



Fundación Social Fénix

2017 Report

Fénix' first ten years.

When Fénix was founded ten years ago, our main aim was "to form outstanding, well-qualified professionals in health and social science careers who can design, lead and manage programmes and projects that will improve the quality of care for vulnerable young people, especially girls and women".

2017 is the year in which several Fénix girls have moved from being students to working professionals, gaining solid experience, moving up rungs in their careers and taking postgraduate specialist qualifications.

Viviana, a doctor in Colombia's highest ranked health care company, was promoted to a programme management position and has just completed her Masters in Public Health at Los Andes University (at the head of her class), which should lead to further promotion into public health research and programme development.

Kilyam, working with her own Ticuna people in the Amazon, has been in charge of infant malnutrition prevention, vaccination programmes, and TB and malaria prevention and treatment, and has recently begun a postgraduate specialisation in epidemiology on a scholarship.

Zarina has worked for three years as dentist, is also completing a postgrad in health care auditing with extremely high grades, and will then take a diploma course in quality control and licensing of health care institutions - which will help her up the professional ladder and enable her to take contract work as an inspector but above all, she says, will give her the knowledge and tools needed to set up her own clinic. Amongst the ideas she is mulling over are joining with other Fénix graduates to bid for state contracts for vulnerable population care projects, and setting up her own consulting rooms which she and the others can also use to provide free care for street girls.

Yennifer, a staff nurse with the principal Bogotá public health care company, also has taken two postgraduate specializations in hospital management and in health auditing, and is now a quality of care auditor, with intimate experience and knowledge of how the health care system works and where it fails.

Paola, after graduating as a Social Worker, joined the programme for youth prostitution and vulnerable children of our sister organisation, the YMCA-ACJ, and has taken there the street outreach and the multi-service health and rights programmes she helped develop in Fénix.

Disney is about to defend her thesis to graduate as a Social Worker (with exceptional grades), has designed and directed small projects, worked with women victims of sexual violence, and hopes to find a full-time job in this area, and then plan for a postgraduate degree: "What I most want from now on is to help form the next generation of professionals."

Edna, Sandra and others have finished secondary school or higher education courses in administration and related areas. Iveth applied the credits from her technical training ('tecnólogo') to a degree course and is working in the city's street youth programme.

Lady Johana is about to start the second semester of her higher education certificate in Community Welfare, whilst also working in a major HIV prevention, testing and treatment rights programme for very high risk groups, and plans to return to her psychology degree in one year.

Since Angélica came to Fénix she says she has been able to organise herself emotionally, finish high school and complete her certificate in pre-school care and education. She has been working with Paola in the ACJ and is deciding whether to continue to a five year teaching degree or to take the shorter training as a licensed nurse, with a view to specialising in paediatric nursing: "*Studying is the principal tool we have for generating changes in society and in ourselves.*"

So Fénix now has a core group of qualified, experienced and respected care professionals advancing academically and in their careers, and thinking about taking another step forward as a group.

And, as a group, they are taking greater responsibility for mentoring, motivating and supporting newer girls.

While the central purpose of Fénix is higher education of girls without resources or functioning families, other high risk adolescents have come to Fénix for help on access to health or defense of rights, support in breaking free of abusive relationships or getting away from street life, sometimes for psychotherapeutic help to deal with the traumas of neglect, abuse and violence, or for tutoring and help in getting back into education or finding a job.

Some have needed only a few weeks or months, or just occasional visits, to find their own ways. Some have stayed on to become full members, to finish high school and start higher education or stable jobs.

And some have drifted away or even back to the streets or to a destructive relationship.

Fénix is not a perfect process. The small size with easy access to therapy and peer group support should make it possible to overcome a toxic childhood and adolescence, but sometimes they are not enough.

We have learned from experience and adjusted Fénix' norms, for example, to insist that no girl goes straight into university without first proving her learning abilities by taking a technical training course, and even before that she must work at length with the psychologist and the group to ensure she is stable, can handle the inevitable crises of life, can cope with the pressure and challenges of studying, and that she feels she really belongs with Fénix.

Regular participation in Saturday meetings, classes and workshops (and the group lunch) is a first step, and gaining confidence to share, usually

horrible, life stories is the second. *“In these ten years Fénix for me has been my family”*, says Zarina.

Apart from the core group and more sporadic participants there is now a new generation of younger adolescents, coming to classes, talking through their lives so far and plans for their futures, and getting on with high school. The support of Ezana and a team of volunteer maths and English tutors has proved vital in ensuring they can get good grades. Two teen students, Indira and Daniela, are also profiting vastly from scholarships for daily English classes at the Centro Colombo-Americano.

Indira reflected on her changes since joining Fénix: *“I began to know myself and to find my fears disappearing and my dreams for the future growing as I overcome each obstacle. I don’t pretend to become perfect, just to be the person I really am, so that the people who have believed in me will be proud of the person I become, someone with the capacity to help others.”*

Outreach

During this first decade Fénix has worked closely with a number of organisations, including the Bogotá Health Department, the city Women’s Department, a central city hospital, the YMCA-ACJ, Fundación Procrear, two HIV prevention, testing and rights organisations, orders of nuns who offer care for women in sexual exploitation, and several other institutions providing services for the most excluded and high risk groups in Bogotá.

Beyond the integrated model of attention we developed and the more than 850 people attended for HIV, Hepatitis B and other tests, HBV and HPV vaccinations, health rights defense (including legal actions), treatment referrals, help in returning to work or education and assistance in other changes, this has provided practical experience in how to support multi-problem people and in trying to make often obstructive state systems work for them. This was coupled with our own training workshops (extended to members of other organisations) on human rights, women’s rights, sexual and reproductive health, mentoring and the basics of counselling for people in difficult situations.

This was all aimed at forming Fénix members as highly capable, experienced and motivated care professionals.

Volunteers:

But there was an unexpected secondary benefit. Foreign interns, students and volunteer teachers worked closely with the members, became their friends and colleagues and joined outreach teams on the street. The intimate contact with brutal sexual exploitation, poverty and violence, severe health risks and official indifference, incompetence and bureaucracy, had such impact that many of them made radical career changes.

Language student Rosie Lloyd returned to the UK to study law. Teresa Hall took a Masters in Public Health; historian and teacher Hannah Coleman took a Masters in International Public Health and now works with

immigrant women. Samantha Joeck took a Masters in Sociology and Gender Studies, researching harassment of women in public spaces, and teacher Isobel Cairns is preparing to start her Masters in Social Work and Human Rights, all decisions in the light of intensive experience with Fénix.

Kate Howard came to teach English in Fénix, which *“had a huge and lasting impact on my personal and professional development. The experiences I had were nothing short of life-changing. Being able to work with all the young women involved, to learn and to contribute as well, was an honour.”*

I did an MSc in Global Health and Development. I now work in a project to institutionalise the practice of providing Immediate Postpartum IUD services in six countries.”

Anthropology student Celine Sparrow came to Fénix for experience but returned to the US to study medicine: *“I was humbled by all of the girls I met at Fénix. I am now a board certified paediatrician and chief resident in Oakland. I recently received training in Nexplanon placement and I remember learning about this method of contraception at Fénix.”*

Biologist Giffin Daughtridge designed and led Fénix’ Hepatitis B vaccination programme: *“I graduated from medical school and a public policy degree and am the founder of an HIV prevention company (directly motivated by my time with Fénix). We have developed an adherence test for an HIV preventive and treatment drug, set up pilots with departments of public health and used it in research studies in the US and Africa, and are now developing adherence tools for HIV, Hepatitis C, and Tuberculosis. My path to this was totally motivated by my work with Fénix and a desire to keep helping vulnerable populations protect themselves from infectious diseases”*

These and other volunteers made large and vital contributions to the development of Fénix girls. The impact clearly was reciprocal, and we are proud and happy that we may have contributed to the careers of these professionals and to their impact on health and social care in other countries.

Other Activities

Paola, Disney and other members took sexual and reproductive health workshops to their universities and became counsellors and educators for hundreds of students at a vulnerable stage in their development.

Beatriz, Fénix co-founder, has been active in a civil-society movement supporting a politically negotiated end to armed conflict in Colombia, advocating for dialogue as a means of solving conflicts at all levels, and offering trainings on reconciliation. Several Fénix members have participated in that group’s meetings and workshops on conflict resolution and non-violent communication.

Financial

Fénix was able to cover street outreach work through support from Fundación Bolívar-Davivienda, UNAIDS and the UK charity Children of Colombia (CoC), and education costs have been met partly by scholarships and part time jobs, but mostly from the regular and extraordinarily generous donations made by a large network of friends,

mostly channelled through CoC, which has also raised funds through donations and events with Prue Leith, author Susan Lewis and other personalities. At the end of the year CoC director Gwyneth Simmons visited Fénix and met core members, who could thank her directly for this long-running and hard-working support. We also thank Rudolf Hommes for the repeated gifts of laptops for Fénix students.

We have mentioned in previous reports with great gratitude all those – too many to list again – who have sponsored Fénix girls over the years, but should repeat that a huge boost to Fénix reserves came through the efforts in 2012 of then British Ambassador John Dew, with Marion Dew and Andrew Loog Oldham, who organized a benefit event.

At the end of 2017, thanks to the kindness of David Veit, Alan Riding, Brian Moser, David Lloyd, Martha Martinez, Douglas Farah, Alison Wood, Kate Seal, Brian Moser, Professors Regina Yando and Malcolm Deas and others, there is already enough in the bank for the graduation and diploma registration costs of Disney, Viviana and Zarina and for next semester's educational expenses of Angélica, Daniela and Indira, and for Zarina's diploma course.

Future

We would like eventually to be able to help fund Zarina's specialisation in orthodontistry and Viviana's residency in pediatrics. These, however, are extremely expensive and also will require them to have saved enough to live on for the three years of full time training.

Other projects under discussion, opening a consulting room and bidding for care contracts, depend on the participating members. The management of Fénix is gradually passing into their hands and decisions about the future must largely be theirs.

These young women – a doctor, a dentist, a kindergarten teacher, administrators, social workers, nurses, with front-line experience, advanced qualifications and skills – now have the responsibility of forming and supporting the next generation.

Disney sums up: “*If Fénix has been a model programme for the 21st century, promoting and supporting the education of young people in difficult situations, it has also proved to be an innovative model that forges the young professionals who can contribute to the social changes demanded by this country's current situation.*”

Our heartfelt thanks to everyone who over these years has contributed so much to changing lives and futures.