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Dear Friend:

Today shafts of gold slice frost-blue shade, crystalline winter, tentative warmth and bone-numbing chill. I have just come inside and my fingers are clumsy with cold.

Such a change from Bahia. I returned barely a week ago and I am still in that strange space that is neither in one place nor the other. In Bahia, the school year was ending, and the girls were preparing for their exams. I walked with Rita in the mornings as she bought vegetables from the local street vendors. With the help of Rotary, Bahia Street Center now has two freezers so Rita can buy the meat for the food program in bulk, a fantastic savings in both time and funds. But she buys the vegetables daily, and always from these local vendors who bring in their produce from the countryside and sell it on the streets from their wheeled carts. As we walked from cart to cart, the vendors called out to Rita, telling her about the special produce they had saved just for her. Rita says that buying from these vendors not only gives her the best vegetables, but also makes Bahia Street money work doubly, not only feeding the girls and other hungry members of their community, but also helping to support these vendors in their efforts to make an honorable if meager living.

On the final Saturday I was in Bahia, the girls gave an end-of-year performance at a local theater. I have been lucky enough to attend several of these performances over the years, yet they continually amaze me with their sophistication and quality. This year, the girls wrote, directed and performed two presentations. The first was a play that took some of the stories of the *orixas*, the saints of the African-Brazilian religion of Candomblé, and rewrote them from a distinctly feminist perspective. The female saints completely upstaged the male ones, putting them in their places in ways that caused the entire audience to nearly fall off their chairs in laughter. It was very funny, clever and powerful to all who watched. Then the girls performed a hip-hop song and dance, words and lyrics written by two of the girls. It was beautiful! I asked particularly about the voice of one of the girls—it sounded professional to me. Rita smiled, “Yes, we’ve been encouraging her. I think we may have found a way to get her singing lessons.”

At the end of the performance, Rosana, the girl I wrote about in my last letter, got up—this is the girl who everyone thought was incapable of learning before she came to Bahia Street. She wrote much of the play and also played a central role. She giggled then began strutting across the stage, egged on by the other girls. “I am Black,” she chanted, “I am strong. I am smart. And we will change the world!” Then she was overcome with shyness and retreated to a group of her close friends while the other girls all cheered. She then reemerged, her face serious. “And who I have to thank for this is my mother and Bahia Street. Without either one, I would have nothing.”

Rosana, her sister and her mother live in the corner of an abandoned ancient fort. They have no sewage facilities; rats run along the cracks of the building, human and animal feces litter the area in front of their small space; not a home by any definition, just a corner in a ruined building. The mother sells water in a Styrofoam box in the streets to feed them. And at fourteen, Rosana has just passed her exams to enter high school.

Carol's family thought she had a 'weak head.' The family—Carol, her mother, and sister—live in a borrowed space, rooms the government sometimes lets the most impoverished families use. Carol has emerged as one of the brightest girls at Bahia Street. She recently came to the Center complaining that a neighbor was standing beside the window, staring at her sister as she lay sleeping. Every day as she came out, the man was waiting nearby. Because of the Bahia Street's sexual violence training and assertiveness classes, Carol knew that it was wrong, and that she and her sister could do something about what was clearly becoming an increasing danger. She reported him to the central police precinct and told Rita, who plans to confront the man. Carol understands that she can take legal action against the neighbor for stalking if he doesn't leave, and that she can take steps in advance before the situation grows worse. This is entirely because of the recent sexual violence and assertiveness training that Bahia Street includes with all its educational programs.


I was in Brazil this time with a group of students from the University of Washington. These were 'minority' students (as defined by the University), immigrants or students who are the first people in their family to attend university. The group was a virtual United Nations with students from Vietnam, Ethiopia, Mexico, Argentina, as well as Native Americans. Several of the students have parents who are migrant workers, and most came from single parent households and were brought up in rough, poor neighborhoods. The idea of the course is to give these students a chance to meet others who have also struggled, who are non-white but who, because of the flukes of history, slavery and migration, ended up in Bahia instead of the United States. The students stayed with local Bahia students in a small town outside Salvador. For the U.S. students, the experience was jolting as they realized that, although they have been poor here and have struggled, there are others in the world whose conditions are much worse—and who are, like them, still struggling, studying and succeeding. The Brazilian students also had a revelation that the face of the United States also included these people who are so seldom represented in our media and promotions abroad.

And next week, Rita and Bahia Street are being presented with the Ivy Humanitarian Award, presented by the Brazilian Ambassador to the Organization of American States in Washington D.C. I feel very honored that Bahia Street's work is being recognized in this way.

But as much as I appreciate such awards, I most appreciate the commitment and community of all of you. I am finishing this letter in the dark hour before dawn and reflecting on what a small group of dedicated people can do. We now have twelve girls in university, girls are going out into their public schools demanding change—and teachers are listening. Rita has set up an expanded computer lab and will be offering classes to community members; they are giving classes on sexuality, reproduction, violence prevention, health, literacy, numeracy and parenting to the caregivers of the girls and other community members. With the support we have received this year, the top floor of the Bahia Street Center has been closed and tiled in preparation for a science lab! And we are doing all this together. The US dollar isn't going as far right now, but as yet we have not had to cut programs. Thank you for your help keeping Bahia Street strong.

As I glance out my window, I see the dawn has arrived.

Warmest hugs,



Margaret

Dr. Margaret Willson
Bahia Street International Director