

CHILD LABOUR STORIES

ALEJANDRA

Twelve-year-old Alejandra is woken up at four in the morning by her father, Don José. She does not go to school, but goes to collect curiles, small molluscs in the mangrove swamps on the island of Espiritu Santo in Usulután, El Salvador.

In the rush to get to work, Alejandra does not take time to eat breakfast. It is more important to make sure she has the things she needs to make it through a workday that can mean spending up to 14 hours in the mud. These items include about a dozen cigars and at least four pills to keep her from falling asleep. A good part of the money that she earns goes to buy these things.

In the mangrove swamp without shoes, Alejandra has to face bad weather, mosquito bites and cuts and scrapes from having to pull the curiles out from deep in the mud. The cigars help to repel the mosquitoes, but when she runs out of cigars Alejandra has to put up with the insects as she moves from branch to branch and from one area to another in search of shells. When she returns from work, her body is nearly always covered with bites.

She earns very little. If she is lucky in one day Alejandra manages to collect two baskets of curiles (150 shells), worth little more than 12 colones, or \$1.40. Alejandra, who has seven younger brothers and sisters, has no time to go to school or play with other children. Anyway, she prefers not to play with other children because they say she smells bad and exclude her from their games for being a curiles worker.

Little by little Alejandra has lost her self-esteem. Like the other children who work collecting curiles, she feels separate from the rest of society. For Alejandra, life seems like a tunnel with no exit.

HAMISI

Even though he is only 11 years old, Hamisi already has had a career as a miner. He dropped out of his third year of primary school and left his home village of Makumira in Tanzania after his father was unable to pay for his uniform and school fees. Although Hamisi's parents have their own half-acre coffee farm, their income fell sharply because of the decline in the market price for coffee throughout the world.

Hamisi had heard stories of people making money from mining and decided to try his luck. He asked his mother for a small amount of money to buy some socks and other items, but instead used this for the bus fare to Mererani, a town in northern Tanzania about 70 kilometres from his home.

When he arrived at the village, he approached a boy and asked him where the mining site was located. It was very difficult for him to get work right away because he was a newcomer and had no relatives there, but he managed to make friends with some children who knew the place and could help him.

After several days of hanging around the mining site, he was hired by one of owners to work as an assistant "errands" boy. The following day, he and another child of his age were sent down into the pit, where the gemstone Tanzanite was being mined, to deliver tools and bring up used bottles of drinking water.

From that day, he worked as a service boy, going back and forth between the surface and the pits. "You have got to get deep into the mining pit by a rope, take what you have been ordered and then go back to the surface," Hamisi says.

The inside of the mining pit, which can be as deep as 300 metres, is totally dark and extremely hot. Those who go into the mine need to wear a special torch (or flashlight) on their foreheads to find their way around. Their skin turns to black because of the humidity and heat as well as the mud, Hamisi says.

"I nearly suffocated inside the pits due to an inadequate supply of oxygen," he adds. At the mining sites and in the township children like Hamisi are called "nyokas", or "snake boys", because they crawl along the small tunnels underground just like snakes. The health of the snake boys is very poor, as they breathe in the harmful graphite dust found in the mines and they do not have enough to eat. Hamisi often worked up to 18 hours a day with only one meal of buns and boiled or cooked cassava.

Children working in the Mererani mines earn the equivalent of between 60 cents and \$1.20 a day when they are given tasks to do. Some children look through the gravel left by the pit owners in the hope of finding a gemstone. When they do, which is only very rarely, they can earn between \$24 and \$122. It is because of stories of finding gemstones that children like Hamisi are attracted to the mines.

But like many others, Hamisi was disappointed by the terrible conditions and he did not make the fortune that he had heard about.

SANDY

Sandy can't see his hands in the darkness of his shack made from palm bark and zinc on a hillside in the Dominican Republic. But he feels them because of the pain from wounds on his left thumb caused by the knife he uses to trim garlic plants. It is dawn and he has to hurry if he is to get a place in the landowner's truck. He jumps from the worn mattress that he shares with three other brothers. He doesn't have breakfast because there isn't any. Nor does he wear working boots because he has none.

Sandy manages to climb into the back of the truck before the others, who are adults and other children like him, without a childhood. In the cold and fog, the icy wind cuts his unprotected face. Sandy doesn't look beyond his hands and forgets his discomfort. His hands are his most valuable

working assets. They pick potatoes, extract onions, dig up lettuce, behead beets and cut and gather garlic bulbs. He knows that he can bring home between 80 and 120 pesos, or \$5 to \$7, to contribute to the low family income and to buy a pair of shoes. He works in the fields every day from dawn to the middle of the afternoon.

Sandy does not go to school. For a short time a few years ago, when the family lived in the mountains, he took a long and steep road to go to classes. "But, we were so far away that he never learned anything," says his mother, Viola Delgado. "How could he learn if with the sweating of the trek he forgot what he was taught in school?" A mother of eight children, the 40-year-old Mrs. Delgado is illiterate, like her husband.

In her hut, only a thin sheet separates the cramped "living room" from the beds. A wooden table and wobbly chairs make up the furnishings. Like other huts in El Chorro, there is no electricity or running water. There is no nearby faucet or toilet. El Chorro is on a hill above the Constanza valley, which is the most fertile in the country. The people living in these huts, about five minutes from town, are farm workers who have come here because there is plenty of agricultural work. But they remain poor because pay is so low.

As soon as they reach a certain height and age, the children go with their parents to the plantations. They are exposed to the excessive chemicals, or herbicides and pesticides, that are applied to the fields. They are often barefoot and underfed -- they drink bottled refreshment to keep them going during the workday. The children are often sick.

Sandy says he would like to study and continue to help his family. His mother also would like him to go to school. "It's more advantageous for me if they go to school, even if they don't earn anything, for they don't make much with a day's work anyway."

There are helpers and community workers in Constanza and El Chorro who are encouraging the children to go to school. They see a big difference in the children after just a short time at school. The kids speak better, keep their notebooks tidy and are interested in school, not earning money. Sandy will soon be one of those children.