

# Welcome to the latest edition of Street Light –Toybox’s mini magazine

Inside this issue, you can read an update from our Birth Registration project in El Salvador. This project is supporting children like Ruben, featured on the front cover, and Mariana (right), to be registered with their birth certificates.

As you may have seen, El Salvador has been in the news a great deal over the last few years, with the country’s notorious criminal gangs making headlines around the world as they establish power by exerting violence and evoking fear. Children on the streets, already some of the most vulnerable, are increasingly at-risk of being recruited by these gangs to traffic drugs, extort money and commit crimes. Others are exploited and abused in unimaginable



ways. For those who refuse, the consequences are often unthinkable.

Unregistered children on the streets of El Salvador are effectively invisible to the authorities and unlikely to be protected from harm. However, a birth certificate and an official identity can change all that. Which is why our work in El Salvador right now is so important.

See inside for more about the Birth Registration project in El Salvador and to read about how you are helping to protect children in a country where it is needed now more than ever.

# TOYBOX PARTNER'S RESPONSE TO FIRE IN DELHI SLUMS

Earlier this year, we received a phone call from our partner in India with news of a devastating fire that had destroyed hundreds of homes in one of the communities where we have been working for the last four years.

Naturally our partner was eager to respond, however needed our support to provide immediate care to those families who had lost everything. This is where you, our wonderful supporters, stepped in.

Thanks to your generous donations, within hours of reaching out to us, the team in Delhi were able to respond on the ground; providing

emergency care including clothes, toiletries, food and blankets to those who had been worst affected.

To add to an already tragic situation, many of the children in the community were due to sit exams in the next few weeks and were heartbroken to lose their school books and bags in the fire. However, with your support, the team were able to construct a temporary shelter where over a hundred children could attend education sessions and receive new uniforms, stationery, books and schoolbags to support their learning and encourage them to continue attending school.

Over the coming months, our partner will continue to support the children as the community around them begins to rebuild.



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With a murder rate higher than many countries at war, El Salvador is currently one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a child. According to a recent report by UNICEF, 52% of children living there will have experienced some form of violence in the past month.

Street children in El Salvador often leave home due to poverty, domestic or sexual abuse or a breakdown in family relationships. However, on the streets they are often vulnerable to even greater harm. This vulnerability increases if they are not registered - no one knows that they exist, and no one sees them, except those looking to exploit them.

Brought up by his grandmother following the death of his mother, Carlos is one of the estimated 670,000 children in El Salvador whose birth was not registered. When his grandmother also sadly died, Carlos went to live with his father; however, his father's issues with alcohol dependency meant he was unable to properly care for him and Carlos was soon moved into residential care.

Carlos recalls that this was an incredibly difficult time in his life; he missed home and his family and found it hard to adjust. Eventually, he decided to run away.

Soon after, Carlos found himself on the streets and, with nowhere else to go, he slept there for the night. Nights became weeks, which became months, and Carlos, like many other unregistered street children in El Salvador, went unnoticed by the authorities. Alone, terrified and under the watchful eyes of gang members patrolling the city, he soon turned to drugs to escape the fear and loneliness he felt.

Gang members rule the streets in San Salvador and the fear and oppression is palpable. For the children and young people living and working there, the possibility of being recruited into one of the country's notorious criminal gangs is an ever-present threat. There are an estimated 20,000 to 35,000 young Salvadorans who belong to gangs, with the average age of joining just 15. Social exclusion is cited as a key reason for joining a gang who, on the surface, offer those

whom society has disregarded an alternative source of safety, security and identity.

Our partner in El Salvador met Carlos on the streets and learnt about his situation. After gaining his trust, and with his permission, they sought the support of the healthcare services to help Carlos with his substance abuse. However, without his identity documents he was refused care. Carlos explains that during this time he felt worthless and humiliated. **"You're not worth it. You do not matter."** became a phrase imprinted in his mind, believing those around him who told him, **"If you die on the streets unregistered, no one cares."** Desperate for a sense of belonging and purpose, as well as needing to earn money to survive, the lure of gang-life loomed over him.

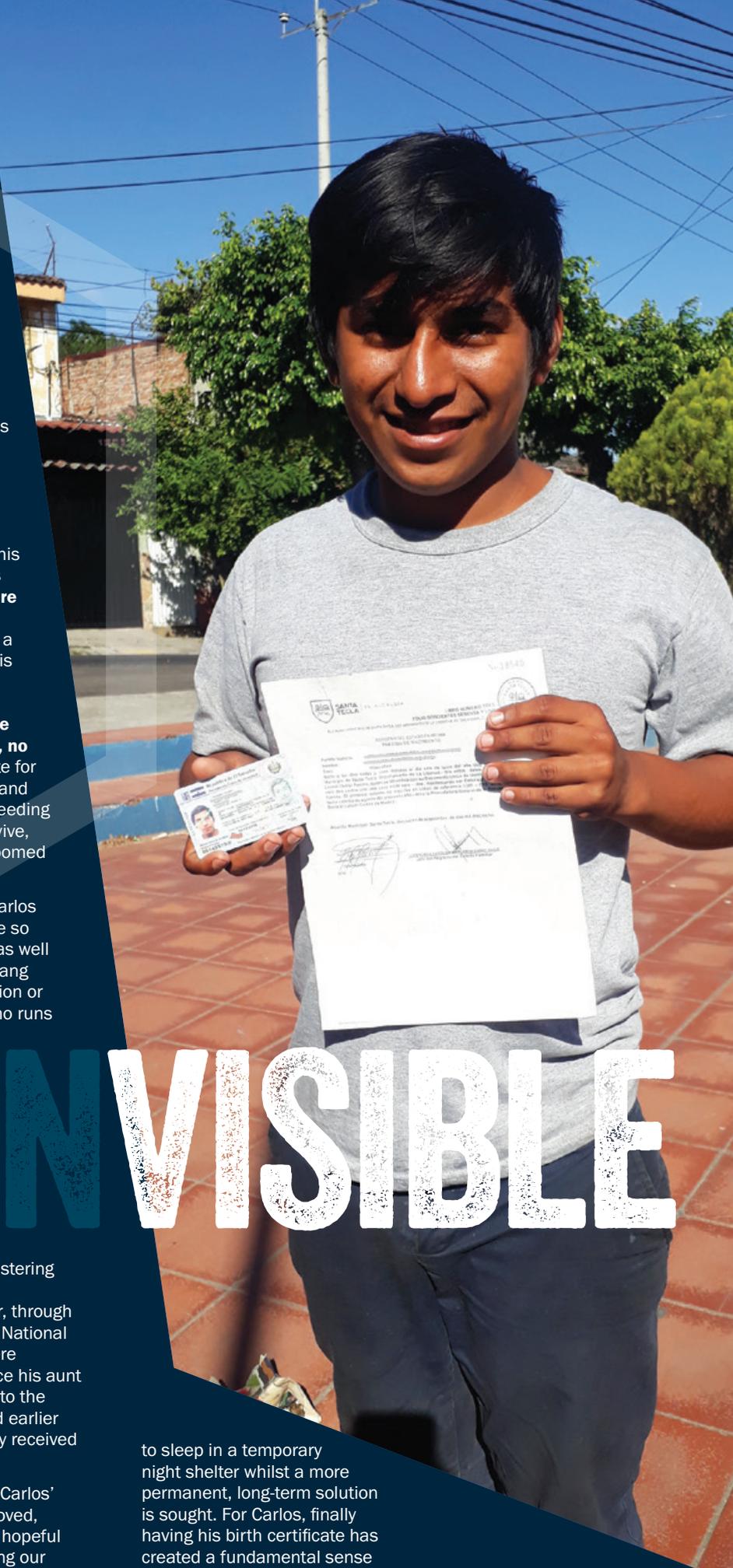
Determined to help Carlos access the support he so desperately needed, as well as protect him from gang recruitment, exploitation or worse, our partner who runs the Birth Registration project in El Salvador took on his case. With no information about his family or the institution he had stayed in, the process of registering Carlos was incredibly complicated. However, through coordination with the National Registry, the team were eventually able to trace his aunt and present his case to the family law courts. And earlier this year, Carlos finally received his birth certificate.

Now he is registered, Carlos' self-esteem has improved, and he is much more hopeful about the future, telling our partner he dreams of becoming a carpenter. He is currently receiving support through a drug rehabilitation programme and has found a safe place

to sleep in a temporary night shelter whilst a more permanent, long-term solution is sought. For Carlos, finally having his birth certificate has created a fundamental sense of self-worth that has been a vital first step in helping him to believe he is worthy of a life away from the streets - and the gangs that inhabit them.

Keep an eye on our supporter magazine over the coming months for further news and updates about our Birth Registration work.

# INVISIBLE





# USE YOUR TALENTS TO CHANGE THE WORLD FOR STREET CHILDREN

Organise a fundraising event with your friends and family. Give us a call today on **01908 360080** so we can send you some resources and help you plan those all-important details. Thank you!



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