

SPECIAL REPORT:
HISPANIC MENTORING

EXTREME MENTORING

A Helping Hand for Child Soldiers

Marc Gonsalves went from hostage in the Colombian jungle to mentoring his captors

BY DAVID ADAMS

A GROUP OF YOUNG boys and girls gather attentively around a cell phone, set to loudspeaker, perched on an upturned log.

A voice at the other end greets them warmly in Spanish, "Hi guys, this is Marc, one of your compañeros from the jungle."

Barely three years ago Marc Gonsalves was a helpless hostage in the jungle, despairing of ever seeing his family again after more than five years in captivity. Now he's talking by phone to former guerrilla child soldiers from the rebel group that kept him prisoner. He tells them they have a lot in common. "We all escaped from the FARC," he says, referring to the ruthless left-wing guerilla army, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, which has battled the Colombian state for decades. "We were all victims. You were prisoners too," he tells the kids. Gonsalves was one of 15 hostages dramatically rescued in July

2008 by Colombian Special Forces commandos. Freed were two other Americans, as well as Ingrid Betancourt, a presidential candidate held for more than six years.

A U.S. defense contractor in Colombia, working in counter-narcotics operations, Gonsalves and the other Americans fell into FARC hands when their small surveillance plane crash-landed in a rebel zone. Since his release Gonsalves has succeeded in putting the ordeal behind him, returning to his family and his job in Connecticut, without ever quite letting go of what he experienced and learned, in the jungle. A month after his rescue he was contacted through Facebook by a young Miami Beach entrepreneur, Philippe Houdard, who was looking to recruit Gonsalves to the

Developing Minds Foundation, a charity he founded to help rehabilitate child victims of violence in Colombia, including young ex-soldiers of the FARC. Houdard, who grew up in family committed to helping others, started the foundation after witnessing deep child poverty during his travels in Latin America.

"When we are working with the kids it's all about trying to help them understand and create a narrative for their lives, understand the past and where they are headed in the future," says Houdard, a former IT executive who is now president of a payment processing startup, SkyBank Financial.

"They come out [of the jungle] and are very confused. There's a stigma

attached to them. Should they hide their past?" he says. "Reconciliation and forgiveness plays a central role in moving forward with their lives. Marc is a powerful vehicle for that. He says 'I forgive you,' and that's enormous."

Gonsalves was immediately drawn to Houdard's project. "One of the best ways to destroy the FARC is to call those kids out of the jungle," he says. "I knew a lot of those kids. Some were naturally evil people and really enjoyed it. A lot were not. They had to follow orders and weren't allowed to leave. I had compassion for those kids. I just wanted to communicate with them, applaud them and cheer them on." It also appealed to him on a personal level. "It's therapeutic for me as much as it is for them. It's something that is part of who I am. It changed the way I am. There's nothing I can do to change that. I lost a lot but I can't be bitter," he says.

A VOICE OF HOPE

Gonsalves agreed to write a letter to the kids in Houdard's program saying he supported their efforts to rejoin civilian life and that he shared their pain. The letter made such an impact on the kids that Houdard asked Gonsalves to take it a stage further. "They all know of Marc and they were out in the jungle. Some of them were part of the outer security ring of the hostage unit," he says.



[Gonsalves talks to former child soldiers and victims of violence via Skype]

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Houdard asked Gonsalves to record a video for the kids, which he was happy to do. Gonsalves, who has Italian and Portuguese parents, learned fluent Spanish during his years as a hostage. After his rescue he went back to his job with defense contractor Northrop Grumman in Connecticut, though he now has a desk job in cyber security.

"I want to congratulate you all on leaving the FARC. Now you are free you have a very difficult path ahead of you getting back into civilian life. So you have to have even more courage," he says. He goes on to talk about how he has put his own life back together, reconnecting with his 18-year-old son who is studying at university. "Sometime I have nightmares about the jungle, and being a hostage. I guess you do too. Don't worry. That's normal," he says. "They'll be people out there who have never been in the jungle and know nothing about the conflict that you and I suffered," he goes on. "It's hard for them

[Gonsalves in San Antonio with family, shortly after his release]



to have the slightest idea of what we are going through trying to start a new life out of the jungle. If they knew what you are doing now they would have huge respect for what you are struggling with. Keep your spirits up, stick with it until you achieve your dreams and the happiness you deserve."

Any lingering suspicion that the encounter is staged as a psychological trick is quickly overcome. "They see the video and they see him talking," says Houdard. "There's such an authenticity to the guy, he's so genuine in his feelings towards them. You can see he really believes it. This is him." Next, Houdard set up the cellphone call to the project's home which the kids share in Colombia.

It lasted 90 minutes, during which Gonsalves told his story, beginning with the plane crash, followed by forced marches through the jungle, being chained around the neck to his fellow hostages, the awful diet of rice and beans, and the bouts of malaria and hepatitis.

"I wanted to remind them how bad he had it and then we bring him on the phone and he's this great magnanimous bright cheerful character," says Houdard. "So when he says he forgives them it's very powerful. They aren't going to hear that from any of their [other] victims. It helps them get over what they have done and teaches them how they can forgive people too." Questions follow. What was the hardest part of

being a hostage? How he can forgive? They want to know how he rebuilt his life, about his teenage children. Gonsalves asks about their stories, wanting to know how long they have been out of the FARC.

“It’s so much harder for them than for us, the hostages,” Gonsalves says. “We know civilization. They have never had the opportunity to go to school. They come from extreme poverty. Being in combat...bombed...shot at... shooting back...all that at such a young age; they have a rough road.”

A second conference call followed. “It was different this time. I felt the conversation was more profound. They were asking me how I felt, how I sleep, what dreams and nightmares I have?”

He carries vivid memories from his days in captivity. “I wonder about my guards. I remember one who helped us. She would break the rules and was nice

to us. I remember one day asking her if she ever thought about escaping. She said ‘All the time.’ She had nightmares.”

Several kids have written him letters. “They are treasures. I keep them,” he says. He’s especially fond of one from a 15-year old, who wrote, ‘You don’t know me but we’re brothers because we both got out alive from the FARC.’ The letter is signed above a pencil drawing of an AK-47 assault rifle, a line through the weapon and the words, “All they do is kill you.”

One of his former hostage camp guards wrote: “We lived many things together in the jungle, and we made you do things... not because we wanted to, it was an order.”

Gonsalves would like to visit the kids in Colombia, though his company and the U.S. State Department may frown on the idea. “My hope is to maybe go there to visit them. I want to do it.” ●

[Photo of Marc Gonsalves while captive]

