

Independent Appeal: Bringing hope to abused children from the streets

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Street children get a new life with Juconi, supported by The Independent Christmas Appeal

When the boy known as Pedro Jonathan was just eight years old, he ran away from the house he shared with his mother and stepfather in Mexico City. For a while he lived on the street, then he hopped on a bus in the hope of finding a better life elsewhere.

Pedro Jonathan had been a victim of serial abandonments – first by his father, who never participated in his life at all, then by his mother, who took off with her new man and left him in the care of his grandmother in Acapulco, and finally by the grandmother, who found him a burden and sent him back to his mother in the big city.

Pedro Jonathan doesn't like to talk about what happened in the final few months before he ran away, but it clearly had to do with the overbearing authoritarianism of his stepfather and the sense that nobody really wanted him. Nobody took the trouble to send him to school regularly, and he never finished his first year of primary education.

Soon after he hopped on that bus, to a small provincial town called Acatlan, his young life hit rock bottom. The family he hoped would take care of him couldn't cope with him either. A government agency took him to a shelter in Puebla, south-east of Mexico City, where he soon became involved in a nasty fight and was sent to a juvenile detention centre.

That was where he was found by Juconi, a charity specialising in rehabilitating street children which is funded by the International Children's Trust and is one of the three charities being supported in this year's *Independent Christmas Appeal*. They took him into their residential centre, gave him clothes and a bunk bed, and embarked on a painfully long process of education and therapy – essentially, taking on the multiple roles of educator, parent, psychologist and occupational therapist.

Pedro Jonathan is now 16, and the "impulsive, explosive" child of a few years ago has become much calmer. Since the beginning of the year, he has been enrolled in a public secondary school, where he enjoys playing the trumpet and has every intention of graduating in two years. He still lives in a residence run by Juconi and maintains close contact with his educators.

Ask him about any painful personal subject and his eyes will go just a little blank and his head will point down as he gives a perfunctory answer, but the happy fact is that he now has a shot at a functional sort of life where, eight years ago, he had next to none.

Juconi – short for Junto con las niñas y los niños or Together with the girls and boys – has been helping children like Pedro Jonathan for the past 18 years and pioneering techniques for rehabilitating children from the worst, most abusive backgrounds. Juconi finds many with untreated second-degree burns, or whip marks where they were beaten with electrical cord, or evidence that they were trussed and caged like animals, or appalling histories of sexual abuse.

Puebla takes in about 350 street children each year, many of whom have severed all ties with their closest relatives.

Some, like Pedro Jonathan, were fending for themselves on the streets. Others might have had a meagre living washing car windows at traffic lights, or doing fire-eating acts on street corners. Less vulnerable children, who work in and around Puebla's main food market where their mothers have jobs, go to a drop-in centre Juconi runs near the market, and sleep at home. What they have in common is not so much poverty – although that is a common theme – as long, inter-generational histories of family violence.

At Juconi House, where Pedro Jonathan lived for close to five years, routine and order are the watchword. The children are responsible for keeping their clothes washed and tidy and spend the day shuttling between basic literacy and numeracy classes, therapy sessions, sports, practical activities and group meetings. Every child is given three sets of clothes and earn more as they gain the educators' trust.

The attractive house, a two-storey structure built around an internal courtyard with blue and white tiles and red brick, is spotlessly clean.

Juconi's Puebla operation's director Alison Lane said: "We've deliberately created an organised, predictable environment, in contrast to the chaos of living in the streets."

Juconi has developed ways for the children – and family members who want to be involved – to express their feelings. Everyone rates themselves on a "mood thermometer" where zero means perfect happiness and 10 means sad and angry enough to burst. Those who feel overwhelmed are encouraged to work on a punch bag, use a ball in the playground or listen to music. The content of individual therapy sessions is determined entirely by the children. At some point in the process, every child will rebel – usually the sign of a turning point as rebellion is seen as an important step towards full engagement. Juconi tracks its graduates for 10 years. Ms Lane said: "We have an 80 per cent success rate which means 80 per cent of kids are off the streets and have their family around them once more."