

UNICEF HUMANITARIAN ACTION REPORT 2009

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

THERESIA – CHILDREN AND PHOTOGRAPHY IN CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

Theresia is one of the most engaged children in the class. This 16-year-old girl carefully follows every segment of the week-long photography workshop organized by UNICEF in Central African Republic. The workshop encourages a group of 15 children to express their views and creativity in a safe environment. Through photography and text they will create a testimony, which will be seen and heard beyond the borders of their country.

Like the other children attending the workshop, Theresia has had a difficult upbringing. Her father died when she was very young and, shortly after, her mother went back to the village where she comes from. Theresia and her siblings were left in the care of relatives in Bangui, the capital city. “My mother wanted us to continue our education and she left me with my cousin, a woman,” explains Theresia. “My cousin made me the house servant. I did everything, cooking, washing and cleaning and, at the same time, she accused me of going after boys. How could I even have time for that?” Theresia looks down at her hands. “Then she started to beat me. Every day. At one point I decided to run away.”

Now Theresia and two of her younger siblings live with their uncle. “It’s a small house but my uncle’s family treats us fine. It’s much better now. When I ran from my cousin’s house I went to an old neighbour.” Theresia looks a little ashamed and she shifts on her chair. “She worked as a prostitute in another part of town. She let me stay there. I didn’t know where else to go. I usually slept outside in the courtyard because there could be many customers during the night and there was only one room divided by bed sheets hanging from the ceiling.”

It is difficult to comprehend that life has been so hard on the group of children attending the photography workshop. All through the week, the classroom echoes with laughter and bubbles with fruitful discussion. It is a colourful week. None of the children have taken pictures before and a professional photographer teaches them basic technical aspects of photography. Before being handed digital cameras the children divide into smaller groups to decide on themes to cover.

Theresia’s group decides on ‘health’ because in their country every ten days nearly 500 children die from preventable and curable diseases. Equipped with camera, pen and paper the group visits hospitals and clinics to document the health and safety situation of patients.

“Oh, I like it so much,” exclaims Theresia. “It’s exciting to take pictures and to talk with all these people. If I could decide I would want this workshop to go on forever, never to stop,” she says laughing.

Theresia regularly attends Voix du Cœur, a UNICEF-supported centre for vulnerable children living in Bangui. All the children participating in the workshop are familiar with the centre. Coming from broken homes, living as orphans, in the streets, the majority go to Voix du Cœur for a meal, a bath, to meet friends, to play or to attend classes. For some children the centre provides a break from the outside world.

Bangui is a struggling capital in one of the world’s poorest countries, plagued by decades of political instability. More than 60 per cent of the population live on less than US\$ 1 a day, causing a widespread scramble for basic needs in a world of ever-rising prices. In the grip of this harsh reality numerous children suffer from serious neglect, domestic violence, abuse and child labour. Hundreds of children have gone through the doors at Voix du Cœur.

The photography workshop organized by UNICEF aims to give some of these children a voice in a life of daily neglect. In Central African Republic, youth constitute the majority of the population, yet their concerns are rarely taken seriously.