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## In Mexico, Grassroots Efforts to Combat Violence and Poverty

by Lindajoy Fenley

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In parts of rural Mexico, where many people cower and succumb to drug cartel extortion, others counter the threats of crime and poverty by offering positive activities for young people. Although the wave of violence the country has experienced for the past 20 years hasn't subsided—government statistics reveal continuing increases in homicide and other violent crimes in most of the country's 32 states—programs focusing on music, education, and community involvement have shown positive results even in areas where problems persist ([SourceMex, Aug. 30, 2017](#)).

### *Traditional music in Guerrero*

In the Tierra Caliente (Hot Land) of southwestern Mexico, a region troubled with narco-driven crime, music schools have popped up in many small towns, including Tlalchapa, Tlapehuala, Zirándaro, and Arcelia, in Guerrero; and Zicuirán, Copuyo, and Apatzingán, in Michoacán. Although many of the places where children learn to play instruments and dance to traditional music are independent endeavors, the government occasionally contributes, sometimes in reaction to the violence. El Tecolote Cultural Center in Arcelia, for example, got help from the government in the wake of a tragedy that had attracted international condemnation.

"For some time, there has been a wave of violence in Mexico, especially in Guerrero, that has overwhelmed communities," Hernán Nava, the son of the independent cultural center's founder and director, told the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB). "Then, in late 2014, something quite serious happened—the disappearance of 43 students in Ayotzinapa. Because of that, the state governor was replaced" ([SourceMex, Oct. 15, 2014](#), [Dec. 16, 2015](#), [Sept. 28, 2016](#), [June 28, 2017](#)).

When Rogelio Ortega became interim governor of Guerrero in 2014 ([SourceMex, Nov. 4, 2015](#)), he issued a call for positive projects in impoverished areas such as Tierra Caliente, said Nava, a conservatory student at the time. Aware that his father and Ortega knew each other, he decided it was the moment to make one of his dreams a reality. With the help of some of his conservatory friends willing to take six-hour bus rides to Arcelia twice a month, plus the state funding made available after the Ayotzinapa tragedy, he created a music group he called Orquesta Tradicional Calentana.

According to Nava, the value of the orchestra goes beyond enjoying music and sharing his passion for it with others. He said he is absolutely sure that out of the 40 orchestra members, there are at least four or five kids who would have fallen in with criminal elements if not for their having embraced cultural activities at El Tecolote. "The orchestra is like a ray of light," he said.

In addition to the orchestra—which has performed in Mexico City, as well as in many of Guerrero's major cities, such as Chilpancingo, Acapulco, Taxco, and Zihuatanejo—El Tecolote is home to theater groups and music and dance workshops that attract over 200 children and teenagers every Saturday from September to July. Nava, who at 26 just graduated from the Conservatorio del Estado de

Mexico, said he will now focus his attention on the orchestra as well as on Los Nietos de Don Juan, a traditional group of Calentano musicians that includes himself, his younger sister, and two other musicians who learned to play at the traditional music of Tierra Caliente at El Tecolote.

### *Celebrity support*

Los Nietos will travel to Barcelona, Spain, in October both to perform and to learn about Catalonian culture. Nava is one of five Tecolote students who have already been to that part of Spain, but his father, Josafat Nava, the activist actor and teacher who founded El Tecolote two decades ago, will be going for the first time.

The trip to Barcelona is a gift of the Fundación María Katzarava, whose director, Enid Negrete, great-niece of the late Mexican singer-actor Jorge Negrete, became one of the center's most distinguished supporters after she offered a government-sponsored theater workshop there in 1994. She has returned annually to coach young actors and, five years ago, she launched a scholarship program that takes one Tecolote musician per year to visit Barcelona, where she now lives.

### *Scholarships for Oaxacan girls*

Celebrity support has also strengthened a scholarship program for indigenous girls in the southern state of Oaxaca. The Fondo Guadalupe Musalem (FGM), which provides scholarship money to encourage indigenous girls from villages throughout the state to stay in school, got a shot in the arm 15 years ago from singer Lila Downs. "Lila is our spokesperson and that is very important for us," said María del Rocío Blancas, the Fondo coordinator, noting an annual concert in which Downs gives all proceeds to the project is a major fundraiser.

The Fondo was created in 1995 by friends of the late Guadalupe Musalem—founder of the Grupo de Estudios sobre la Mujer Rosario Castellanos A.C.—with the surplus left from funds raised for Musalem's medical expenses at the time of her death. It is a response to economic and social needs, though it also addresses issues of domestic violence.

"Unlike other entities and other contexts, a high percentage of young women in Oaxaca cannot continue their upper secondary education for economic reasons," a note in the Fondo's website explains. "In addition, there are cultural factors such as machismo, whose social practice seeks to maintain the belief that men are superior to women" ([SourceMex, Aug. 20, 2014](#)).

Although Blancas said she is not aware of a direct connection between Downs' endorsement and the scholarship program's growth, statistics show that the number of girls in the program—which grew to four per year in 2000-2001 after hovering between one and two a year for several years—shot up to eight after Downs became involved. The program has had more than 20 scholarship recipients every year since 2010-2011.

This year, 25 girls will receive 2,000 pesos (approximately US\$110) per month to support their schooling in remote villages throughout the state. Another 11 young women get a 3,000-peso monthly stipend to help with college expenses; those who study in the city of Oaxaca are allowed to live in the organization's headquarters.

The high school students attend classes in their municipalities, but come to the city of Oaxaca once a month for academic enrichment programs to bring them up to par in physics, chemistry, and

mathematics. They also receive medical and psychological attention and are assigned a tutor in the city who can help them with personal and/or academic issues.

Marcela Taboada, a professional photographer living in Oaxaca, has trained the girls in photography for three years and helped produce a fundraising calendar featuring their black-and-white images. This summer, Ana Luisa Anza, author of more than a dozen children's books and editor of *Cuartoscuro* magazine, who offered a two-day creative writing class, reported she was impressed with the girls' writing ability. On three occasions, the US Embassy has financed special programs: In 2011 and 2012, it contributed to one on using video for education or work, and in 2014, one on preventing violence during courtship.

The Fondo's graduates become leaders, working to improve living conditions in their communities, according to Blancas. Four have been honored with the National Youth Prize and one with the state equivalent, she said. One young woman told her that she has persuaded her community to allow women to participate in traditional assemblies and will now work to get voting rights for women. A filmmaker who is one of the program's early graduates is now involved in four separate projects, including a monthly non-commercial film screening project in her community and a video training program that involves many other communities.

### *Traditional activities among Zoques of Chiapas*

Meanwhile, a renaissance of traditional mayordomía culture among the Zoque peoples of northern Chiapas state is strengthening a healthy lifestyle among the youth, according to Fernando Hajar, a cultural promoter and producer of musical recordings.

Hajar, who himself has been accepted into a Zoque mayordomía musical group, says that there are now at least five traditional flute and drum groups in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, up from the single one he found when he moved there from Mexico City eight years ago.

These groups belong to the Zoque system of mayordomía, a blend of pre-Hispanic and Roman Catholic beliefs and responsibilities that has survived for five centuries, Hajar explained. "There is a resurgence [of traditional culture], especially of pito y tambor. And it's important to mention the presence of children and adolescents," he said. "There are more than eight piteros [cane flute players] and more than 50 tamboreros [drummers]" in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, not to mention numerous others in the northern part of this southernmost state.

Chiapas, which borders with Guatemala, faces less violence than states in Mexico's central and northern areas. According to government statistics, there were 260 homicides and 11 kidnappings in Chiapas in the first half of 2017. Comparable figures for the southwestern state of Guerrero were 1,161 homicides, and 34 kidnappings; in the central state of Mexico, which nearly surrounds Mexico City, 1,026 homicides and 83 kidnappings; and in the northern states of Sinaloa and Tamaulipas, 747 homicides and 5 kidnappings, and 336 homicides and 85 kidnappings, respectively.

While Chiapas doesn't face the same degree of crime found in central and northern states, Hajar says he believes "the problem of violence that is present in many parts of Mexico due to drug trafficking and other illegal activities is also reflected in Chiapas ... Fortunately in Tuxtla and the Zoque region, this presence of the flute and drum music is recapturing many children and adolescents. It can counter violence as we have seen in other parts of Mexico and Latin America. It's like an element of prevention."

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