

Queremos Graduarnos – Growing with Quality

By Ana Luisa Silva, Communications and Partnership Director, Queremos Graduarnos

Venezuelan non-profit organization, founded in 1989, that seeks to avoid school dropouts in young adolescents that live in the poor slums of Caracas. Our main goal is to help them graduate not only from high school but also from university, for them to become the professionals that our country, and the world, needs more than ever.

Summary

“Queremos Graduarnos” (We want to graduate) is a nonprofit organization with the mission of deterring high school dropouts in both male and female students who live in poor neighborhoods in Venezuela, and instead help them study at a university and become professionals.

How and why was Queremos Graduarnos created?



Fe y Alegría Jesús

Obrero School

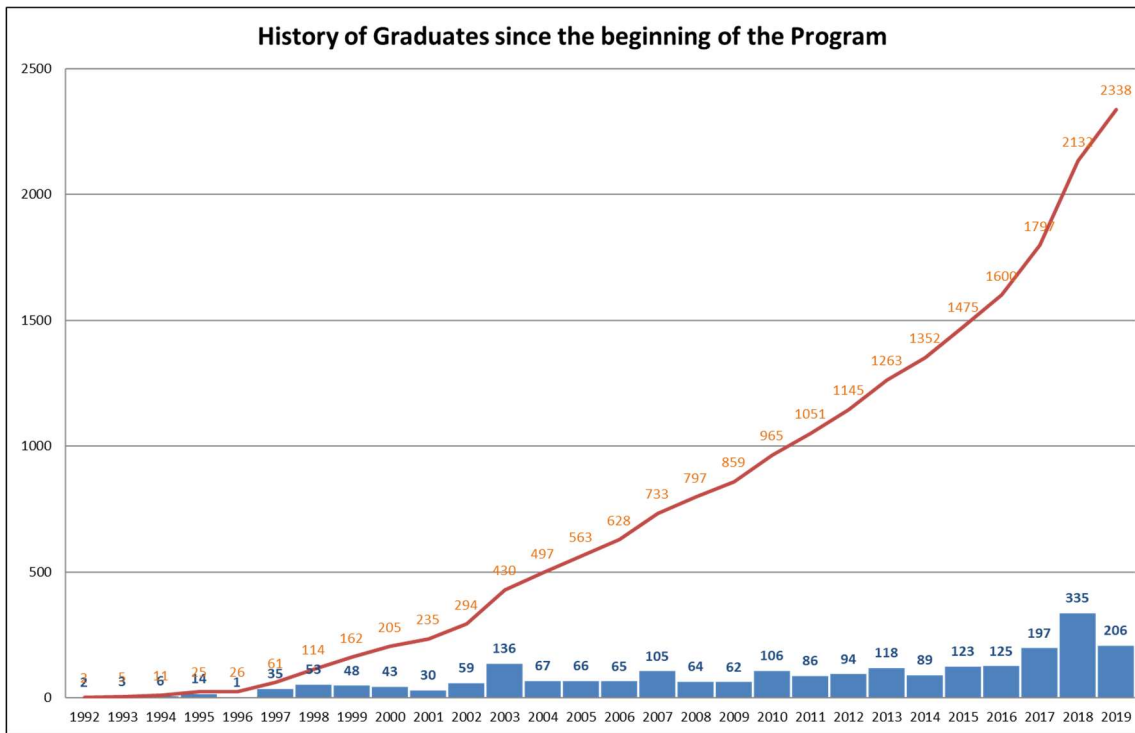
Photo Credit: Ana Luisa Silva

Queremos Graduarnos (QG) was born in a country where more than 80% of the population lives in extreme poverty. This means that for each of the teenagers who live in these poor neighborhoods, life is very hard, making it nearly impossible to study because they have other priorities. Most of the teenagers come from families with numerous family members and live in areas far away from the center of the city, with difficulty accessing transportation. To catch public transportation, they have to go down hundreds of stairs, and then, at the end of the day, go back up these stairs to return to their humble homes and walk many miles during each leg of their journey. Also, they face problems paying the fare, not only because they don't have money, but also because cash is hard to obtain. Banks only grant a small amount of cash for withdraw from ATMs, if in fact the youth are lucky enough to possess a debit card. Also added to these problems is the fact that when boys and girls turn 18 years of age, they are expected to work to help their families buy basic products such as food and medical supplies, and even carry water to their homes, which also is scarce and vital for life.

The idea to grant scholarships to these young adults for them to study and graduate was born out of the Rotary Club of Chacao (Rotary), one of the five municipalities that make-up the City of Caracas. But shortly afterwards, Rotary realized that with the growing demand for these scholarships and the great need, they could only afford to fund a few scholarships. Thereby, they started to look for other alternatives, mainly the insertion of new allies. This gave the program more stability and institutionalism, quickly growing beyond the Rotary Club.

Nowadays, Queremos Graduarnos (QG) is an independent organization thanks to its Founder and President Juan Silva, a member of the club, who adopted the program 29 years ago and helped it to grow and become what it is today.

There was a clear goal to defeat a common enemy: what lead to teenagers dropping out of school; and the development of a flexible and unique model to achieve that goal to ensure that adolescents don't abandon their education, thereby fighting ignorance.



Graduates through 2019

Source: Ana Luisa Silva

Since its beginning, QG has supported 2,338 youth from the slums of Caracas. They are from Fe y Alegría schools, as well as other schools located in 23 communities including: Catia, San Agustín del Sur, Sarría, 23 de Enero, Valle-Coche, Antimano, Artigas, La Vega, Chapellín, Cota 905, La Pastora, Petare, Filas de Mariche, and Caucagüita. In 2017 we opened our first social franchise serving six schools in the rural area of La Victoria, Aragua State. The replication of this model has been advanced with talent and funds from the Rotary Club of La Victoria and headed by the current President of the Venezuelan Chamber of Franchises Alejandro Vivas, leading to the success of the project.

How does it work?

We assign a monthly scholarship – which includes a bank account, school payment, and some extra money for school expenses – and create an opportunity alliance with these teenagers, ages 14 to 18, who are attending their last three years of high school. We prioritize their personal development, giving them all kinds of workshops like: self-esteem, sexual education, drug facts, life planning, development of lateral thinking, and conflict resolution, among others, that complement their studies and help them to grow their values and encourages their development into quality individuals. These dynamic

workshops are held every other Saturday and are given by specialized professionals and advanced university students, creating a new dimension in QG called Jóvenes por Jóvenes (Youth for Youth).



Youth for Youth presenting the Program Queremos Graduarnos

Photo Credit: Ana Luisa Silva

For these activities to take place, there is a need to support these young adults in a comprehensive way by paying for their transportation and meals, which every day grows more expensive while resources become more scarce, otherwise students face the reality of fainting from hunger or just not coming at all. In 2020, 1,206 students are enrolled in QG, they not only receive the benefits of QG but also perform social work for two hours weekly in their communities as pay back and a requirement to continue in the QG program.

For young adults to enter the organization, QG visits each school and gives a talk about the duties, responsibilities, and commitment they have to commit to, in addition to the good grades and social sensibility that they will be expected to have

as part of the program. Then the students apply, and the selection process is carried out together with the liaison teacher at each high school who selects the students according to their social vulnerability, financial need, grades, and interests.

The voluntary and enthusiastic way in which teachers and school principals actively participate in these communities has been significant. They cooperate with the program from the preselection of the young people, during the weekly monitoring of community activities through their graduation and accompany them during their journey of personal growth and finding their community identity. The adolescents see the example set by their teachers and it becomes a form of solidarity with their training and the overall improvements made by the collective to the community.

The program has been developed and tested over more than 29 years as an intervention, accompaniment, and subsidy system (IAS-QG) for young people, where each activity of the program reinforces a fundamental value that has been clearly defined, optimizing costs and efforts.

- The QG components of direct intervention with the youth of the program consist of:

1. **Intervention: "the value of work."** The teenagers participate in several workshops during the school year (20 per year) for their personal improvement. Universidad Católica Andrés Bello and Universidad Metropolitana lend us their classrooms and auditoriums on weekends for our workshops at no cost.



Workshop at Universidad Católica Andrés Bello.

Photo Credit: Ana Luisa Silva

2. **Accompaniment: “the value of solidarity.”** Participants do community work for two hours per week. In this way, the student receives the workshops and gives back with labor in their neighborhood, learning that "nothing is free" and valuing work as a worthy way of living and experiencing the pleasure of achievement.

3. **Grant or scholarship: "the value of savings."** When the young adults enter the program, they are introduced to banking and given a debit card with their name. They are given minimum money to cover monthly essential expenses to allow them to manage their bank account. Therefore, they join the formal economic system and learn to conduct their finances responsibly, incorporating the value of saving to achieve their goals.

There are also sponsors and partners who are fundamental for QG to exist and pursue its' goals. Enterprises like CAF -- Development Bank of Latin America, Banco Occidental de Descuento (BOD), ProFranquicias The Venezuelan Chamber of Franchises, Rotary Club of Chacao, McDonald's, Plumrose, Duncan Batteries, Quick Press Dry Cleaners, and other businesses and individuals that have helped us with donations.

CAF's support has been very valuable in the growth of the organization, helping the program to “see beyond” and maximize the potential of QG. The creation of manuals and videos, the development in the technological area, the monitoring of graduates, the expansion of our allies, added to new goals, have contributed to what we call "growing with quality." Even a book is in the process of being published as a contribution to the dissemination and replication of the QG concept.

Regarding the technological area, we have promoted social networks to communicate more efficiently with the students. A website has been created and Facebook private groups are used to communicate directly with them in a format that they are comfortable with and use often. Through social media, we make them aware of events, courses, workshops, college applications, and other relevant information.

Likewise, being members of the Venezuelan Chamber of Franchises (ProFranquicias), as a social franchise is an achievement that has contributed to the expansion and recognition of the program.

The goal of “growing with quality” pursued by the project will be achieved through the replication of the processes, procedures, and policies by partners, sponsors, and allies committed to expanding the work of QG.

Since the year 2018 we have decided to go further. Our new aspiration is to give adolescents the opportunity to go to college. Of the 206 high school graduates we had that year, 44 entered college: 15 at Universidad Santa María, 6 at Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, 2 at Universidad Alejandro Humboldt, 5 at Instituto Universitario Jesús Obrero, and 7 at Universidad Metropolitana. With the last school we created a partnership called “Beca de Inclusión” that consists of a full academic scholarship for 20 QG students. For 2020, we already have eight who are ready to enter. We have also begun the follow-up of other students that are attending well-known public universities such as Universidad Central de Venezuela where we have three students, Universidad Simón Bolívar where we have two, Universidad Simón Rodríguez where we have two, and finally Universidad Francisco de Miranda where we also have two.



Graduation 2018-2019

Photo Credit: Ana Luisa Silva

The problem is complex for the reasons previously stated. 90% of Venezuelan adolescents don't have this opportunity. It's very difficult for them not only to enter university but to continue in their studies and move on to becoming professionals. They are poorly prepared in high school and most of them, once they graduate, fail to enter a university. There is a big gap in the educational system between public and private schools. That's why QG has taken the initiative to give them extra classes to be better prepared to apply for college. Math, language, grammar, history, and physics have been taught by teachers in the QG office.

We have also partnered with another educational organization called Superatec, which has technological centers around the City that give our high school students, especially the ones that are going to graduate with extra courses.

Our dream is that all of the students, and those to come, enter institutions of higher learning and become the future professionals that our country needs today more than ever. Recently the Venezuelan American Friendship Association (AVAA) joined our family. After a selection process, the young QG's in the second semester of their educational career can join AVAA, where they receive English classes at the Venezuelan American Center (CVA) and additional and more advanced courses to continue complementing their studies until they graduate from college. The monthly fees that QG gave the students is now given by AVAA to them. However, QG continues paying for their studies so they are still linked with

the organization and continue to do the social work in our institution that AVAA requires. Therefore, they become part of the communications, sponsorship, and logistic teams at Queremos Graduarnos. As of now, five of our university students are part of AVAA.

Why is it an innovative proposal?

This project has a triple innovative character:

- 1) First, it constitutes an original solution to a complex problem: the social exclusion of adolescents. The originality lies in the approach of intervention, accompaniment, and subsidy (IAS), through which socially disadvantaged youth are endowed with a substantive training process, with very basic capacities, aimed at strengthening their condition as a responsible citizens for themselves and society. In other words, a complicated problem, generally addressed from the perspective of extra-curricular care, is preceded by a program aimed at strengthening the character of young people, who are surrounded by peers. They reinforce their ethical commitment and are helped with a small grant, which functions as another training element, this time from the point of view of managing their personal finances. All of the above generates a protective and enabling environment in which they operate.
- 2) Secondly, the project pursues the scaling of what until now has been a very localized experience towards a study of greater extension and depth, generating the idea of replication in autonomous modules, for which the systematization and detailed documentation of QG processes, procedures, and operating policies, are essential to develop the social franchises.
- 3) Thirdly, the project considers the development of commitments by partners, sponsors, and allies, each cooperating in their area of expertise with common goals that seek a greater collective impact.

On November 12, 2016 Mr. Juan Silva, M.I.T. graduate, was selected and invited by Rotary International as a member of the Rotary Club of Chacao to attend the United Nations in New York. The theme chosen that year for the Rotary Day at the UN was "Responsible Business, Strong Societies," which means, business leaders who use their professional knowledge to help strengthen and grow communities. Rotary International awarded six people worldwide (Australia, France, India, South Africa, USA, and Venezuela). Each participant must have fulfilled two fundamental characteristics: (1) Good entrepreneurs with long trajectories and (2) They must have successful social projects. Juan Silva, through his company Industrias

Macuples S.A., manufacturer and installer of Curtain Walls, and his social project Queremos Graduarnos that works to bring jobs, mentoring, education, and innovation to the communities and the people who inhabit them, was recognized as a Rotary Responsible Business Honoree.

There is still much to be done. We require new funding money to continue growing and expanding throughout the rest of the country. Costs in dollars are increasing due to prices hitherto subsidized. We need to be able to sustain our work and continue "growing with quality."



Fe y Alegria La Rinconada School

Photo Credit: Ana Luisa Silva

Queremos Graduarnos will continue working to ensure that adolescents do not leave the classroom before graduation. We need more financial support to grow our innovative scholarship program throughout Venezuela and beyond. For more information visit <https://vimeo.com/423836118>.

Author bio

Ana Luisa Silva is a Venezuelan journalist graduate with a postgraduate degree in Fine Arts at the International Film School of Paris. Ana Luisa has worked at Queremos Graduarnos since 2015 managing the communications and partnership departments.