

November 28<sup>th</sup>, 2011

Dear Friends,

It is a privilege for me to take on the role of International Director of Bahia Street from Dr. Margaret Willson. Brazilian Director Rita Conceição, the Board of Bahia Street USA and the Trustees of the Bahia Street Trust in Britain have given me their vote of confidence to continue the mission of Bahia Street. I look forward to working with all of you in the Bahia Street community here in the US, in the UK and in Brazil.

This year the weather in Salvador has been the most severe I have experienced since my first visit in 2007—torrential rain and howling winds for days on end. Since that visit I have noticed a marked deterioration in the living conditions in Salvador. Each and every day I see people digging through the piles of garbage on the sidewalks in search of food, families on the street sleeping on dirty mattresses, barefoot and dirty children playing in abandoned buildings and, worst of all, hearing of the shocking five to 10 teens and young adults murdered each weekend. One cannot escape the dire situation in Salvador.

Over the past six weeks I have collaborated closely with Rita and her competent staff. We discussed the complexities and realities of both sustaining and improving the programs at Bahia Street, and the increasing difficulties of adapting the programs to the African-Brazilian community's growing needs.

The building looks better than ever. There are new, durable floors on each level and a renovated kitchen which is able to accommodate the 100 lunches we prepare and serve each day. The main floor has been partitioned into a reception area, teacher lounge, administrative office and the office of the director...very professional.

The staff at Bahia Street is impressive. Arlete is a 2011 graduate of the *Universidade Catolica do Salvador* and the Administrative Coordinator at Bahia Street. She offered to take me to meet a 13 year old, who we will call Claudia, whose mother had removed her from the program so she could watch her little brother while the mother went begging on the streets. I followed Arlete to a graffiti-covered abandoned building on one of the main streets in the center of town. Inside, we walked around puddles strewn with garbage. The stench of human waste was overpowering. There were barking dogs and people shouting. Young men loitered around a torn-up sofa. We continued into the dark, watching every step so as not to fall into an exposed open area while at the same time avoiding the makeshift electric cords that were hanging precipitously above us. We made it to the girl's home at the back of the dilapidated building. Someone opened the door. There were dirt floors. Inside we found Claudia and a rail-thin boy about five years old wearing only a T-shirt. Claudia came out while her mother screamed at her from inside. Arlete told Claudia she was missed at Bahia Street and asked her to come back to the program. Claudia shrugged her shoulders and mumbled something, and we left.

Claudia's story is a reality at Bahia Street but there are brighter realities as well. Juliana is the Coordinator of the Vestibular Prep Program (entrance exam required to enter the university) at Bahia Street. At age three, Juliana's mother refused to take care of her anymore so she was sent to the interior to live with her eight cousins and her aunt, who worked in a cigar factory. When Juliana was 13, she dropped out of school and worked as a domestic for four years. In the evenings, she and the rest of the cousins would help her aunt sort tobacco leaves so she could meet her quota the next day at the factory.

Juliana moved back to Salvador and heard about Bahia Street. Rita invited her to attend, and she completed the program in 2001. Juliana also returned to high school and graduated. At Bahia Street Juliana was exposed to new ideas and given a chance to imagine a better future. Prior to Bahia Street, her only expectation was to wash clothes or sort tobacco. Juliana told me she had never heard the word "university" until she was 15. Now, Juliana is finishing her second year in the library science/information technology program at the Federal University of Bahia in Salvador.

Our job is to teach these girls to believe in themselves and to instill in them a sense of dignity. As Eva Cristina, one of the alums studying for the university entrance exam and working at Bahia Street, told me, "The biggest obstacle to believing in myself was me. I was able to overcome my lack of confidence with the support of Bahia Street. Alone I couldn't have done it."

The teachers and programs at Bahia Street foster the development of self esteem, discipline and respect. The girls begin to understand these concepts and gradually internalize them, and believe they can achieve a different reality from what they know. They begin to envision a future that prior to Bahia Street was unimaginable. These girls grow into young women who are role models for the younger girls in the program. And the cycle continues.

It is a privilege to be a part of these girls' lives and to be a member of the concerned and caring community here, in Salvador and abroad. I look forward to meeting you and hope you will share your ideas and suggestions with me.

We appreciate your past support of Bahia Street. In addition to providing for the core programs, materials, lunches and uniforms, next year Rita plans to: initiate music and drama classes; enroll teachers and administrators in professional enrichment courses to improve writing skills and to learn strategies for working with underprivileged populations; and expand the English language curriculum.

I am asking for your continued support of Bahia Street; these programs require resources. We have made great strides over the past 15 years but there is still so much more to accomplish. Let us work together to break the cycles of poverty and violence through education and contribute in every way we can to opening the door to a brighter future for these young women and girls in Salvador.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Sofia Zieve  
International Director  
Bahia Street