

Miguel, Nicaragua

Miguel, 13, lives in the Linda Vista Sur neighborhood of Jinotega, Nicaragua with his maternal aunt and two of his siblings, an older brother aged 18 and a little sister, Karina, aged 11. Miguel's aunt became his guardian after Miguel's mother died and his father remarried. Miguel's father also lives in Jinotega, but in a different district. His father lives with his second wife and their three sons (ages ten, six and four).



Miguel (far right in red), 12, from Honduras at Children's World Congress on Child Labor, Florence, Italy, May 10-13, 2004

Miguel began working part-time when he was only *seven*-years-old. Miguel explained that it was not critical for him to work. Nonetheless, he worked to help his aunt pay for food, schooling, and clothes. He also worked to have money for school supplies. All four of Miguel's younger siblings go to school.

Before his grandmother died, Miguel worked with her on the streets selling enchiladas. Some people treated him well. Others treated him poorly (even as he served them food). Naturally, he did not like being mistreated. However, even though he has worked since he was little, Miguel has never stopped studying. "When I worked in the streets I used to watch, with dismay, the other kids watch me and think that I did not study," he said. He went to classes in the morning, and helped his aunt sell home-made food in the afternoon.

Miguel had thought that selling food would be easy, but it was sometimes not so easy. His day depended a lot on the weather. He learned that if it was rainy or cold, it was rather difficult to sell food. In the winter, he had to work harder because it was difficult to sell in the cold. In general, he got tired - from walking a lot, not playing. When it rained, Miguel waited for the rain to pass. He said that he could not dress adequately for bad weather, because "I had neither a jacket nor cape/cloak." When it was very sunny, he sold more food.

Later, Miguel sold posol [stew, typically made with pork] on the street by himself. He sold posol in the morning (from 7:30 a.m.-11:00 a.m.) and went to classes in the afternoon. He worked more or less 3-4 hours *daily* or approximately 26 hours each week.

Miguel earned 2 córdobas (US 12 cents) a day. He took the money to school to buy something to eat during recess. There was no money leftover to keep and spend on himself.

Now, Miguel works with his father who sweeps the municipal park. His father earns little. Every two weeks his father gives 215 córdobas (\$13.53) to his three children who live with their aunt (for food, clothes, school, and medicine). Each child receives \$4.51.

"As you can see," Miguel said, "this is why I work. Receiving \$4.51 is not fit to live on." Miguel helps his papa to clean the park from 3-5:00p.m. after his computer class, and he sells tortillas on the weekends. He does the same job as his father, although, Miguel said, "my papa works a bit more than I do."

Miguel is in his first year of secondary (high) school and says that helping his father to clean the park for two hours each afternoon and sell tortillas on the weekends does affect his studies. It interferes with his right to play and leisure. Each day, Miguel gets up at 5:30 a.m. He eats breakfast - coffee and two pieces of bread - at 6 a.m. He attends school in the morning from 7:15 a.m.-11:45 a.m. At noon he eats lunch (rice and beans). In the afternoon after school, Miguel studies computers at the *Children's Club*, a non-governmental organization financed by Terre des Hommes of Switzerland. From 3-5:00 p.m., he helps his father to clean the park. "I do not have any breaks and there is no time to play," Miguel said. Still, for fun he likes to play football and watch television. Typically, he goes home at 5:00 p.m. In the evening, he eats rice and beans, again, and goes to bed at 7 or 8:00 p.m.

The *Children's Club* takes care of around 250 working children and adolescents from Jinotega - offering them free classes in computers, crafts, alphabetics, communication, dance and sports, and a tutoring program. Yet, it does not have a connection to Internet mail. Miguel has been studying in the tutoring program since 3rd grade to improve his academic studies. Devoting time to studying at the club has enabled him to advance more in school. In the *Children's Club*, Miguel has also learned about child labor exploitation and his rights. The club allows children to reflect on the protection and fulfillment of their rights, Miguel said. The boys and girls organize themselves and their own activities.

Miguel likes school because, he said, "Each day I learn more, and then I can become whatever I want to be in life." His future looks very bright. He aspires to continue studying, finish his studies, and help his family. He would like to be a lawyer in order to defend the rights of children. Miguel is optimistic about realizing his dreams, if he challenges himself and with support of his family and the club. He thinks *that having support from parents* is most important for children. He hopes that learning computer skills will enable him a get better job, since sweeping and selling in the park will not cover the costs of university.

Miguel is already defending children's rights. He got involved in stopping child labor when he saw that many children, including his siblings and himself, were working and after learning about child exploitation and children's rights at the Children's Club. Miguel says that the best way to help child laborers is for "*governments to give work to their parents, but pay them well. They should not charge fees for education, so that we can go to school. Parents must motivate us (children) to go to school, and not give us work.*" Miguel has sound ideas!