

LET THE LITTLE ONES BE FREE

By JORGE R. MANCILLAS

I never thought there was anything unusual about working as a child. Plenty of children in my neighborhood in Ensenada's Colonia Obrera worked to help their families. It was a normal part of growing up.

While I regretted not being able to join some of my more fortunate friends to play or shoot some hoops, I enjoyed the feeling of taking part in the adult world--except at times, such as when I got my initiation at a butcher shop at the age of 10. I was talked into making the chorizo-- a spicy sausage--kneading the mixture of meat, spices and sauces for hours with my uncovered arms and hands. The adult employees told me they tossed coins for the once-a-week privilege, but they would allow me to do it because it was my first day. I was in pain for days, barely able to move my burning arms because of the skin irritation. And the scar at the base of my left thumb reminds me of the time I almost lost it. I was cutting, weighing and packing lard with a sharp knife almost the size of my arm when the knife slipped and the huge blade cut my thumb to the bone.

Stocking goods on a supermarket shelf or bagging them at the register was more fun. I learned quite a bit from reading the labels when stocking them. I would look at customers and try to get a glimpse of their eating habits, their life stories, as I hurriedly put their purchases in a box or bag. I had a vested interest: I was trying to guess whether they would offer a tip if I carried their bags to their cars. In every place I worked, we kids had some sort of camaraderie. But I felt sorry for those who took the next step and quit school as teenagers, seeking to make enough money to fulfill their family obligations and keep some for themselves.

How would my life have been different if I had used my after-school time differently from the age of 8? I'll never know. I always wished, growing up by the seaside, that I had learned how to swim. I also could never find enough time to read, though I read some during slow times when I worked in a furniture shop or in a motel.

I thought I was lucky, though, when I saw kids working in the streets, shining shoes, cleaning cars, selling all kinds of goods. I worked indoors and didn't have to hustle for business.

When my son turned 8, I could not conceive of him working. And yet there are about 115,000 children working in the streets of Mexico City, part of the 3.5 million Mexicans aged 12 to 17 who work to help their families survive.

What do they do? Forty-two percent work in agricultural fields, 23% in the service sector, 17% in commercial activities, 14% in manufacturing, 4%--140,000--in the construction industry. As I did, 64% are still attending school.

Don't blame their parents. Forty percent of Mexicans live in poverty and 16% live in extreme poverty--defined as being unable to consume their required daily caloric intake. Many working children are orphans or part of broken families in a nation with a scant safety net, which is being pared further by administrations that believe in smaller government. The focus is on the health and well-being of the Mexican stock exchange and financial institutions.

I believe that, overall, I benefited from working when I was a child. It helped make me and many like me the people that we are, with good values and an appreciation for what it takes to get ahead.

But I don't believe we can take the chance that this will be the universal experience for children. They might as easily be permanently injured or never learn to read. They might just as easily be set back for the rest of their lives.

Look at your children and imagine them carrying a heavy sack of beans, slicing beef in a butcher shop, evading cars on a busy street as they try to sell chewing gum, shining shoes on a busy sidewalk.

It is a desolate picture. You don't get a second chance at childhood.

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