

The Brotherhood, Venezuela.

Source: Brandt, Pamela Robin, "The Brotherhood: These sons of a Venezuelan Dynasty saved a family rum company. Now they're helping save street kids and slums," *American Way*, 15 May 2005, 74-82.

OVERVIEW

The main story here is how two brothers, quite different in temperament, interests and training came together to save a family business. Of more interest to us is how they responded to having some of their land seized and to problems with a local gang.

Having saved the family business from bankruptcy, the brothers Henrique and Alberto were faced with two crises. Some four hundred families from the slums seized a large tract of their land. To have the police drive them off would be dangerous. To allow them to stay would set a very risky precedent. Instead Alberto (who has a degree in negotiation from Harvard) proposed donating 60 acres if the squatters would agree to build a 100-home model community. That was the beginning of a productive relationship.

Since we had that land invasion here, my theory has been, "Okay, invade my territory, I'll invade your mind," (Alberto says smiling).

A second crisis was even closer and more violent. One of the brothers' security guards, in fact the head of security, was ambushed by three local gang members. They beat him up and stole his gun. Three days later the police caught one of the gang members. For such a violent crime, and with such a police record, he could have taken for a jeep ride. Alberto explains:

Jamin calls me up and says, "Listen, the police are taking this guy out to execute him. Green light or red light?" I said, "No, no, red light. Bring him over here." They didn't want to give him over. But Jamin finally bought the guy for (the equivalent of twenty-three bucks. Amazing, no? Twenty-three dollars, the difference between life and death.

Alberto wasn't sure what to do next, but he ended up presenting the gang member with two options.

One, you go back to the police. Two, you work for three months for nothing. Choose. (The young man took the second and showed up at 7:00 am Monday morning. Alberto asked if he knew four or five others who'd be interested in a work/training program, 22 showed up—the entire gang.)

So that's how Proyecto Alcatraz came to be. Of course, it took a lot more to make it work.

Roughly 115 gang members are currently participants or graduates of the program, which has grown to include agricultural labor, education in values, psychological counseling, community service, and rugby training (a strong interest of the brothers).

After three months, graduates of the program can opt for paid employment; the brothers themselves have hired four graduates as Santa Theresa (their farming and rum estate) marketing trainees. Or graduates can further their education in Café Alcatraz's coffee-growing program or the Taller del

Constructar Popular, a builders' workshop where the young gang members—many of whom were formerly employed as professional hit men—learn complex computer architecture programs and remarkably intricate woodworking.

One of the most feared of gang members, Darwin, Smelly Feet, a Proyecto Alcatraz graduate, wrote this rap song about his life and turn around:

Before, we spent time stealing,

Looking for trouble here and there, in gangs...

Before, they would think ill of us, not anymore!

They know we're in the Project, and guide us.

They tell us to continue forward—

Thank God we quit that:

That we should take the chance we've been given;

That, as they say, this train goes by just once:
Those that don't get on won't be picked up again.

Alberto admits self-interest in the brother's altruism:

The drive to do good comes from 208 years, because we had to preserve our land, our philosophy. And the only way to do that is to actually change your surroundings so our way of life is sustainable.

So it has to be a positive influence for society, but the social philosophy is not selfless. It is also self-preservation. It's got both.

The brothers are different. It's Alberto who talks about social issues and keeps the projects going. Henrique is mostly about the business. But together they're making it all work.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What impresses you most about this model? What can you learn from it?
2. What do you think a "liberationist" or radical socialist would say about this program? Do you think they could see some good in it? Are there more than one way to bring "power to the people?" Can that happen under capitalism as well as socialism?
3. Do you think this model is replicable? Could you see others adopting such approaches? Is there anything here you could apply in your situation or some place you know?

IMPLICATIONS

1. In South Africa and Zimbabwe and many other rural areas of the world, creative ideas such as these could be made to work. And businesses could accomplish similar results in urban areas.
2. It is important to realize Alberto's preparation for these projects. He was a somewhat rebellious youth himself and sent to a military academy where he learned discipline. He excelled in rugby. Then he learned engineering and saw homes built in a slum. He took that degree in negotiation at Harvard. And most of all, he has a big heart for the poor and for troubled youth.
3. Anyone considering such a program should really know the culture of those who might be helped, must establish relationships, study models like this, know how such programs have failed and succeeded, and work collaboratively with others.

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