



Rita Conceição

Co-founder, Bahia Street
Director, Bahia Street Center
Anthropologist
Community activist
Salvador, Brazil

Rita Conceição was born in a shantytown in 1959 in Salvador, a city of about three million in Bahia, Northeast Brazil. She is African-Brazilian in a city that is at least 80-percent African decent, considered the largest African city outside Africa. She was also born into grinding poverty from which only a tiny minority ever escape or get formal education beyond the first grade.

Rita was also born into a turbulent time. In 1964, Brazil's government was taken over by a military dictatorship that quickly repressed free speech and instituted economic policies that resulted in millions of landless or starving peasants who fled to the cities in hope of survival. The result is vast shantytowns that now surround every major city in Brazil. Inequality between the rich and the poor dramatically increased to establish a society that now boasts the greatest economic inequality in the world. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Brazilian intellectuals, protesters and activists were rounded up, tortured and 'disappeared.' Those who survived were those who had overseas contacts and could escape.

In the midst of this terrifying oppression, Rita began her own personal intellectual and political exploration. Starting at age nine, she began wandering far from her home, listening to those who were brave enough to speak out against the tyranny in their country, and began making friends with the leading intellectuals of Salvador at the time. She joined protest marches, learning as a small child to run from the police.

The people she met through these experiences encouraged her to study, and she eventually won a scholarship to a higher quality public school (a program now discontinued in Brazil). Then, when Rita was a teenager, someone gave her a camera. In a story chillingly similar to the central character of the film 'City of God,' Rita began to take photographs of what she saw in the shantytowns she knew so well. Such photos were impossible for outsiders to obtain. Rita also early became a political photographer, taking photos of protests that were then covertly passed from hand to hand as proof to others of resistance. In 1984, the Brazilian dictator allowed democratic elections in Brazil, but Rita's life of activism didn't stop.

She decided she wanted to study at university, an almost impossible aim for a poor African-Brazilian at this time. She studied for the difficult university exam, persevered, and after four attempts managed to pass with high enough marks to allow her to enter the Federal University of Bahia. This is the public university in Salvador and is free if you can get in. Ironically, however, it requires much higher grades than do the several other non-free private universities of the area. Rita studied sociology, also taking classes in anthropology. She also

continued with her political photography. She became the unofficial photographer for Lula, a well known union labor leader who fought for workers rights and equality in Brazil. Twice he ran for president of the country in campaigns where his posters were ripped from the walls by those in power, where marches by his supporters were greeted by baton and gun wielding police. Rita photographed it all and her photographs were printed in journals and the covers of books on workers rights.

Rita began other projects as well. She became the official documentarian in a project she designed and implemented, for the Church of the Blacks. This church has been an advocate for African Brazilian rights and equality since before Abolition in 1888. Rita worked in theater for some years and then got a job with the city of Salvador as a video technician. She also became known as about the only female skilled *capoeira angola* (an African Brazilian martial art) player in Bahia, and generally the only woman who would take the lead instruments in the often all male *capoeira angola* gatherings. Because of her personality and dedication, the male leaders of the *capoeira angola* community did not resent her for this intrusion, but respected her.

In the mid 1990s, Bahia elected to power as governor a man who already directed much of Bahia through his family connections and historical control. His government fired nearly all city workers, replacing those in lower level jobs with others at much lower wages. Rita was the only person in her department fired in this sweep. She was also the only African Brazil woman with a middle management position. So she sued the city for racial discrimination – and won.

Brazil is a much more racially mixed society than the United States. That tiny number of impoverished African Brazilians who make it out of poverty can move to mostly white middle class neighborhoods and mix almost entirely with the white middle class. Because such a class shift is possible, this is the choice all African-Brazilians take.

Except Rita. Rita has remained in the shantytown of her birth. She has built herself a reasonably secure and lovely apartment above her father's house. She has stayed there despite increasing violence and dangerous health conditions. When asked once why she remained, she replied, "No one is going to change our communities for us. If I don't care enough to stay, how can I expect activism from anyone else?"

In 1997, together with Dr. Margaret Willson, an anthropologist from the United States, Rita founded Bahia Street. With almost no initial money and only the support of local shantytown residents, they created a program to provide quality education for young woman and girls from Salvador's shantytowns. For the first two years, Rita dedicated herself to this project with no salary at all. After two years, the project was able to pay her US\$100 a month. Over the next two years, she only accepted US\$250 of this – to buy herself a new camera.

Bahia Street, as the program is now called, now employs a staff of fourteen, all former residents of Salvador's shantytowns, all African-Brazilians who have somehow managed to graduate from university. Sixty girls are now enrolled in a program that rivals the best academic education available in Salvador. The Bahia Street Center now offers a health program, teaching on sexual reproduction, violence, a councilor for the students, family councilors for the families of the students, nourishment for all students in the form of one hot meal a day and snacks, music and arts therapy programs and a multitude of other on-going projects.

Rita has worked for equality for African-Brazilians her whole life, giving particular attention to the children who live in the shantytowns of Salvador. Her work has inspired projects well beyond Bahia Street in other parts of the world. She won the World of Children Humanitarian Award in 2008 for her work on behalf of impoverished children. She accepted the Ivy Humanitarian Award of the Americas in Washington DC in December 2009.