecilia Albancando Comer is studying English at Chatahoochee Technical College in Canton, GA. She has worked as a cook and taught cooking. She loves to sing, dance, draw, and cook. She would like to go to college and study social work. She hopes to help her Kichwa children someday. In 2010, she met a nice man and accepted him. They were married last year.

