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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

## “INTRODUCTION TO FOTOKIDS” BY NANCY MCGIRR

*CHIME FOR CHANGE Through the Years: The Female Fabric is a series curated by CHIME Managing Editor Mariane Pearl featuring stories from the CHIME journalism platform archives by women around the world.*



I founded **Fotokids** 28 years ago after leaving my career as a Reuters news agency’s combat staff photographer in Central America. Originally, the program started with six kids from Guatemala City’s vast garbage dump. It has since served thousands of children from poor areas of Guatemala, Honduras and children of migrant workers in California’s Central Valley.

I know a good photo when I see one and the kids' photographs from the outset were strong and creative. They weren't just good children's photos, they were excellent for any professional photographer and their personal points of view were exciting. These were kids aged 5 to 12 years old who had never held a camera much less used one.

Today, Fotokids students have had 46 exhibits in 14 countries; they are in galleries and museums in Seville, London, Helsinki, Tokyo, Adelaide, Paris and Amsterdam. They have been published in NYT, Washington Post and have appeared on CNN, Bravo and the BBC.

The staff, all Fotokids graduates, came from the dump, and the violent gang saturated zones of Guatemala City. Now with almost 30 years under their belts they have profited from professional mentors who came to share their knowledge in photography, design, alternative processes, video and education.

And 12 years ago, we began Girls Life Skills, (GLS) a 3-year vocational program for adolescent girls from urban and rural barrios of poverty. This program is a Fotokids vocational training (photography, Photoshop, graphic design, web design, writing skills, video and Final Cut Pro), aimed at giving students a better chance at finding employment.

Additionally we have scholarship programs that pay for traditional education, middle school through university.

**Today, Fotokids graduates run their own design studio: Jakaramba. They take younger students as interns, giving them a chance to experience work in the real world. The design studio began in 1998, but took off when the students learned web design and video production.**

Jakaramba has worked for the United Nations, Save the Children, World Emergency Relief (with displaced in Uganda), Pura Vida Coffee, Child Aid, Fotelica, WINGS, Paiz Foundation, Cooperación Española, etc.

For these and other clients they have created billboards, posters, web sites, brochures, given photography workshops and taken photographs for publication.

Here are profiles of three female students participating in the Fotokids visual arts training program:

### Ruth Coco



In the mornings Ruth studies English and baton twirling. Her mother worries that she has taken on too much and would like her, the only girl, to stay home and babysit the younger kids. Her grandmother, though supports her and her struggle for a different life. Ruth had asked the Principal if she could go to the Fotokids classes twice a week after which, by 6pm, she picks up that day's assignments to keep up her grades, that incidentally, are in the 90%.

Here is Ruth in her house, on the dirt floor, and here are examples of some of her work:

Winter 2017

My name is Ruth Marina Noemí Coco Pínula I am 11 years, and I'm in fourth grade, now studying in school and very happy because I have friends there who also go to Fotokids.

I live with my parents, my mother, my Dad, and my brother Ishmael and my other relatives. We are 15 people who live in my house. The neighborhood is very dangerous where we live, because the gangs once charged us tax (extortion) and now they are threatening my family because they say my cousin took guns from some gang members but that's not true. Now the gangs are coming to my house to find the guns and my cousin and his parents even had to go live far away. I don't know where, they didn't tell us so that nobody knows. But even so the gang members are still coming to my house to look for him. I am really frightened that they will do something to us.

My mom is a housewife and she takes care of my little brothers and me, my dad is in construction. My favorite subject is English because I like to learn new things and also pronounce the words. I don't like reading because it's so boring, but although it is an effort, I try to do well in class, because if I fail that class my parents beat will me and punish me.

When I have free time I like to play on my bike with my brothers and cousins. I have a lot of fun. I get along very well with my brother Ishmael because he plays with me. I won't forget when my little brother was born because I was so excited to be the older sister.

When I grow up I want to be a doctor, I would like to heal people and my family when they get sick or have an accident, because my grandmother was run over by a car and died, and we couldn't do anything.

I know that to fulfill my dream I have to do my homework and go to school, so I try to try my hardest. It makes me very happy to get 100 in my exams, but sometimes they are very difficult.

I like when we have to do school activities with recycling, because I can use tapidas or something that already doesn't serve in my house. I really like swimming pools because at school, for the end of the year we went there. It was a lot of fun, we played a lot with my classmates. My best friend at school is called Sheidi we are always together, we play and when I don't have anything to eat, she shares her food with me, I get along very well with my classmates. My favorite animal is the crocodile, because they are large and their teeth look like they are very sharp.

### Emelyn Vanesa Mejía Chocón



My name is Emelyn Vanesa Mejía Chocón. I am 15 years old and I am in the 9th grade. I live with my parents and my brother — my father's is in charge of a carpentry company, and my mother's a worker at a bank and is finishing her senior year at Mariano Gálvez University in legal and social sciences.

I live in zone 2, Boca del Monte Villa canals, in the alley of the goats. It is a quiet and very safe place. But outside the alley it is dangerous to travel. Behind my house is the ravine, the river, the cornfield and bean crops.

In my house it is almost always peaceful, most of the time my brother is the one in the house, since my parents work and I study, unfortunately he is always alone.

Thank God my parents do not suffer from any vices or diseases and they always treat us with love, although there are times when they scold us. But we have learned to live together despite the problems and we all have responsibilities. Although perhaps one of the problems we have as a family is religion, since my mother is Catholic and my father is evangelical. That has always causes some arguments and silences between my brother and me. But they have learned to take this problem with maturity, and leave the decision to choose what we really want in our hands.

I really like studying natural sciences, sports, math and art — they entertain me a lot. In my school, I really like to play sports, for example, football and basketball.

I like to learn, in my spare time. I like to look at Pinterest a lot. I like to watch cartoons and even pastry baking documentaries. I like to see all my surroundings and imagine many scenes for photographs, and later when I get to capture what I have been imagining in my mind for a day or for weeks, it becomes one of my greatest satisfactions. Drawing is another hobby that I love; I like to create characters.

Aly Azucena Choipen

My name is Aly Azucena Choipen and I'm 12 years old. I was born in a barrio of Santiago Atitlán. I am the last daughter of eight brothers; I have two brothers who are married and they no longer live with us. I get along very well with them, they are always watching out for me because they want that I'm able to study and achieve my dreams. They did not have the possibility for an education because there are so many children in my family. My parents have done everything possible to support me in my studies, but there are times that are difficult for them because they don't have a permanent job. My dad is a day laborer and my mom works at home. It is difficult for them to get a job because they are elderly, so my sisters work making beaded jewelry to cover the expenses of the house and my study expenses.

In my spare time I make beaded ornaments with my sisters. The house where we live is one level, reed roof, cement floor and cement block walls. It is two rooms where we share sleeping beds.

The saddest day for me it was when my dad got sick for three months. He had a bad flu and he was in bed all the time.

I was very scared because some people thought he was not going to recover and was going to die.

I am in the 6th grade. The school of my barrio is a two kilometers from my house. In the morning I wake up early to sweep the floors or do the dishes and then fix my things to go to school.

I like to study a lot because I learn to read, write and do math problems. When I grow up I want to support other children so that can have a home and fulfill their dreams.

I like my photography classes, for me it's a great opportunity to learn things they don't teach me at school and that makes it very interesting. I really like to do portraits, because I can talk to people and they can express their feelings through a photograph.

Discover Fotokids' students through the Fotokids [website](#) to learn more about their work.