

# SOLDIER BOY

By David Blumenfeld

**PHILIPPE HOUDARD'S**  
CHALLENGE OF  
TURNING TEENAGE  
MERCENARIES BACK  
INTO CHILDREN  
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**T**he trendy hotels and boutiques that line Miami Beach's Ocean Drive are a world away from the impoverished villages nestled in the remote mountainsides of Colombia.

Just a few blocks away from the neon glow of the bars and shops, Philippe Houdard reflects on a trip to the South American country; he was there helping to rebuild the lives of former child soldiers—many recruited as young as 9 years old to fight as rebels in Colombian guerrilla groups.

"Before this most recent trip to Colombia, I had not visited the project in three months. And the transformation over time that I noticed in the faces of some of our kids was a real pleasant surprise," Houdard says. "When I had originally seen them, some were like stone. They had just come from the jungle, and you could find no emotion there; they were just completely shut down. But with time and being in a safe environment, you start to see that they become human

again. It's completely amazing to see."

Turning these ex-soldiers back into gregarious, fun-loving teenagers is just one goal of the Developing Minds Foundation. The nonprofit organization, which Houdard, 41, created in 2006, has a mission to bring education, counseling, schooling, and computer training to children affected by poverty and armed conflict. In addition to Colombia, the Developing Minds Foundation has ongoing projects in some of the urban shantytowns of Brazil.

"In a lot of these areas, kids have very little access to education, which is what Developing Minds is trying to address. Our fundamental belief is that education is the way up and out of these difficult situations. Many of these kids are living in bleak circumstances, feeling hopeless, and a number of them, as it turns out, are also having problems at home with their parents or experiencing some kind of abuse," Houdard says.

The situation is particularly troublesome in the remote and rural villages of



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Photo by Pablo Garcia



**PROFILE**  
**Philippe Houdard**

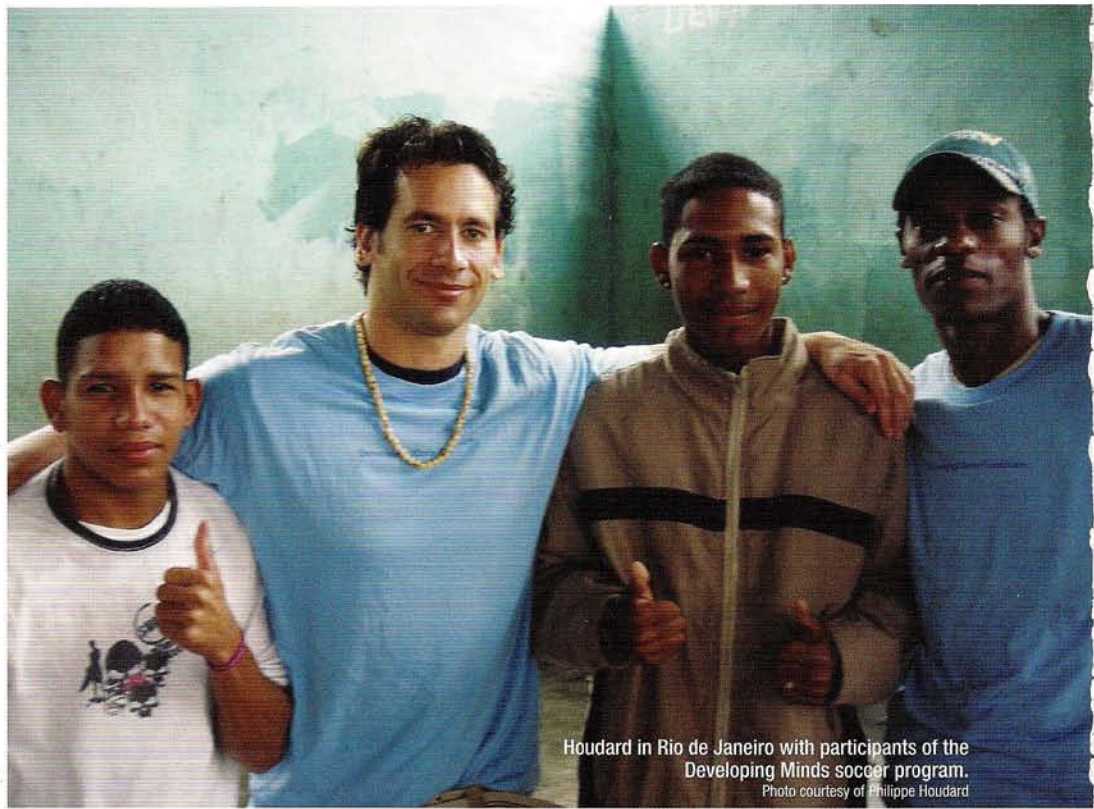
Colombia, where children have little or no access to formal education, no government support, and little chance for a better life. As a result, they become easy prey for the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the country's largest guerrilla group. The FARC, a group predominantly made up of leftist rebels, has been in a 50-year on-going battle with the Colombian government and right-wing paramilitaries.

"The guerrillas will come marching through the village and for a lot of these kids, believe it or not, going off to fight actually seems like a better alternative to them," Houdard explains. "They'll be approached by a guerrilla commander who promises they'll be well taken care of and have access to better food. There's a lot of allure to a child who lives in a rural area and doesn't see much hope for a better option. They see these soldiers with the guns, with the uniform and a strong presence, and they think it's glamorous. Sadly, they think it's going to be a great adventure."

But once they realize they've been misled, it's too late. As part of the FARC, they're constantly on the march from attacks and raids. For any who consider deserting the FARC, the penalty could be death—for either themselves or their families.

"Some of these kids will be out in the jungle on guard duty, and they reach a point where they simply can't take it anymore, so they desert and make a run for their lives. It's generally a harrowing experience that takes a tremendous amount of courage," Houdard says.

The psychological scars of experiencing war firsthand, and more importantly, at an early age, hits relatively close to home for Houdard, originally from a small village in the north of France. One of his great-grandfathers and both his grandfathers were veterans of World War I and World War II, while his father fought alongside the French Foreign Legion in the Algerian War of Independence. Through each successive generation, Houdard has seen the physical and emotional impact armed conflict has had on his fam-



Houdard in Rio de Janeiro with participants of the Developing Minds soccer program.  
Photo courtesy of Philippe Houdard

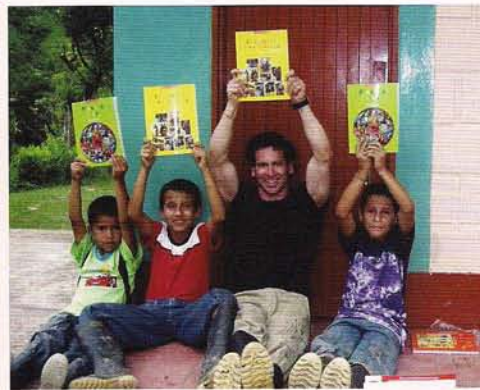
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ily. It was particularly difficult for his father, Louis, who he says never really recovered from his wartime trauma, and in the years after, coped with post-traumatic stress disorder by emotionally and socially withdrawing from people around him.

"Algeria was a particularly brutal conflict, and so it was an extremely traumatic experience for my father. When he came back from the war, he was supposed to just get back out into the fields and start working again—that's what you did during that era. He unfortunately didn't have the benefit that kids in our programs do today," he says. "We know now that we can bring somebody who has just come



**CLOCKWISE:**  
Kids taking part in the Developing Minds literacy project in Colombia.  
Kids show off their new books.  
Kids get ready for soccer practice in Rio de Janeiro's Mangueira favela.  
Photos courtesy of Philippe Houdard



back from war and give them support, education, and some guidance, and they can get back on the path to actually be rehabilitated.

"I think in a way, my father's experience has always served as motivation for me...to hopefully do something for people who live in areas affected by conflict, using education as

a way to try to help improve their situation."

One of the other major catalysts behind the Developing Minds Foundation was Houdard's maternal grandfather, Dr. Thomas H. DeLaureal, who passed away in 2006. When Houdard delivered the eulogy at his funeral, it became a life-changing experience for him. Shortly afterward, he left his successful job in software and technology to start the Developing Minds Foundation.

"He was a doctor and a great humanitarian, and an inspiration to my life in many ways," Houdard says. "At that time, I thought deeply about what his great life was all about, and in the process it compelled me to consider much more seriously what I wanted mine to become. Three weeks later, I was on an airplane flying to Rio de Janeiro and running around the favelas trying to start things."

Today, the Developing Minds Foundation has a number of ongoing literacy, vocational, and rehabilitation projects in both Brazil and Colombia. And one by one, Houdard is helping to put the smiles back on the faces of former child soldiers in Colombia who were stripped of their emotions and robbed of their innocence.

During a recent trip to the Colombian city of Medellín, Houdard met one such child, whom at first he could only call Number 13.





## PROFILE Philippe Houdard

"He had just escaped from the guerrillas and hadn't spoken a word in weeks since leaving the jungle. He was 16 years old, deeply traumatized, and we couldn't get him to speak or tell us his name. Since he was wearing a soccer jersey with the number 13 on the back, we were stuck with that for the time being," Houdard says. "At the time, we were hosting a retreat with the kids for four days, and he was completely shut down, totally inaccessible the entire time. Finally, on the last day, I asked him whether or not he thought it was going to rain that day—just a standard question. He looked up and said, 'Yeah, it looks like it's trying to.' These were probably the first words he had spoken in three weeks. It was just a simple exchange, but it opened up the floodgates."

The boy told Houdard his story, of being an orphan from Guaviare, a region heavily overrun by the FARC. Houdard spent some time with the boy, encouraged him to see that things would ultimately get better for him, and expressed his desire to see him improve his life.

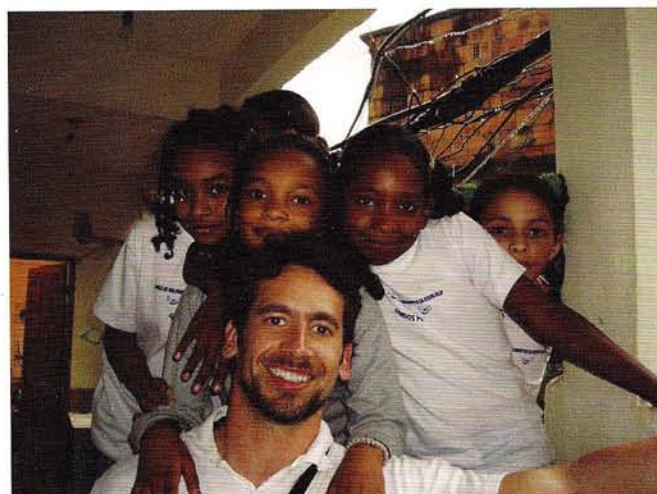
"We talked for a while and something seemed to happen at that moment," Houdard says. "Sometimes they just need someone to hear their story to get things started. After that, it was kind of like he turned into a boy again. The rest of the day, he started talking to other kids, he was running around, laughing and playing. It was absolutely amazing to see that transformation from this kid whom we used to simply call Number 13. Even to us, we couldn't quite see him as a full human being at first because he wouldn't talk, but with time, we saw this evolution. It was really amazing."

Often, when Houdard is working with children who have spent years fighting against their will in the jungles of Colombia for a cause they know little or nothing about, his mind traces back to his father. In his office in Miami, where he works in finance, there hangs a faded black-and-white photo of his father in a military uniform, taken in the 1950s.

"I look at their faces, and a lot of times I try to visualize what my father's face would have looked like at their age, and it's not too difficult to imagine. They're a little bit younger than my father was at the time, but there are a lot of similarities," he says.

A tremendous amount of prep work is often needed to launch a new project in a region polluted with armed conflict and violence. Research and local partners on the ground can make all the difference. Still, there are at least one or two projects in the works that Houdard has not personally visited due to the risks.

"You minimize the risk as much as possible and you try to make educated decisions," Houdard explains. "When I'm in the favelas in Brazil, there



Houdard visits the Developing Minds computer program in a Rio de Janeiro slum.

Photos courtesy of Philippe Houdard

are guns all over the place. There are guys walking around with AK-47s, Uzis, and grenades—everything you can possibly imagine. I've always been fortunate that when I was there, and gunshots were going off, that it was on the other side of the favela. But also I try to do my homework. A lot of times, we call in advance to make sure there isn't a police raid going on...or things aren't too intense at the time."

On certain occasions, when friends or colleagues hear about Houdard's charitable work with the Developing Minds Foundation, the reaction is one of gloom and sadness.

"At times people say, 'Wow, doesn't that make you depressed to be around such sad situations?,' but really it's very inspiring to be able to try to help somebody," he assures. "Generally, you leave feeling exuberant from the experience. Rather than feeling sad from having been around kids with sad lives, you actually feel great having been able to do something that is helping them."

"I feel like we're doing meaningful work, and that's a good feeling to have. Because if you don't do it, who will?"

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For more information, visit  
[www.developingmindsfoundation.org](http://www.developingmindsfoundation.org).