

Madre Maria Luisa Foundation and the Jenaro Aguirre Elorriaga School of Petare, Venezuela

By Andreina Aguiar, Advisor for Madre Maria Luisa Foundation and Jenaro Elorriaga School of Petare in Venezuela

Summary

“A healthy and well-nourished child can study and learn.”

Mother María Luisa Casar, founder of the Jenaro Aguirre Elorriaga School



Founder Mother Maria Luisa Casar

Photo credit: Marisela Hoffman Mijares and Andreina Aguiar

The Jenaro Aguirre Elorriaga Primary School and the Madre María Luisa Casar Foundation form a micro-society where very committed civil society members, together with private companies and a religious congregation, join efforts to guarantee the comprehensive and integrated education of 400 children from the Barrio 24 de Marzo of the Caraqueña parish of Petare in Venezuela. 550 students have completed their primary education through 19 uninterrupted school years, in a country where the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has identified about 2.2 million children who need access to education.

Article

To have access to Petare, known as one of the largest and most dangerous neighborhoods (barrios) in Latin America, María Luisa Casar earned the respect of an entire community and with it a kind of "social license." Her work began little by little more than 20 years ago, recruiting out-of-school children through the labyrinthine stairs of various petareño sectors. Few know that Petare, one of the 32 parishes of Caracas, was a quiet agricultural village of Canarian immigrants that was founded 400 years ago under the name of "Dulce Nombre de Jesús de Petare." Today, it is home to more than 400,000 inhabitants in an area of just 40 square kilometers. There are marked social differences in this neighborhood. Those slightly more "fortunate" families live in humble one or two room houses near the public transportation stops, with little access to basic services and sanitation. But as they move further out into the mountainous depths, without any urban planning, so-called "ranchos" (shacks) are born, which exist in extreme poverty along with a winding set of steps that go up and down between blocks, tin roofs, electrical cables, garbage, and above all, a lack of formal law – just the "law of the streets" exists.

Hundreds of children are born there. Many of them live in overcrowded conditions, without a family structure or support, eating once or twice a day -- when they do -- and growing up surrounded by drugs, crime, and ignorance. According to the Venezuelan National Institute of Statistics, for every 100 people, only 32 are enrolled in the school system. Moreover, 600,000 students left school between 2012 and 2017. The educational system has reached a state of emergency in which more than half of Venezuelan teachers have fled the country and nearly 1,300 schools have closed. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) warned that more than 2.2 million children in Venezuela require access to education. And within this complex framework the Jenaro Aguirre Elorriaga Primary School operates.

When she was about to turn 60, María Luisa Casar, a nun of the Congregation of Esclavas de Cristo Rey (Slaves of Christ the King), focused her work as an educator in a sector called "Barrio 24 de Marzo."

Innovative Approach



Students Jenaro Aguirre Elorriaga Primary School

Photo Credit: Leo Alvarez

Casar's peculiar and outgoing character, tenacity, and recklessness, but above all her educational ideas, focused on the service of the most vulnerable, were the seeds of two institutions that have generated a profound social impact. The Jenaro Aguirre Elorriaga Primary School, that is charged with leading the implementation of the integrated educational model, and the Fundación Madre María Luisa Casar that seeks, keeps, and administers economic resources for sustainability of the project. Both make up a micro-society where very committed civil society people together with private companies and a religious congregation join efforts of all kinds to ensure the comprehensive and integrated education of 400 petareños children. To date, 550 children have completed elementary education through 19 uninterrupted school years. This dual institution structure is undoubtedly what makes it different from other educational institutions.

The Jenaro Aguirre Elorriaga Primary School's mission is focused first on providing children with the basic conditions necessary to ensure students' school performance. In a holistic setting, children who have not yet joined the formal education system are educated.

In the school canteen, students and staff receive a daily balanced lunch. During the course of a year, more than 80,000 meals are served. As a result, more than half of the students have been able to maintain an adequate weight and height, in fact this is true for 55% of children under five years of age and 64% of youth between age five and 19. However, the remaining students are at risk, with moderate weight and height, with a growing

number, currently 14.9%, of children under the age of five in need of immediate attention. They receive dietary supplements at the school to improve the condition of their health, and they are monitored and frequently evaluated. Furthermore, the entire school even school staff are given de-worming treatment every 6 months.



Ambulatory Medical Center

Photo Credit: Leo Alvarez

At the ambulatory facilities, not only children but also parents, caregivers, and other members of the Barrio 24 de Marzo community receive pediatric, gynecological, and dental services. For example, in 2019, there were

2,200 consultations, as well as health days for staff and all members of the community including home visits to patients who need special treatment including the elderly.

In addition, the Jenarian pedagogical and humanist vision seeks to offer equal opportunities to all of its students, regardless of their background or socioeconomic situation. This is why first-level partnerships are promoted in recognition of the power of collaboration. In particular, the instrumental skills of the educational pensum are complemented by the arts, music, and body expression.

For example, the "Pequeños Cantores del Jenaro" nucleus, sponsored by the MMG Foundation, is affiliated with the "Fundación Schola Cantorum de Venezuela" under the program "Construir Cantando." Through this project, the child not only experiences music through choral singing, but is also taught discipline, responsibility, and commitment to others.



Art Activities

Photo credit: Leo Alvarez

The school also promotes arts, music and body expression through a partnership with the Laboratory of Integrated Arts, an extracurricular program of the Center for Integrated Arts that strengthens cognitive and creative development, communication, and interpersonal skills, as well as children's social adaptability,

judgement, and cultural awareness. Jenarian activities have generated a strong sense of belonging and affiliation among students, teachers, families, and the whole petareño community, since most of the personnel working in "el Jenaro" are part of the community. The "school as a center" has ensured much of its sustainability, as the community itself supports and protects the institution.



24 Marzo Petare Community

Photo credit: Leo Alvarez

To maintain a project of this size in such a particular environment requires great organizational temperament. The Fundación Madre María Luisa Casar (FMMLC) is in charge of finding sources of funding and donations, managing them, and accounting for all the resources that are needed with a strategic and organizational base plan. In addition, it carries out a scholarship or sponsorship program and once a year promotes a fundraising campaign among all its benefactors and associates. It is the organized union of many civil society members that ensures the sustainability of this project.

The Future

The conviction that education enables the formation of social change agents with a great multiplier effect has maintained the commitment of a multidisciplinary team of collaborators who personally relate to "el Jenaro" through private organizations. Other educational communities also provide significant support to the project: they collect equipment, carry out extracurricular activities, and support the scholarship program as part of their social impact work. Through the latter, the field of action of the Jenaro Aguirre continues after the completion of elementary school, because those students who maintain academic and human excellence receive support for middle and high school. At present, there are 60 young Jenarians who are completing this phase of their education. The community of students and former students, parents and representatives of the Colegio Cristo Rey Altamira, another educational institution run by the Congregation of Esclavas de Cristo Rey, as well as the community of the Colegio Integral El Ávila and the Colegio Británico de Caracas, are just some of the friendly institutions. The Jenaro Aguirre Elorriaga Elementary School is recognized by many as "the Oasis of Petare." Among the "small big things" are agents of change who are gradually transforming, organically and permanently, the pace of education and thereby an entire community.

Author bio

Andreína Aguiar is a writer, specialist in branding and strategic communications, with extensive experience in the corporate world and business consulting. For more than 15 years she has turned her gaze to purposeful organizations. She is certified as a System B Multiplier to advise triple impact companies in Latin America. She studied social communication at the Universidad Católica Andrés Bello and completed a Master's in Business Administration (MBA) at the Instituto de Estudios Superiores IESA, where she graduated with honors. She is the founder of two creative digital studios, Outbranding and Kiubic Creative Lab, through which she contributes to the commercial growth and social impact of local and regional brands from various sectors and industries. She is part of the group of former students of the Colegio Cristo Rey Altamira that provides voluntary support and advice to the Fundación Madre María Luisa Casar to ensure the sustainability of the Jenaro Aguirre Elorriaga Primary School, located in the Barrio 24 de Marzo in Petare.

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