

The Story of Roberto Morales

By Jhon Evaristo Flores

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"Have you heard, Jhon?" my school friends asked me at lunch break. "They say Roberto Morales was shot and killed by the military this morning!"

The awful words echoed in my ears and crushed my heart. Roberto and I had grown up together in the same neighborhood in Ciudad Bolivar, the poorest and most crime-infested district of Bogotá, Colombia. We were friends and I knew his mother and brother. I knew nothing of his father. Because they were poor, Roberto quit school so that he could work and help out. I was poor too, but I was an excellent student and had received a scholarship for school. I had a dream of finishing school and living a life different from my mother's sad and angry life; even though I also had to work to help my mother, who was raising seven children alone. And so, I was in school the morning that 15-year-old Roberto was shot in the street.

"Who told you this?" I asked desperately. "How do you know this is true?" I prayed for some flaw in the story that would prove it was not true; but in my heart, I knew that yet another friend of mine was dead.

Young people were being killed all the time in the streets of Ciudad Bolivar. Our district was known as the most violent district in Bogotá and was called "*zona roja*," the dangerous "red zone." It was a district infested with youth gangs and members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrilla group. Because of the negative image of Ciudad Bolivar, most people in Bogotá thought that people from there were very dangerous criminals, especially youth. The government had a policy to eliminate "that problem." But eliminating "that problem" meant eliminating our youth! "Grupos de Limpieza Social" (Groups to Clean Society), or "Escuadrones de la Muerte" (Squadrons of Death) as we called them, were formed. More than 500 youth were killed in Ciudad Bolivar by 1992 and no one came forward to claim responsibility. Even with all of this killing going on, it was uncommon for students to be killed. The perception was that if you went to school you were "good"; young people who didn't go to school were viewed as "bad" or in gangs. No one asked if you were out of school working to help your poor family; you were automatically "that problem."

Roberto had been playing ball in the street with a friend that morning. They didn't have a real ball. They were using a rock to play catch. One of the boys let go with a curve ball that was intercepted by a military bus just making the turn onto the street where the boys were playing. The rock went sailing through one of the open windows. The boys froze. The bus stopped immediately. A captain got off the bus and before the boys could explain what had happened, he took aim and without a word, shot Roberto. He then got back on the bus, which lumbered on down the road, leaving Roberto dead on the street. His stunned friend ran to Roberto's home to tell his mother.

Grief-stricken, Maria Morales went to the authorities to demand answers for the killing of her son, but they ignored her pleadings. Searching for help, Roberto's mother remembered that I had joined the Conscientious Objection group that had been organizing nonviolent actions. (In spite of all the violence in Ciudad Bolivar, there were many organizations and people like me

working and developing workshops, trainings, art, carnivals, public debates, sports, and other similar activities to create a better and safer place to grow and live.) She came to us for help.

Until the killing of Roberto, no one had done anything. The killing of Roberto mobilized us. We were sad and tired and couldn't bear the killings of our youth any more. We decided to protest the authorities. We planned our demonstration very carefully. Our goal was to form a commission to negotiate with the government. We decided democratically elected representatives from our group for the commission, prior to the demonstration. I was one of the representatives elected. The day of the protest we would demand representatives from the government meet with us and organize the commission.

There were about 60 or 70 of us in the Nonviolent Action Group. Most of us were youth between 13 and 17 years old; I was 14. There were some adults including Roberto's mother and some of her friends with their young children. They wanted to make people conscious of the social problems in Ciudad Bolivar. Even though we were all sad because of the death of Roberto, we were also full of hope that at last we were going to have answers from the government authorities.

The demonstration took place on a sunny morning only a few days after Roberto was killed. We all dressed in black and white, mostly jeans and T-shirts, to symbolize death and life. We carried placards that said, "Queremos Morirnos De Viejos" ("We Want To Die of Old Age") and "Para Que La Vida Siga Siendo Joven" (Life Is For the Young"). We were met by 100 policemen carrying shields, batons, guns, and gas canisters. It was their practice to use their shields to enclose people and then beat them with their batons. We were very frightened, but before they could hit us, we began the "Carnival of Life" we had planned. We started dancing and playing instruments and joining in games. The police didn't know what to make of us. They had never seen protestors all dressed alike and had certainly never seen them dance and sing! Bystanders joined the "Carnival." Even some of the police started dancing with us! Instead of beating us, they began talking to us and asking us why we were protesting. We realized that they didn't know why they were planning to hit us; they only obey orders.

The results of that "Carnival of Life" were felt almost immediately. Within two months, a public debate was organized by both representatives from our group and the government authorities in a public school in Ciudad Bolivar. Every social organization in the district, as well as all the teachers, students, and parents participated. More than 2000 attended. The outcome was the government opening a Human Rights office for youth in Ciudad Bolivar and promising more investment in education, health, recreation and sports, culture and art, employment and social security, especially for youth. Other killings were investigated, and military/police promised better communication among themselves and the community.

After this public debate the situation in Ciudad Bolivar changed dramatically. For the first time, a high-ranking military officer was found guilty for the killing of a boy in Ciudad Bolivar. People were filled with confidence and continued to speak out to their government, which was now listening to them. The "Carnival of Life," which was created because of the killing of my friend, had returned hope and dreams to the mothers and children of Ciudad Bolivar.