




Out of the Darkness

Shine a Light, an organization founded, led and supported by members of the Class of 1993, focuses on getting children off the streets throughout Central and South America by connecting the hundreds of nonprofits that serve them.

By Denise DiFulco



A 22-year-old Argentinean man, in full close-up, speaks quietly, confidentially, to his handheld camera. He pans to a shot of a dank sewer tunnel—a favorite haunt of his youth. It is the place where he sniffed glue with his buddies, the hideout where he eluded capture after snatching women's purses from the street above. He is fearful, breathing heavily. He slowly begins to retrace his steps through the muck-filled passage.

The screen is black except for subtitles that translate his Spanish into English: "I never imagined back then, running through that tunnel in the dark with a stolen purse in one hand and a bag of glue in the other, 'What future can this boy have?'"

The darkness breaks momentarily, and he aims the camera at the apertures in the street grates above. The streaks of light raining down are an epiphany. "I had opportunities—like those little lights—but I didn't take advantage of them," he laments.

The 15-minute film, *El Túnel*, is thick with metaphor, describing how Alejandro Ledezma eventually found the light at the end of his proverbial tunnel thanks to La Luciérnaga, a youth group in Córdoba that helped him get off the streets. He later started working for the nonprofit, which uses income from the sales of its monthly magazine to support 400 young writers and impresarios and to provide study support and vocational training. Helping other children to change their lives, Ledezma says, is "one way we can make up for all the wrongs we did to society."

But his film, and La Luciérnaga itself, likely would have remained in the shadows were it not for Shine a Light, a nonprofit serving some 300 educational and humanitarian organizations in 49 cities throughout Latin America. The brainchild of Barry Malin '93 and Colin Rule, who met at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, Shine a Light's primary focus has become providing troubled youngsters living in the streets and shantytowns a means of expression and empowerment through the arts.

Malin became interested in child poverty and homelessness after visiting Honduras and Nicaragua for a graduate school research paper. At the time UNICEF estimated that 40 million children were living in the streets of Central and South America.

He and Rule came up with an idea for a nonprofit that helped serve humanitarian workers and educators on the front lines of the issue. Knowing their futures lay elsewhere, they thought Malin's Williams classmate Kurt Shaw '93 would be a perfect fit to lead the organization. Shaw had spent time working with grassroots organizations in Latin America as a Fulbright Scholar, and he had recently withdrawn from his doctoral studies at Harvard to help street kids in Santa Fe and New York. The timing couldn't have been better. Shine a Light launched in 1998 with Shaw as its executive director and only full-time staff member.

"I put to Kurt all these big ideas I had come up with—things that would be helpful to grassroots organizations that help street kids," recalls Malin, who now serves as president and board member of Shine a Light while finishing his residency in head and neck surgery at the State University of New York at Buffalo. "It seemed so far-fetched that from Harvard Square we could do anything that would be useful."

It turned out their plan had legs. Traditional organizations assisting the poor in Third World countries had a wealth of front-line knowledge about how to help street children with a variety of problems, but they had no way to share their expertise across the barriers of language and distance.

"You'd have this brilliant street-based high school in Mexico and an extraordinary street-based dance program in Brazil or Colombia, but they never had the opportunity to talk to each other and learn from each other, and everybody was just reinventing the wheel," says Shaw. "So that became our model: not how we can solve the problem, but how is it that we could help people communicate."

Shine a Light originally focused on connecting educators and humanitarian workers with each other via the Web site www.shinealight.org. So an agency in Bolivia looking for ways to help girls steer clear of prostitution could read an online essay about a successful program in Mexico or Chile. If the Bolivian group wanted more details or had specific questions about other programs, it could contact the organizations directly via e-mail.



Shine a Light-produced films such as *El Túnel* (previous pages) and *Ruleta de la Vida* (above and opposite page) allow children to "move from being victims of someone else's world to becoming agents in their own lives," Shaw says.

Over time, Shaw began noticing common themes and problems being faced by the nonprofits, and he decided to make his first foray into video by creating digital workshops that could be shared via CD-ROM or DVD. Shine a Light's first digital workshop was created with a Mayan organization in San Cristóbal de las Casas in Mexico and described in detail how to handle linguistic and cultural differences among indigenous street children. Those lessons could then be used by grassroots workers dealing with a Mapuche child in Chile or an Aymara kid in Bolivia.

"Almost 20 years ago there were no indigenous kids on the street," Shaw says. "The idea that you would have someone who was both urban and indigenous was a paradox—a contradiction in Latin American thought."

Today, understanding the needs of street kids in Latin America remains critical, despite a pronounced decline in the number of them living in urban areas. In some areas gentrification and urban renewal have cast the poor to the outskirts of the city, where they are far less visible. And many indigent, neglected or abandoned children now find their needs met by gangs, so they're not taking to the streets in the numbers they once did.

The reduction in the number of street kids has presented new problems and challenges for the humanitarian workers concerned about their welfare. "What happens then when you don't have street kids?" Shaw asks. "You don't have that constant reminder that there is injustice. That there are people living in absolute poverty not that distant from where you are."

As Shine a Light enters its second decade, one of its goals is to become a mediator between dominant, wealthy society and the marginalized poor so that street children don't go unseen and unheard. And what Shaw and others have found is that art—film, in particular—does the best job of mediation and education.

"So that's the model that we began to think about," Shaw says. "How is it that we could turn Shine a Light into a space where kids and organizations could make that sort of mediation in the world? That they could—at the same time—teach dominant society the wisdom of the periphery and also transform the injustices of the periphery?"

To that end, Shine a Light played a role bringing Alejandro Ledezma's movie *El Túnel*—and many other films by current and former street kids—to a broader audience. Originally intended to show other troubled youngsters in Córdoba an alternative to the crime and violence of the streets, *El Túnel* was posted on Shine a Light's Web site, www.shinealight.org/tunnel.html. There it attracted the attention of educators interested in La Luciérnaga's successful model. It then was picked up by a film festival and screened throughout Argentina.

One of Shine a Light's latest efforts has been producing a feature-length movie, *Ruleta de la Vida*—or *Life's Roulette*—based on the harrowing experiences of former Colombian child soldiers but set within an urban context. During the Colombian Civil War, young peasant children signed on with guerrilla or paramilitary groups not for ideological reasons but for the \$150 monthly salary to help their starving families. After witnessing the senseless violence and brutality of the unrelenting conflict, they fled the armies in droves, escaping into the jungle. They ultimately made their way to the cities, where they lived in the streets in order to avoid capture by their own or enemy forces.



10-minute weekly episodes will reflect on being poor and Indian in the largely white city of Compa. Shaw, who now lives in Florianopolis, Brazil, but frequently returns to Santa Fe, N.M., on business, says he would like to do similar work with undocumented immigrant children in the Southwestern U.S. Their tales of families broken apart by borders, growing up in an unfamiliar culture and suffering economically and socially from unbridled discrimination are much like those of their Central and South American counterparts.

Effecting change in this way, one life at a time and one mind at a time, is slow but potent. Shaw laughs as he remembers a time, shortly after he graduated from Williams, when he had hoped to be something of an American-born Ché Guevara. “Those big ideals—those aren’t the changes that are necessary,” he says. “What really matters are these infinitesimally small steps that allow people who are marginalized to come to the center. Film, as well as music, allows children to move from being victims of someone else’s world to becoming agents in their own lives.” ■

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If they were lucky, the ex-soldiers might encounter a humanitarian worker or group that would help them reintegrate into society and find an outlet for their stories.

Ruleta de la Vida, like other Shine a Light productions, was shot on the group’s three handheld cameras and edited on iMovie software that comes standard with Mac computers. It was screened in Bogotá in March at a special-invitation event hosted by the Dutch non-governmental organization Warchild. Shaw and others involved in its production hope it eventually will make it to the international film festival circuit.

“It’s a very compelling story,” Shaw says, “and when you combine it with a documentary about the making of the movie—showing how the kids created this story, how they filmed it, how the camera is like a gun but a transformation of the gun—I think it will be a powerful tool.”

Other upcoming projects include a telenovela series, filmed and produced by indigenous children living in Bolivia. The

KEEPING THE LIGHT BRIGHT

Shine a Light’s efforts are largely owed to the generosity of Kurt Shaw and Barry Malin’s Williams 1993 classmates and classmates’ families, including Tim Lupin ’93 and the Lupin Foundation; Dave Litvak ’93, whose wife Meredith’s family is involved with the Boston Foundation; and Matt Griffin ’93. The organization was launched with 100 percent of its funding from Williams connections. Today Ephs cover 60 percent of Shine a Light’s annual operating expenses, which were just shy of \$56,000 in 2007. “That support has been tremendously important,” Shaw says.

Last year, Shine a Light hired its second staff member, academic director Rita Oenning da Silva, a Brazilian anthropologist. She and Shaw were married in April. In addition to working with other nonprofits and producing movies, the group has been hard at work developing its Web site, which has grown to 5,000 pages of text, video and photos translated into English, Spanish and Portuguese.