



Stories of young people *on the move*



En colaboración con
Canada



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Background



Currently, more than half a million Venezuelan people have settled in Ecuador.* The mobility of a good number of girls and adolescents from that country — during their migratory route and later in their host countries — resulted in risks involving the violation of their rights to a violence-free life, quality education and health, including sexual and reproductive health, and even food.

With funding from the Canadian government, Plan International created the ELLA (Empowerment, Local Leadership and Accountability for Venezuelan Adolescents and Youth) project: with the aim of providing humanitarian assistance to migrant populations from Venezuela and to their host populations in Ecuador, Colombia, and Peru.

In essence, the ELLA project is a transformative proposal that seeks to change sociocultural patterns limiting adolescent and young women's ability to make free and informed decisions about their bodies, their lives, and their sexuality with agency and autonomy so as to reduce early pregnancy and prevent gender-based violence. Moreover, it promotes modification of gender roles and stereotypes through boys and young men's engagement in behalf of equality and the redistribution of responsibilities.

Plan International Ecuador** — a development and humanitarian aid organization working for children's rights and equality for girls for the last 60 years — and the ELLA project have been training girls, boys, adolescents, and young people since June 2022 by way of a multidisciplinary team with previous experience working with vulnerable populations, providing them with the tools and strategies essential to acting in difficult situations, improving their access to national protection services, and exercising their rights.

By applying proven and technically evaluated methodologies to generate change, including the "My Transformation Paths" methodology, the ELLA project in Ecuador has achieved a significant transition in the lives of 373 adolescent women and men, 173 from Venezuela and 200 from Ecuador.

The ELLA project has been implemented in four neighborhoods in Quito, three in Manta, and two in Loja.*** Its strategic partners are the ministries of Public Health, Economic Inclusion, and Education, and the Decentralized Autonomous Governments, among other civil society organizations with which it has coordinated a multi-sectoral agenda to respond to the needs of the migrant and refugee population in a timely and efficient manner.

It is precisely this close work with the Ministry of Public Health program promoting teen clubs in each locality that has made it possible to bring to light the gaps and inequities experienced by migrant and refugee girls and adolescents, not only in their access to health rights but also in the social treatment they receive, which is often discriminatory and xenophobic.

The stories of how some girls and boys managed to overcome these negative experiences with the support and resources provided by the ELLA project is reliable testimony that the work accomplished must continue.

* Refugee and Migrant Task Force (GTRM), <https://www.r4v.info/es/ecuador>, version updated as of March 10th, 2022.

** <https://plan.org.ec>

*** Quito: La Gatazo, Carapungo, Zabala and Quitumbe; Manta: El Aromo, La Pradera, and El Palmar; Loja: Loja Centro and El Valle.

...stories of people on the move...

The ELLA project has achieved such positive results in the lives of the participants that we want to share with our readers. The 15 stories told here are not intended to be just stories about how the lives of a group of mostly Venezuelan adolescents and young people changed. This book's real interest transcends the limits of a transfer of information regarding life stories with which more than one person will undoubtedly be able to identify or empathize.

Thus, the most ambitious aim of this publication recounting the life experiences of adolescents and young people is to inspire and raise awareness among you, its readers, to mobilize you to take steps to empower and support migrant and refugee adolescents and youth, especially females, so that they can do the decision-making in their own lives, not only as an act of reparation but rather as a commitment to transform our own vision and behavior with respect of those who, perhaps, engender mistrust because they are foreigners, perceived as different without considering the reasons that forced them to migrate to our country.

A positive change is possible. We have worked for 60 years in Ecuador to achieve that goal, but it is necessary to connect with more people, so that they become the catalysts of a process in which origin, skin color or any difference, are not an obstacle to integrate our community, with all the complexities and risks that implies.

We put these stories at your disposal in order to generate reflection on an important issue for our country and region, we hope you will join us in this ambitious goal.

DANNIELA

*A resilient teenager who radiates
tenderness and security*

“If I hadn’t come to this country, I would be afraid to say what I think and feel in my heart. I would be very different from how I am now. Ecuador is my other home; here, I’ve been taught and I’ve learned much more than in my home country.” Few of us could imagine that these words full of appreciation and affection come from a 14-year-old Venezuelan girl. Dannielita was a victim of bullying and discrimination because of the color of her skin and her strabismus during her first year in Loja. “One time at school, when the bell rang at the end of recess, a girl came up to me and suddenly said, ‘Why have you come here, Venezuelan? You would have been better off staying where you belong ... you are too black.’” She felt so bad at that moment that she was on the verge of tears, but the hugs of her classmates trying to comfort her made her understand that, even if she is living in another country, she will always find good people willing to help her. It was only a matter of time.



The impact of Plan International on her life

That episode, and recognizing herself as different, had triggered her insecurity to alarming levels, making her introverted and unfriendly. Nothing at that time could have led her to think that she would experience a radical change in her behavior three years later. Danniela's life changed by participating in one of the teen clubs of the ELLA project launched by Plan International in Loja. What she learned through talks and workshops on human mobility, gender equality, women's rights, managing emotions, preventing xenophobia, and sexual and reproductive rights, among other topics, has given her the tools to strengthen her capacity for resilience and adapt to the demands of the new context in which she is living now.

Danniela has learned to accept her differences and has turned them into strengths. She

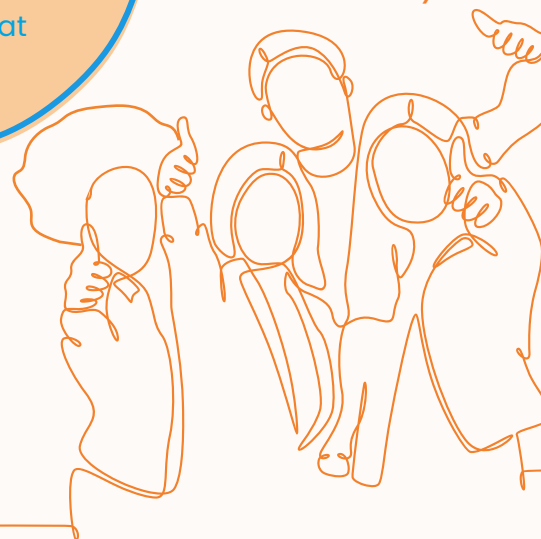
has gained confidence to express her ideas candidly, is extroverted, more self-confident, and has lost her fear of participating or making mistakes. "They've taught me a lot at the club, even my mother is surprised and tells me, you weren't like this before ... how you've changed over all this time!" The truth is that I opened up more and met many Ecuadorian people. Today, wherever I go I make friends. I have quite a few, and they love me as I am."

Her great capacity for learning and assimilating knowledge has made it easier for her to incorporate these new social skills into her daily life and achieve a solid sense of belonging, since what she wants most for is to be accepted and to fit into her environment; so much so that, at times, she even tends to forget where she comes from. *I feel like I belong here, and I even forget that I'm Venezuelan. Sometimes they ask me where I'm from, and it seems natural to answer that I'm from Esmeraldas (coastal province where most afro Ecuadorians live)*

Yes, I like them to think I'm Ecuadorian. That makes me feel included and part of this country, although I'm very proud to be Venezuelan. I've discovered that there's richness, new learning and ways of seeing the world, new colors, and new music in the interaction between Venezuelans and Ecuadorians."

"The truth is that I opened up more and met many Ecuadorian people.

Today, wherever I go I make friends. I have quite a few, and they love me as I am."



Deep desire for self-improvement

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Danniela is so identified with the decisive role the teen club has played in her personal change, that it is no surprise she is including, as part of her life project, helping all the people who need it through talks and workshops in which she would address the same issues that have moved her the most and which she records in her memory with amazing precision. And as a matter of fact, due to her outstanding dedication and leadership, Danniela is part of the group of teenagers from the “Marcando la Diferencia” (Making the Difference) club trained by the ELLA project as facilitators to replicate what they have learned to more young people in the area.

Danniela is a teenager who inspires tenderness because of her delicate manner and an innate tendency to express her affection for people, starting with her family. She has barely started high school, because when she arrived in Ecuador, she had to drop down a grade due to the lack

of knowledge she had. This does not faze her because, for her, everything that involves learning is always welcome, she says.

She’s the last of six children and despite being the youngest, she has matured considerably through interaction with her older sisters and brothers. “Yes ... they have always pampered me, and still pamper me a lot, but now that I’m older, they treat me like one of their peers. I like that, and it gives me a lot of confidence.”

She likes helping with housework, making crafts, painting, and taking care of plants. She appreciates singing but has more skill in dancing and believes she has inherited the musical gene from her mother and father. Her mother, who is also involved in the teen club as a volunteer chaperone, is Danniela’s emotional support. She constantly encourages her to express what she feels and to put into practice the skills and abilities she is picking up.

This is in large part why Danniela did not hesitate to grab the opportunity that arose to give her 20-year-old sister an in-depth talk on contraceptive methods and her sexual and reproductive rights just before she got married. “My sister asked me, ‘Where did you learn that?’ I explained to her that I wasn’t going to the club just to talk and make friends but also to learn, and that it was my duty to channel that learning and try to put it into practice in our daily lives.”

She turned to those same lessons learned later on, but this time to overcome the pain of separating from her sister, with whom she was very close and who went to live in the capital city after the wedding. “It always hurts to separate from someone whom you have lived with almost your whole life, but I know that all my loved ones have to leave at some point to make their own way. For sure, when I grow up, I will also leave my parents.”

Sisterhood and resilience: the driving forces behind her actions

Danniela took her best friend from church to the teen club because she was sure that they would provide her there with the right tools to overcome her introversion, just as had happened with her. “The first time she went, she liked it so much that she took an active part in the talk. She has improved; she’s more open, she talks more and expresses herself better. My friends accepted her immediately, and now we’re part of a group where we share knowledge about issues that many of our parents find it hard to openly explain to us.”

Danniela has been so happy in the ELLA project’s teen club that it makes her sad to think about it ending. This is why she has already signed up for other initiatives such as the Plan International leadership school. Several of her friends are also there, and she’s looking forward to it very much. She believes that everything she’s learned has changed her life as a whole, not just one part of it. “For me, the club has meant completely new and different things, like an adventure that I’ve enjoyed to the fullest.”



Now, she takes advantage of the time by spreading her learning among all the girls in her classroom. She talks to them about their rights, tells them that they do not need to be guys to do a job or have a certified document to get access to knowledge. She urges them to believe in themselves and to put into play the true potential of their female power. **"I tell them that I belong to a project called ELLA, from Plan International, through which we become powerful. We are women pushing ahead. I tell them we are 'bichotas'" (a Caribbean neologism that means having control, being empowered).**

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Danniela's prodigious retentiveness is comparable only to her infinite gratitude to the ELLA project's technical specialists and to Plan International and her host country. **"In this world, we need to have more people like you, because by helping people from other countries, you motivate us to do the same. We rely on you and gain confidence to express ourselves."**

Danniela's memory is so strong that it not only enables her to store information, or retain it but helps her to bring herself back to reality or to raise her spirits with unusual efficiency when she needs to. In any case, as an extra aid, she keeps a picture on her

phone of the emotion traffic light she learned to use in one of her club sessions.

She knows that to keep her self-esteem high, she must accept herself as she is and allow all the emotions she feels, trying to keep the color green, even if sometimes the light is red and she's down in the dumps, or it's flashing yellow and she can't seem to change the way she feels. **"All emotions are positive; you just have to know how to manage them!"** she says.

So, every morning, in what feels like a game, Danniela tries to improve her self-esteem — the strongest resource she has for contributing her grain of sand to making the world a more welcoming and supportive place — and thus keep going forward along a safe path lit by a bright and unwavering green light.

So be it!! Bon voyage, then, sweet Danniela!



PAMELA

Her name is Pamela, although in the teen club they call her Alexa (like the virtual assistant you can interact with on the internet) because this Venezuelan girl, who turned 14 in December 2023, is able to answer almost all the questions her classmates put to her. Her deep interest in investigating and learning has enabled her to upload to her prodigious memory bag loads of information and knowledge on different topics. "One time they asked me what the temperature of the sun is, and since I got the answer right, they started to ask about a bunch of other stuff. I always answer with what I remember reading on the internet or seeing on TV. I even remember what cartoon characters say and the setting where the plot unfolds."

Pamela is a very responsible student and is always determined to improve herself. Because of her academic prowess, she was designated as the First Escort of the Ecuadorian Flag in fourth grade, shortly after arriving from Venezuela, and marched in a parade during the

*The girl who wants to be free
like the wind*



Manta civic festival. *"Carrying the flag of another country that I hadn't even lived in for long and representing an institution that I had only just arrived at, it was just incredible!"* Thanks to her performance, she has more than once been chosen to compete in speech competitions and drawing contests. She was even all set to travel to the capital for one of these events but only got as far as her excitement because she didn't have an identity card. *"Just the same, a Venezuelan classmate who did have an ID document ended up going. They replaced me with him ... it was very sad."*

For much of the last five years, her stay here has been just as sad. She has been a victim of bullying, harassment, and xenophobia, not only from girls and boys of the same age but also from adults unable to tolerate coexisting with a teenager whose only difference is in her great intelligence, and maybe her skin color, her curly hair, her physical appearance.

The hard times that taught her to accept herself

One night, the only thing on Pamela's mind was getting better at riding her bicycle, and as she pedaled faster, her hair fought a separate battle with the strong and constant wind at that hour. She felt like she was moving fast, like air it self; she felt free and happy, but an unfortunate comment undermined that magical moment: *"Look at that buzzard how fast she rides on a bike,"* a woman exclaimed. This abuse made her feel resentful, hurt, and helpless. She was the only one riding a bicycle at that time and place, and apparently her hair was very windblown, although deep down, she didn't care.

Other hard moments she's faced in her short life have been at school. A somewhat older classmate published some photos of primates in the student group chat, alluding to what Pamela looked like, according to him. In another episode a year ago, when still in seventh grade, a student from another grade told her that someone had written a degrading insult

at the entrance to the bathroom, apparently in retaliation for her being exempt from taking exams in some subjects because of her good scholastic performance. Pamela's parents stood up for her at school and they painted over the words written on the toilets, since the institution's authorities did little or nothing to identify those responsible and even less to make up for the hurt caused to the teenage girl.

"Carrying the flag of another country that I hadn't even lived in for long and representing an institution that I had only just arrived at, it was just incredible!"



Although Pamela eventually identified her detractor, she chose to remain silent as people who suffer bullying generally do. "Now I know that they are like that because they want to stand out. I don't let those types of actions affect me, and I tell them, 'Hey, easy there, tiger!'" she says, in a clear demonstration of her resilience and ability to laugh at herself. "Actually, I don't expect praise, much less ridicule or sarcasm. I simply want them not to mess with me. I want to live calm, free, and happy."

The club, her safe place

Pamela felt alone and lost at the start of her first year at elementary school because only one girl spoke to her and spent time with her in the classroom and recesses during her first two weeks there,

Now that she's in high school and more than half the

school year has gone by, more people have learned to get along with Pamela, and some of the students have become her friends. "They don't bully me anymore. Instead, they help me, defend me."

The place where Pamela really feels most comfortable, relaxed, and free to be herself is at the ELLA project's teen club that Plan International sponsors in Manta. They practice non-violence at each meeting and make an effort to maintain a friendly atmosphere, which is why this girl has been able to socialize with many people she'd never met before.

"Here I've learned what I never knew before about xenophobia, gender equality, sexuality, and other topics I've just learned about that are often considered taboo by families. I've changed a lot; my thinking is more open."

"Actually, I don't expect praise, much less ridicule or sarcasm. I simply want them not to mess with me. I want to live calm, free, and happy."



Now I know how to act in the event of discrimination, and so that I don't forget it, I reread my Travel Journal, * but also because I like to look at the doodles and illustrations. I've learned to accept and love myself as I am, with my weaknesses and strengths."

Despite being so young, her life experience and her time at the club have enabled her to develop a keen sense of justice, and this is probably why she dreams of becoming a lawyer to defend the most deserving and honest causes. "If I believe a person is innocent, I'll certainly take their case, but if they're not, they can find someone else to defend them. It would hurt me to prosecute people, to tell them, 'You are going to jail' ... No! ... in the end, each person has their heart, and that's plenty ..."

For now, Pamela strives to do her best in school. She likes French, and although she was the only one who got a ten in English without much effort — because she helps herself to understand by translating some internet texts on her mobile phone — she still has her doubts about it.

"I haven't even finished learning Spanish, much less English. In language and dictation, I have to repeat the sentences on the whole page like about 20 times because I missed five accent marks!" she says, with the confidence she has in always overcoming her shortcomings.



This young woman loves crafts and decorating. She likes to make necklaces, figurines, and plasticine dolls as well as unicorns, deer, and wolves with recyclable material and cardboard. She is irresistibly attracted to collecting small things. She has two boxes full of scraps of paper and stickers, pebbles, and letters of the alphabet ... keepsakes, among which we are sure there will never be any that deserve to be forgotten to ease some consciences.

A lot of people could learn from this teenager's capacity to bounce back and overcome adversity. Pamela is without a doubt owed more than one apology, and on behalf of those who never gave her one — nor will they — we do so through this story, which we hope will invite reflection on the attitudes that many of us Ecuadorians have held toward migrants and refugees in our country.

* The Travel Journal is the workbook of the "My Paths of Transformation" methodology developed by Plan International for training adolescents in human mobility and host community contexts who participate in the teen clubs run by the ELLA project. The document emphasizes gender equality, protection, and sexual and reproductive health and rights.



SARITA

An example of healing and resilience

Only a few days were left before the end of the school year and as part of a final project, the kids had to make a Diablo Huma mask (a two-faced, multicolored hood symbolizing the duality of the cosmos in Ecuadorian folklore). Most of the teenagers had put off the task until the last minute and manufacturing one in the short time left was nearly impossible. Sarita saw an opportunity to take advantage of this situation by offering them her mask-making skills.

“Hey ... I make masks for \$5!” she announced, and the orders started coming in right away, even from another grade. Nevertheless, the time constraint and some haggling over the price conspired against her business idea of using the leftover scraps from her mother’s dish-towel business to make the masks. In the end, she sold one and made her own, but over and above what seems like a meager result lies Sarita’s ability to sell almost anything. She works and contributes to the family income by peddling the dish towels in her free time from school.



Sarita is only 16 years old, but she speaks loquaciously and reasons like someone much older than her peers, so much so that she is the leader in her group. When it comes to doing group work, she gets them together, divides them up, and assigns tasks, because otherwise, she says, everyone trusts that someone else will do the project and, in the end, no one does anything. "On the other hand, if I tell them, 'Look, you make the poster, you do the theoretical part, and you give the presentation,' the project turns out fine." When teachers assign group tasks to do, most want to work with me: 'I go with Gómez, I go with Gómez ...,' but when they ask me who I want to go with, I say 'no one,' and they get angry." Although she almost always picks her friends, she ends up adding in other classmates with learning difficulties in an effort to include them, she says.

Personally, she considers herself an average student and, although she is not one of those who get all A's in school, her teachers see her as a very intelligent and dedicated girl, and in the last school year she was exempted from taking the final English and philosophy exams and the partial entrepreneurship exam.

"More than anyone, my chemistry teacher is really impressed with me. The philosophy and English teachers are the ones I do best with, and they praise me a lot."

Her process of change

Beyond her academic performance, Sarita's story highlights her ability to overcome traumatic circumstances that upset her short life long before she was 13 years old: she suffered anxiety and depression that endangered her mental and physical integrity. Faced with her helplessness and cluelessness as to how to alleviate the intensity of the episodes that the girl suffered, her mother, Gloria, ill-advised by relatives and neighbors on many occasions, saw no other option than resorting to violence.

Speaking from her heart, Gloria says, "They really give you brutal advice. They told me, for example, that if she lacked discipline, it was because she needed

a strong hand, and in my anguish and ignorance, I would beat her rather than regret her hurting or killing herself." Gloria remembers that it never occurred to her at the time to question whether, as a mother, she could be wrong. "I also didn't stop to think that I was raising a human being and not a little animal," she confesses with genuine pain and regret.

It wasn't until the school recommended it that Gloria sought help from Fundación Tierra Nueva to deal with Sarita's case.* There, over a year of therapies, they provided her with the tools that helped her understand that Sarita needed medical and psychological care, as well as ongoing medication to compensate for her body's deficiency in producing certain hormones that keep human beings stable. "And that was what was going on ... not that she was a bad girl or a bad person. Not at all," says the mother.

At first, the medication made her very drowsy and sometimes she would fall asleep in class, but despite having problems with some teachers because of that, no one can explain how she managed to stay up to date with the subjects she was taking. The testimony

of her chemistry teacher confirms it: “I don’t know what the girl problem is, but to be honest, I teach the class, and she sees the entire exercise and half asleep goes to the blackboard and works it out just as it should be.”

Due to how vulnerable she was, Sarita was also a victim of bullying, gender-based violence, and even attempted abuse. These situations worsened her depressive symptoms, but even in these terrible circumstances her self-esteem prevailed, and she was able to control the emotions that overwhelmed her. “I told myself that it wasn’t fair that I should continue to suffer because of those who hurt me, so I decided to forgive them — without justifying them — and to refocus my thoughts and energy on helping other people who have gone through the same or worse things. I can understand them, I can give them advice. This helped me a lot to stop feeling bad.”

Sarita recognizes that none of this would have been possible without the psychological treatment she received in time and without the psychosocial support provided by Plan International Ecuador’s ELLA project thereafter. She also considers essential for her joining the “Círculo de Panas” (Buddies Circle) teen club, where she learned about her rights, sexuality, and self-esteem, among other things.



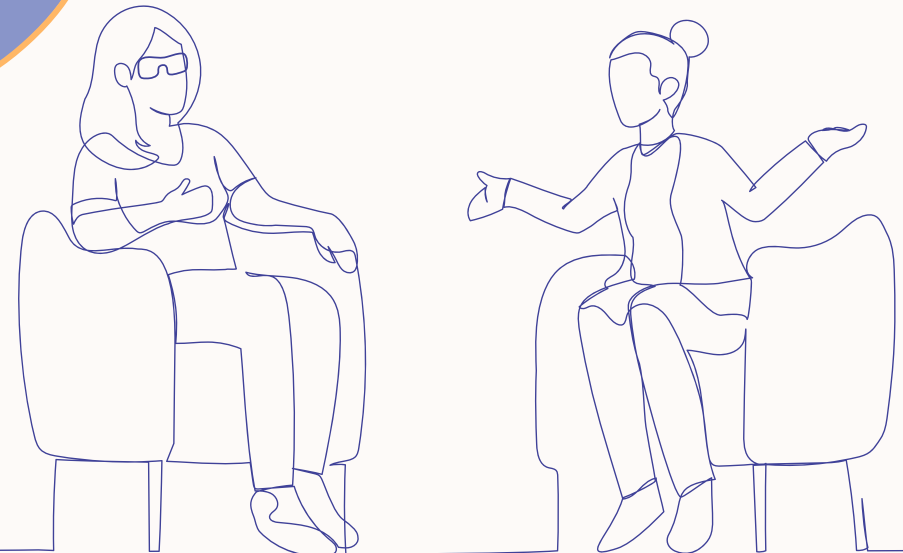
Forgiveness and love

All of that, she says, acted as a healing therapy, which is why she does not hesitate for a moment to recommend that young people get involved in the things that Plan International makes available to them.. “Also, everyone, even if they’re feeling all right, should go to a psychologist, not because they think they’re crazy but because it’s essential for their well-being and mental health, just like when we go to the doctor for a routine check-up.”

Gender-based psychological violence and bullying are, in Sarita’s opinion, the main risks to which young people, especially females, are exposed. They face contempt and humiliation through social networks and are isolated by their peers if they fail to conform to stereotypes or to meet the challenges of going viral in pursuit of gaining public recognition. She believes that parents, mothers, and other adults should be more attentive to adolescents, be more understanding, less judgmental, and find out more, which is the only way to develop trust

so that their daughters and sons can open up and tell them what kind of violence they are suffering, without fear of being scolded and punished.

“In addition, everyone, even if they’re feeling alright, should go to a psychologist, not because they think they’re crazy but because it’s essential for their well-being.”



Sarita offers the case of a friend as an example: “She took a picture of her partly uncovered body and uploaded it to her statuses on social media. Her schoolmates began to call her this and that, so she told her mother, and far from getting her understanding and support, she got a beating.”

Accordingly, Sarita reasons – and is convinced – that youth people need to be listened to and not judged by their parents, which is why the rules of her teen club seem very good to her: Do not judge, do not interpret, and do not preach. They should apply them at home, she suggests optimistically and adds: “I wish all moms and dads could go to places like Plan International’s positive parenting workshops, because there is no manual that teaches them how to be good parents, so no one does it well, and mostly they do it badly or terribly. So, it would be great for adults to learn how to be fathers and mothers.”

Forgiveness benefits those who give it, but also those who receive it, says Sarita. She has done it with her mother and, as proof of this, she now considers her,

along with Cristopher, her boyfriend, to be the people she can lean on and for whom she feels true affection.

“I know that my mother is now more focused on reality, understands mental health better and, although she gets angry instead of judging me and hitting me,

she helps me. I can say that at this point in my life I’m happy – I’m not saying I’m always just enjoying myself, nope! ... but I’m happy. Most of the time I’m relaxed, although I still have my glitches, but I know when I need to ask for help.”

Congratulations to this girl!



ABRAHAM

Crossing the borders between Venezuela and Colombia and that northern neighbor and Ecuador is an unimaginable journey for any boy barely 15 years old, and even more so if he does it unaccompanied by an adult, but for Abraham (now 18 years old) there was no choice: it was that or continue separated from his family, who had already emigrated a long time before. So, he did not hesitate to risk his own safety in order to be back with his mother and brothers in the Ecuadorian port of Manta.

The trip through Colombia was not easy at all and was full of mishaps. He had to pay people dressed as soldiers to let him continue his route because they threatened to send him back to Venezuela for traveling alone as a minor. That's where he dropped the last 20 dollars, he had for a trip that took four days in all. Once in Rumichaca, on the Ecuadorian side of the border — and as if the experience he'd gone through up to then were not enough — the first of the guides paid upfront by his mother to help him travel through the country

His connection with community activism



never appeared and the young man was left abandoned to his fate.

Still, just as there are people who take advantage of the situation of migrants, there are also others who are caring and supportive, and that was the case of an Ecuadorian who accompanied the boy and paid for his transportation. Abraham remembers the act with deep gratitude. *"I didn't find the second guide either, but I did find this man who was a good person and happened to be traveling to Manta, so he offered to accompany me. He just asked me if I had an identity card, and since I had an Ecuadorian one, he told me that I could pass through with that. From the border, we took a taxi to Tulcán. The man paid for my ticket to Quito and from there to Manta. Once here, my mother paid him back for what he'd spent."*

This could have been the experience that forged the young man's character or perhaps the catalyzing force from which an innate quality of leadership emerged. The truth is that, after his reinsertion into the educational system, Abraham, an Ecuadorian by birth who lived in Venezuela from the age of one to 15, felt a deep attraction for community activism, something so strong that it led him to get involved in some youth clubs.

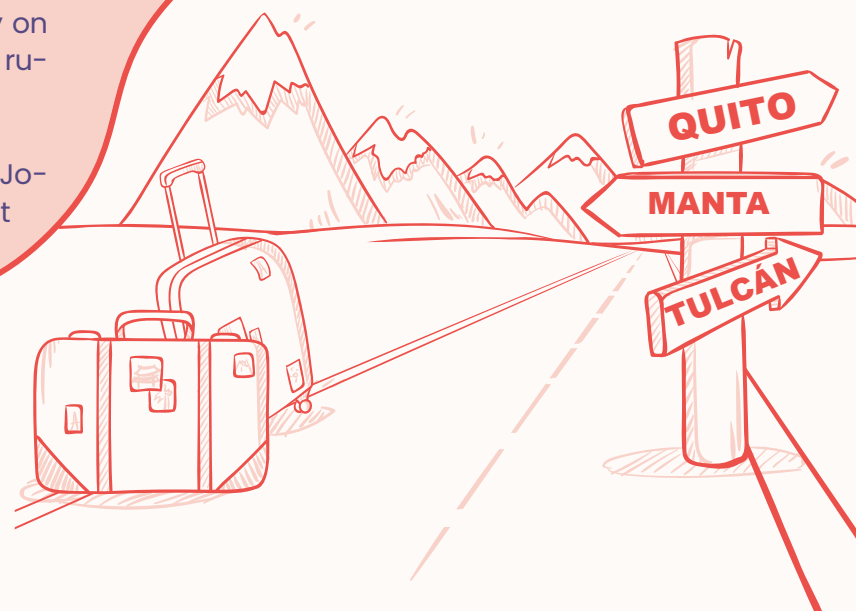
Currently, he is part of the teen club "Juntas y Juntos Es Mejor" (Together Is Better), one of the nine clubs that Plan International supports in Manta, Quito, and Loja. *"In this club, I went deep into issues of human rights, sexual and reproductive health rights, gender equality, self-esteem, and others with the My Paths of Transformation method, * which for me is a very good guide "* says Abraham.

He was also in the Manta City Council's "Jóvenes del Cambio" (Young People for Change) club, where he took part in painting murals and cleaning up the beach and the streets, lent a hand in delivering food and clothing kits to people in need, and participated in talks among young people. The health center club where Abraham lives chose him, along with other adolescents, as a community leader to work especially on various projects benefitting youth in this rural area of San Lorenzo Parish.

He twice participated in the "Manta Joven" (Young Manta) summit, an event held by the Manta City Council in which influencers, Ecuadorian Olympic medalists, and even winners of com-

petitions such as Master Chef told their life stories and how they managed to achieve success, with or without help. This experience led him to a realization that now largely guides his life: *"If they could ... why not me?"*

"The man paid for my ticket to Quito and from there to Manta. Once here, my mother paid him back for what he'd spent."



The leader of the hive

Abraham is the senior class president at the only high school in his town. As the leader of the class, he enjoys the trust of most of his classmates. "We are like a beehive. If something happens to any of the members, we must all come to their aid. We also keep an eye on behavior in the group so as to safeguard our relationship with the teachers and the establishment," he says a few months before graduating.

He was also vice president of his school's Student Council and, as such, promoted recreational activities for both students and teachers. In his opinion, peaceful gatherings are the best "Often students don't complain to teachers because they're afraid they'll be reprimanded or



their grades will be affected, but I think you have to say what you feel. If others don't do so, I'm not afraid to confront the situation ... anything to improve relations between both sides. If we students are asked to improve, so is the teaching staff."

These are some of the qualities for which Abraham was chosen by Plan International's ELLA project to be one of six young representatives from Ecuador at the multi-country meeting of adolescents from Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador held in November 2023 in Bogotá, Colombia. He remembers in this regard that during the selection process he answered the questionnaires honestly, according to his own way of thinking. "The truth is, it wasn't difficult for me to answer with my point of view, what I really think; nothing prepared beforehand because you have to know how to react properly and assertively," he states without a moment of hesitation. *afirma sin titubear ni un instante.*

He of course recognizes that representing Ecuador in the event was a commitment that required thorough preparation with a cool head, and he therefore left no detail to improvisation. So, in the months prior to the event, he reinforced the public speaking methods and abilities he learned in school. "A teacher told us to learn how to present a topic, not only because it's important to get good grades but because it will help us in college and in other moments in life to share our work, projects, and thoughts. I don't feel nervous or embarrassed when I speak in front of an audience."

The life project

During his time in the ELLA project's teen club, Abraham outlined his life plan and how to channel his goals as part of the strategies and dynamics implemented by Plan International in the adolescent training process.

He's very good at mathematics and thought about studying architecture, but his family lacks the means to pay for the full-time course of study. He has a plan B: working to finance his education, but this time in cybersecurity, one of the new careers he learned about in a workshop led by experts from a private university in the capital city of Quito. He's very interested in this, even though to achieve his goal he would have to leave his family and home in Manta.

His short-term goal is to getting a job and even a scholarship to enable him to continue studying, but he avows that he will not be away from his loved ones forever, because he will be returning home when he has finished studying, since that's where he wants to create a foundation to care for stray cats and dogs.

Abraham had eight cats and two dogs. First, there were four felines in his care, and one day when he returned from school, the number had doubled: his kitty had given birth while he was gone. Then, his deep sensitivity and empathy for the little ones led him to search for responsible people who might want to adopt them.

As a matter of fact, in every action and project he undertakes, Abraham strives to become a better human being and leave his mark on the planet, and that's what makes a difference.

* My Paths of Transformation is the method used by the ELLA project to strengthen the agency and empowerment of adolescents and youth in contexts of human mobility who, along with their host communities, participate in its teen clubs. The document emphasizes gender equality, protection, health, and sexual and reproductive rights.



MADELEIN

Found a better present and a promising future in Ecuador for herself and her family

It's just before 10:00 a.m. on a weekday. In the small living-dining room of their apartment in the north of Quito, 15-year-old Madelein takes advantage of her father's absence at work, her mother's while busy seeing to materials for her business, and her siblings' away at the park, to dance to the beat of a song in English. She tries to record a TikTok with a spontaneous choreography, the kind that just comes out of her as soon as her mind starts to enjoy the music and her body responds to the vibes (as spontaneous and happy as she herself is almost all the time, with her endearing smile) and gives expression to how at ease and happy she feels.

The arrival of the expected visit does not bother her; in fact, she likes having a new audience to tell her honestly whether her dancing is any good or not.

She sure is good! She's got so much rhythm, and you can see the passion she puts into it!





Madelein envisions herself in the future as a dance instructor for girls, anywhere in the world but preferably in Switzerland, Spain, or Argentina, she says frankly, because she dreams of someone discovering her potential through social media and inviting her to travel the planet perfecting and spreading this art. Medical school is also among her options, but perhaps now, because of her youth and energy, dancing is what draws her attention the most.

"I like dancing. In Venezuela I practiced from Monday to Friday, and on Sundays I performed with my group at the neighborhood church. We danced until we were exhausted, and that made me very happy," Madelein says. Entering a dance academy is among her priorities, so now the task is to find where to take classes in the morning because she goes to school in the afternoon. School vacations, she believes, are always a good time to start.

Her eventual dance classes, going to a school where she feels welcome and has a good number of friends, belonging to a teen club with young people from various sectors in the north of the city, and the economic stability achieved by her family are powerful reasons that lead Madelein to say, "I'm super, super happy in Ecuador."

When the family decided to leave, they only told their maternal grandparents to avoid envy and ominous predictions, says the teenager. “Four years have gone by, I’ve grown and matured and, most importantly, I’ve got my cool back ... ‘peace of mind,’ as they say. It’s strange, and also sad, that I’ve come to feel better in another country than in my own with my people. I would only return to Venezuela to visit my grandmother; my grandfather already passed away, far from us,” she says this last thing with sadness.

The migratory process

On August 19th, 2019, after a long and arduous trip that took them seven days from Maturín in Monagas state in northern Venezuela, Madelein, along with her mother and two brothers and a sister — now 18, 10, and 7 years old —

finally arrived in Ecuador. “The trip was rough. We traveled by a route full of rocks and scattered sticks. It was the worst thing I’d been through in my life. They kept telling us that if we fell into the river, the current would sweep us away and we would drown. That made us afraid, almost terrified, but my mother gave us the courage to keep going.”

The mere fact of crossing the Colombian–Ecuadorian border breathed new life into them, in Madelein’s words. They received help and shelter because in Tulcán, the northern most Ecuadorian city,

it is so cold (7–11°C) that it cuts to the bone, and it’s worse for people who come from a hot country with a humid tropical climate (21–32°C). From there, they traveled the last five hours of the journey by bus to Quito.

“The trip was rough. We traveled by a route full of rocks and scattered sticks. It was the worst thing I’d been through in my life.”



The hope that things would get better never abandoned them during the trip and until they were finally reunited with her father, who had migrated with the aid of a relative a year earlier to look for work, furnish a house, send money to Venezuela both for their upkeep and to save enough for the rest of the family to make the trip to Ecuador.

And in fact, once settled in, things got better for them. Gone are the days when the family had just one meal a day. Now, their father's steady job and their mother's made-to-order handicrafts, advertised on Facebook, enable them to eat three times a day, go to school, purchase school supplies, pay rent, and buy new clothes. "The hard migration experience — which, if we'd known about it before, I don't think we would've done it that way — was finally worth it," says the teenager.

"Sometimes I talk to Mom about our difficult past, the present, and our promising future,

and I thank her for how brave she was to risk traveling alone with two girls and two boys. She's the best example of determination and strength we have." Madelein, her mother, and her younger sister are part of the 236 thousand Venezuelan girls and women in Ecuador, out of a total of 502,514 migrants from that country.*

Adapting

The first year, they did not go to school. The mother had a hard time getting four places in the same institution for all her children. It was very important to her for them to be together and watch out for each other. She finally managed it. They are in a relatively small public school close to home. "I want to finish in the same school, although they're pretty strict. We can't wear piercings during classes, nor dye our hair, nor use our cell phones. And that's okay, we go there to study and socialize with friends. Just like at home, rules are necessary; they make us respectful of spaces and people."

She says that when she entered the seventh grade (she's now in her first year of high school), she was "somewhat antisocial." The first girls to talk to her were Venezuelan students, but now she has more classmates, and her best friend is Ecuadorian. "I hope that in the next few years everyone will return to school, and we don't get separated into different classrooms. In any case, recess is always a good time to get together."

"I hope that in the next few years everyone will return to the school and we don't get separated into different classrooms. In any case, recess is always a good time to get together."



"Nueva Juventud" (New Youth), her teen club

Plan International sponsors nine teen clubs through its ELLA project in the cities of Quito, Loja, and Manta. Madelein is part of one of these spaces that operates in a neighborhood in the northernmost part of the city, where she has gotten to know the 22 teenagers from Ecuador and Venezuela who also attend.

"I've felt it to be a safe place to speak freely, give my opinion and share with others. We all participate. That's what a club is for, to come together, to help each other, to work as a team." She adds that this space is important to her because this is where she learned to be more sociable and speak in public. She thinks that what she now knows about human, sexual, and reproductive rights, contraceptive methods, xenophobia, self-esteem, and other topics are essential lessons for life.

"I would like the club to never end so that my little sister and brother can also join and learn how to act, where to go, where to call if they need protection, how to ask for help and assert their rights — although they have me, and I learned the lessons very well," she ends with a giggle, ready to go out to the park across from her house to pose for the photos for this story.

* R4V: Regional Interagency Coordination Platform for Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants, managed jointly with UNHCR and IOM in Ecuador.



Ynez María

*Example of leadership,
empathy and solidarity*

Mimoso, a polar bear; Quiqui, a brown bear; and Chochó, a dog, are the only three stuffed animals that 15-year-old Ynez María was able to bring to Ecuador from Santa Ana de Coro in western Venezuela, where she came from with her mother and brother a little over a year ago to settle in Loja, in the southern inter-Andean region of Ecuador, joining more than 514 thousand Venezuelan people who have settled in this country.* She lives in a third-floor apartment from where she has a privileged view of the city, a landscape that inspires tranquility and a certain sense of belonging, she says.

In her country, her mother worked very hard and earned very little, says the teenager. An aunt, whose daughter had already migrated to Ecuador seven years before, told her about the better job opportunities and standard of living in this country. She risked traveling alone first, leaving her two children with their father. In six months, she was set, had rented a house and got together some money to return to Venezuela and pick up Ynez María and her brother to come back to their new home with them.





Jennys, the mother, hasn't yet practiced her occupation in Ecuador; she plans on taking refresher courses soon. Meanwhile, like the 21% of Venezuelan people with formal employment in the country, ** she works in a family member's bakery and puts her baking expertise into practice, another activity that she loves and does very well, comments her daughter.

"I left my musical instruments — a flute and a cuatro — as well as my childhood toys and some books in Venezuela. Those are things that I'll be able to recover or replace at some point, but I couldn't leave my stuffed animals, because I grew up with them and each has a special meaning for me, and they keep alive some memories of the people who are important to me, like my father," says Ynez María maturely and with a certain nostalgia.

In her room — the first one she has ever had all to herself and which she considers synonymous of freedom and privacy — Mimoso, Quiqui, and Chochó occupy an honored place along with the numerous books meticulously arranged on a shelf, testifying to her keen interest in reading. Just by entering her room, it is possible to see her priorities, her dreams and desires, and the sweetness of her nature. "Having my own space is a new and wonderful feeling for me. I can stay up late reading, talk on the phone without anyone else hearing me, and listen to music without headphones.

Entering school as soon as they arrived in Loja was a big step and also a big change for her. “I was surprised that each student has their own books here. In Venezuela, only the teacher had them, and you had to take dictation or copy from the blackboard. It wasn’t easy to get materials for practical work, either. We had to recycle whatever was lying around. That’s good, of course, but sometimes there was nothing left at home to reuse. Making photocopies was expensive, not to mention the internet,” she says, while explaining that the list of changes is even longer.

In fact, in the few months she has been going to school, Ynez María has already been in singing performances, in a play, and even in a beauty pageant as part of a cultural event. The teenager naturally confesses that she also knows swimming styles, dances ballet, and paints, all skills she learned from a very young age in her hometown. “I’ve adapted to the school, and I want to finish high school there. The teachers already know me well ... for good things, not for anything bad,” she clarifies..

Solidarity as a motto

When talking with Ynez María, it is not hard to identify her leadership traits. “Maybe I will become a leader. Yes, I’d like that. I’m working on many aspects of my personality, like empathy, for example, which is essential for being a fair and respectful leader, not a boss,” she says, while explaining how important it is for her to look out for the well-being of the people around her.

“I like to collaborate ... I put others before myself.” And so, it is: in her Making the Difference teen club — one of the nine that Plan International’s ELLA project has established in Loja, Quito, and Manta hosting 264 adolescents — Ynez María is the one who worries about whether there are enough chairs and, if not, she sees to it that there are and that everyone has the necessary work materials. She also helps to serve lunch. “When each participant has their snack, then I see to myself. My motto is: It’s not going to hurt me to wait.”

Perhaps her desire to help is innate, she inherited it, or she learned it spontaneously from her parents, since she grew up watching her mother, a nurse, and her father, a firefighter, performing community service activities. Even during the migration journey, she says, her mother took care of many Venezuelans. “My 20-year-old brother and I helped out by distributing water, cleaning wounds, giving medication, and feeding girls, boys, women and men who, like us, were also migrating with the same dream: a better life and a better tomorrow.”

“When each participant has their snack, then I see to myself. My motto is: It’s not going to hurt me to wait.”



Shaping the future

Plan International stresses guiding the adolescents it works with to develop their life project, teaching them to mark out the roadmap that will direct their steps. "To be honest, I love talking about my life project: first finishing high school, then going to college to study psychology or law, working, and making a home." Ynez María also wants to make enough money to buy a ranch for her father, preferably near her, in the same country where she makes her life, whether it's Venezuela if she goes back, Ecuador, or wherever life takes her.

"At some point, I want to get married and start a family. Of course, that will be at the proper time, when I'm professional, mentally and financially stable. I think that will be essential to give a good life to the people I'll bring into the world"

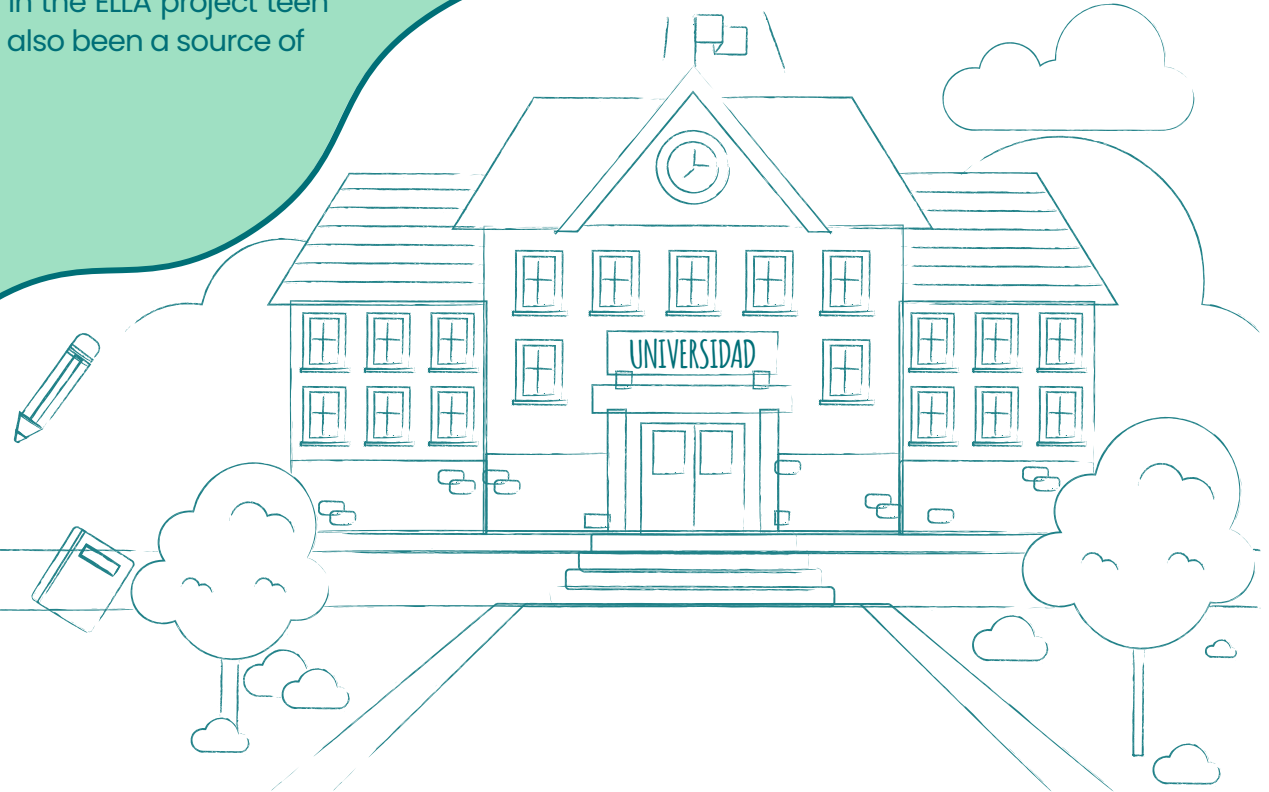
She knows that it will not be easy to fulfill her goals and dreams, which is why she works hard at school and tries to perform well and get better in all her subjects. She is open to learning everything placed in front of her. "You have to know a lot of things. Maybe something you know can help you at some point to get ahead in life," she reflects, while looking at her mother as if she's setting her as an example.

Her time in the ELLA project teen club has also been a source of learning.

To what she has absorbed regarding identity and sexuality, she adds learning about herself.

"Something else that I learned and put into practice every day is the importance of not

I love talking about my life project: first finishing high school, then going to college."



stigmatizing people with labels that society puts on them. You have to accept people as they are,” diario, es la importancia de no estigmatizar a la gente con etiquetas que les coloca la sociedad, hay que aceptar a las personas como son”, she stresses.

The first achievements

Sitting on the spotless floor of the living room, still without furniture, which is not the family’s priority at the moment, we enjoy the spaghetti Bolognese that Jennys prepared for lunch, as the conversation continues.

“In Venezuela, to be honest, we never went without food, but there was always the fear of one day not having the money or any way to buy food,” remembers the teenager. She still can’t get over how easy it is to buy groceries now, but also clothing and toiletries, mainly.

Ynez Maria hurries to finish her food; she barely has time to brush her teeth and spruce up in front of the mirror. She looks calm, confident, and relaxed, although in a few minutes she has a very

important appointment: a key virtual meeting with the ELLA project team from Plan International Ecuador and dozens of young Ecuadorian and Venezuelan women living in the country.

It turns out that Ynez María, with her knowledge and longings in tow, was nominated to be one of a group of six teenagers who would travel to Bogotá in November 2023 to represent the country at the multi-country meeting of teenagers from Ecuador, Peru, and Colombia.

And how did it go? ... well, superbly ... she managed it! Good for her and good for Plan International Ecuador, which has an extraordinary representative in Ynez María.

* R4V: Regional Interagency Coordination Platform for Venezuelan Refugees, managed jointly with UNHCR and IOM in Ecuador.

** Report published on July 28, 2022, by the Refugee and Migrant Task Force (GTRM).

“Something else that I learned and put into practice every day is the importance of not stigmatizing people with labels.”



KILVER

***At intense race to discover
his passions***

A day before the final game of the school soccer championship, 17-year-old Kilver, being a conscientious player from his class, is out practicing at the south end goal post on the field in Carapungo's main park — better known as “the youth park” because of the considerable number of young people from this neighborhood in the north of Quito who come every day to practice various sports and outdoor activities, especially under the intense sunlight of the first days of summer and in the refreshing breeze of the winds typical of this time of year.

“If we win the championship, the reward for the whole team is a good final grade in the subject we're lowest in, not to mention the benefits for whoever scores the winning goal,” Kilver explains with a big smile, as if justifying the extra time spent training. Although he is an academically good student, a little help is always welcome, he acknowledges. “I don't think I'm the best student, but I am the most sociable in school, no one



beats me at that I've always looked for a way to be positive and get along with everyone. You have to learn to understand people who don't think or act like you," he wisely reflects.

Immigrating, the hardest experience

For Kilver, sports are a part of his daily life. He's an athletic kid, quite tall, which also helps him in basketball. "Four years ago, when I was 13, my mom, my sister, and I arrived in Ecuador and met up with my dad, who had come three years earlier. He almost didn't recognize me. "When we separated, I was little and chubby, and when I arrived, I was pretty tall, almost his size, and thin, because I'd taken a liking to sports and because of our obligated diet due to circumstances in Venezuela." Despite the money his father sent, there was scarcity, and they could not buy enough needed groceries, Kilver says. They also had to save for the rest of the family's trip to Ecuador.

Thinking back on the immigration process brings back many memories for the young man, who has not forgotten what he calls "the most traumatic experience" of his life. "We left by bus from Los Teques to Caracas. At the main terminal, we left for Maracaibo, and from there to Paraguachón in Colombia. It's really a very nasty border where you see horrible things." According to data from the Colombian Foreign Ministry, every day about a thousand migrants headed to Colombia, Ecuador, or Peru pass through Paraguachón by unofficial routes.

He remembers in great detail that for one stretch they had to go through on a motorcycle, wearing hoods to avoid being seen by the soldiers who asked for documentation. Afterwards, like hundreds of others, they took a route where they had to pay every so often to be allowed to pass on ahead. "I felt panic, because all along that route the trees were all burned. They told us there had been a shoot-out and some trucks transporting cheap gasoline from Venezuela to Colombia had exploded. It was terrible, like a horror movie, until we finally reached the border between Colombia and Ecuador and passed through Rumichaca with the Andean Migration Card on Au-

gust 26th, 2019, at 10:00 p.m. on the dot, two hours before the closing of the border for migrants from Venezuela without a visa."

Reuniting the family after three years was an emotional moment for all of them. His father's tears for missing his son's growing up from a child to a teenager was what struck him the most, remembers Kilver, who values his parent's support and mentoring above all and is determined to try to always be a good son.

"Four years ago, when I was 13, my mom, my sister, and I arrived in Ecuador and met up with my dad, who had come three years earlier."



Living his own career path

In order to achieve a bright future and not fail in the commitment he has made as a son, Kilver does not stop learning, investigating, and searching for what most excites him and will enable him — sooner rather than later — to find the kind of job or endeavors he will go into as soon as he finishes school in June 2024. “I’m not going to go to college. I can’t pay for a private university, and a public one is out of the question because of my immigrant status. Plus, I don’t want to study something that will tie me down to being an employee for years and years. I definitely want to be my own boss.”

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Thus, he has added other passions to sports: gastronomy, barista craft, cosmetology, finance, the stock market, digital marketing, and entrepreneurship. These are all activities and skills that, despite his young age, he has been picking up in various in-person and virtual courses, and he is perfecting them on his own through graded tutorials, generally on YouTube.

“I’m interested in taking the greatest number of courses available, not only to have a lot of skills and knowledge but to find what really intrigues me so that I can dedicate myself to that for a long time and also make it pay off,” comments the teenager, who plans to become an entrepreneur, earn enough money fast to invest in the stock market and achieve a good standard of living for himself and his family, and then start to see the world as early as possible. These are the prospects that excite him for the time being.



The simple pleasure he gets from combining foods, knowing about cuts, and handling kitchen utensils and appliances, gastronomy was one of the first courses he took — when he was 16 years old and the only adolescent among the 30 people enrolled. Although he has a certificate that endorses him, he does not see himself as a professional chef in the future, much less as the owner of a restaurant. “Maybe gastronomy will help me to earn my first dollars, but it would be temporary until I become the owner of my own business, which will not be a restaurant. That’s really complicated,” he states categorically.

He likes cooking a lot, but just to enjoy himself with family and friends, he explains, while confessing that his favorite dish to prepare is ravioli. “I like making whole wheat pasta. I made that pretty well, but I still have to refine it. I’ll keep trying until I get it right,” he says, showing how much, he likes honing his skills on his own.

This quality stands out in almost everything he does. For example, in the barista course — which takes up two afternoons a week — the coffee combining techniques they are teaching him are

not enough. He likes to experiment by creating new drinks with different types of essences, milks, and flavors. “I won’t stop until I achieve my own creations,” he says.

He goes on in detail about how he learns new makeup techniques (also on his own) that are not necessarily part of the curriculum of the beauty, makeup, and hairstyle course that fills his Saturday mornings for the moment. “I learned eyelid shading in a tutorial and I’m perfecting it. Makeup appeals to me the most, although I like everything a lot. It’s a job I’d be interested in doing some time in my life.”

Once again, Kilver is the only teenager in the class and the only male, a situation that does not bother him at all, he clarifies. “There’s no such thing as some activities for men and others for women. We can all do what we want and like to.

We have to break the stereotypes society uses to define us

as men or women and that limit our freedom to express ourselves from the depths of our individuality.” He feels comfortable with the women and has managed to earn their affection and respect. They treat him as an equal regardless of he being a teenager because they see and value his potential and dedication, he says.

“I won’t stop until I achieve my own creations.”



Growing with responsibility

Transformative masculinities and how to develop and apply them is one of the great topics that he has learned about during his time at the teen club, a space for 55 young people from neighborhoods in the north of the Ecuadorian capital and one of the nine clubs that Plan International Ecuador sponsors through the ELLA project in three cities: Quito, Loja, and Manta.

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Kilver is a leader in a youth group trained to spread the knowledge they have learned among their peers and in other spaces. This knowledge includes how men can be allies in preventing gender violence and promoting equality by disseminating the rights of girls, adolescents, and young women and the protection routes.

Out of everything he took in, the classes on sexuality were what made him a little uncomfortable, he confesses. "At first, I acted serious so as not to appear ner-



vous, but now I'm clear that it's important to know the subject. "There are many teenage pregnancies, at least in my school there are several cases, and it's necessary to prevent them from increasing," he states with conviction.

"Adolescents should know about contraceptive methods, everything related to sexuality and sexual and reproductive health because it's normal that at some point we're going to start our sex life, so the idea is to learn how to protect ourselves and know how to act," he ends, with his characteristic smile that almost never leaves his face and allows us to see a determined, disciplined young man who, despite just turning 17, is clear about his goals and certain he will not stop until he achieves them.

MELANY

Striving for her dreams

When the clock hits 7:00 a.m., dozens of girls, boys, and adolescents begin to leave their houses on either side of the Spondylus Route, a tourist route that passes through their rural area in the southern part of Manta on its way through numerous towns in three provinces (Esmeraldas, Guayas, and Manabí) on the Ecuadorian coast. The route owes its name to the spondylus shell used as currency by pre-Hispanic cultures and found on the edge of the submerged continental shelf.

Seeing them walking along the edge of the only paved road that runs through the place is part of everyday life. As if they were neatly columned little ants, they head along the edge of the road (there are no sidewalks) to the area's only school, which in the blink of an eye is filled with the voices, laughter, and hubbub of its more than 350 students. At that hour, as well as after school, the few vehicles circulating on the road slow down, almost instinctively.

Halfway down the last column of students is 16-year-old Melany, her 7-year-old sister, and her 8- and 4-year-old cousins. After almost 20 minutes on their slow trek, they finally arrived.



"When I come alone, it doesn't take me more than 15 minutes, but when I bring the three, I'm always on the verge of being late, especially because of the youngest one, who doesn't want to walk, although my sister and my other cousin also enjoy themselves playing along the way," says Melany, who is responsible for taking care of her sister and cousins and ensuring that they arrive safely and on time.

Being late means having to sweep the school's entrance or yard and running the risk of missing her first hour of classes, which she cannot afford, especially since she has decided to study conscientiously, learn as much as she can. and prepare herself to take and successfully pass the college entrance exams in just over a year. "I would like a profession having something to do with the health sciences. I think I will be a doctor, a dentist, or even a veterinarian, or maybe a psychologist. I'm still not very sure about the career and I have to do more research, but what I am sure of is that I want to keep studying," she says, while mentioning that she is aware that to fulfill her dream, she will have to go live in another city away from her family, a sacrifice she is willing to make.

She is now in her next-to-last year of high school. She will be graduating before she turns 18, and this will be a turning point in her life, as both she and her mother — for whom her daughter's success is one of her top priorities — are convinced.

If fate finally takes her to another city, it would be the fourth big change in Melany's short life, first was just after she was born. That's when her mother, Erika, an Ecuadorian but raised in Venezuela since she was little, returned to Ecuador. The second was when she was not yet a year old and Érika took her back to rejoin her maternal grandmother, who had remained living in Venezuela. The third relocation was when she was barely three years old and her mother, during a visit to her hometown in Ecuador, decided to stay and live there, where the teenager has spent most of her short life.

During the two years she lived in Venezuela, Melany practically spent her time locked up, walking alone on tile and cement floor, never grass or sand, says Érika. Her mother and grandmother intense sewing work, left little time for leisure and did not leave because of the dangers of the neighborhood in which they lived.

"When we returned here, one thing I remember the most about the changes my daughter went through was her crying when her feet sank into the ground. She felt uncomfortable and didn't like the feeling it gave her. Also, and most importantly, for the first time she played with other children, went out into the backyard and to the park and the beach."

At her mother's request, and despite the warning that she was too young and would have to repeat the year, Melany entered first grade when she was four. "It was either that or spending most of the day

"I would like a profession connected with the health sciences. I think I will be a doctor, a dentist, or even a veterinarian."





locked up again, and because the girls and boys she played with went to classes — I didn't want any more of that for my girl," Erika explains.

This is how Melany got used to school. She is a good student and, although she is not very outgoing, she gets along well with all her classmates and, of course, with those who have migrated from Venezuela, from whom she has learned for the first time — despite also being Venezuelan — certain words like *chama*, *chamo*, and *vale*, which have become very common around school.

She spends most of her time at her school and at the Community Development Center, where she regularly attends the teen club run by Plan International's ELLA project, the only space for young people where she lives and where she says she feels comfortable and safe. She says that at the club she has learned in depth many things about sexual and

reproductive health, prevention of gender-based violence, protection routes, xenophobia and inclusion, how to strengthen her self-esteem, and to plan her goals according to her life project, among other things. "I know that all this will help me in life. I have to know a few things about how to protect and take care of myself, especially if I someday live alone," says the teenager.

Participation in the club has also reinforced the idea that all adolescents have the same rights to training and higher education, breaking with the socially assigned roles of women and men.

To going to school and to the club, she has added a course in acrylic nail design and application that she attends regularly and in which she has demonstrated great skill. She also likes to do makeup and hairstyles and every morning before school she fixes her seven-year-old sister's hair. In her free time, also practices on her the new hairstyles she sees on social media. "I don't think I can devote my entire life to these jobs, but maybe at some point they will help me support myself, especially when I go to college and until I can practice my profession," she says, sure of the future she aspires to.

At home, her schooling and development are a priority for the family, so much so that she has no set chores to do, although that does not mean — once the homework is done and the lessons have been studied — that she does not help her sister with her homework and school work, as well as with the chores of cleaning, washing, cooking, and mainly taking care of their little one-year-old sister, for whom she has a real soft spot, she confesses. Her mother says it is common to see her cradling the infant in her arms, playing with her in the park, and feeding her or putting her to bed.

While Melany is going to the teen club, Érika attends the workshops for ELLA project mothers and fathers. “They give me insight into how to raise my daughters there. I learn from the experience of other moms and dads, and it has helped me reinforce the idea I’ve always had that parents are not only there to bring up and educate their children but to support, accompany, understand, and guide them along the best path until they’re responsible adults. “That’s my mission, and I’m willing to study, read, and prepare myself to always be a good mother and guide to my daughters,” says Érika, who arrives at noon with her baby by the hand to pick up her seven-year-old and her nephews, who finish school at that time.

One hour later, Melany will finish her last class and return home along the same route and with the same group of teenagers as in the morning. At that hour, their pace is slower as they drop off their companions from house to house. The leisurely walk back draws out the time to enjoy this special moment of genuine youthful companionship to the utmost.



ANDREA

A Venezuelan teenager who knows how to defend her rights

"I was invited to have lunch at a friend's house in Quito, and when her parents asked me where I was from, I said the Ecuadorian coast because, moments before, they had said bad things about Venezuelan people and how, supposedly, they had robbed them.

"It was very strange to deny my nationality. I had never done that, but at that moment I felt terrible because of their comments."

This is the testimony of Andrea, a 16-year-old girl who at the age of 14 traveled for three days from her native Maracaibo, hidden and extremely uncomfortable in the back of a truck transporting bananas because neither she nor her mother had a passport or any other documents that would allow them to move freely through Colombia and Ecuador.

Although Andrea made up for her omission shortly after that lunch by acknowledging to her schoolmate where she was really from, this act of sincere vindication on her part still left her with an unpleasant feeling, because her friend's mother did not keep how she felt to herself and, at the first opportunity, quite unabashedly made no secret of the fact that she would have liked Andrea to really



be from the coast and not from Venezuela. Later on, she understood during Plan International's ELLA project training program at the teen club that her experience was similar to other girls' who were forced to migrate, and that she had been a victim of discrimination and xenophobia.

But this was not the only xenophobic act Andrea experienced in Quito during her first year in Ecuador. On another occasion, when she and some Venezuelan girlfriends were getting on a bus, some people yelled at them, "Get out of here, this isn't your country." The difference from the first unfortunate episode was that this time the girl already knew about her rights as a migrant, so she did not remain silent and, without having to resort to rudeness or harsh words, she informed her hecklers that migrants and refugees have the right to be in Ecuador according to the Constitution and legal framework of this country: "We have the right to study and work; we can be here without having to hide, because we're not doing anything wrong", she responded without hesitation.

It was in her Caraquitos teen club that Andrea found out, for the first time, that she had rights. "I used to tell my mother: 'Well, let's go when the six months we can stay here are up!' But then I realized that I could stay in Ecuador because my record is clean.



Andrea overcame these experiences and today considers herself fully included not only by Ecuadorian people but also by Venezuelans, Colombians, and people from other countries. She no longer sees signs of xenophobia, and although it could happen again at some unfortunate moment, she now knows how to defend herself and assert her rights.

For now, she has already obtained the certificate of permanence in the country* and a temporary visa for six months that can be extended to obtain her passport — when she has the money to pay for it — and the Ecuadorian ID in at most two years. She was overjoyed and breathed a deep sigh of relief when they told her the wonderful news, Andrea is in her second year of high school at a public school in the north of Quito, and although it is still too early to define a career, she really likes graphic design and architecture. She's good at drawing women's faces and sunsets, which she imbues with unexpected tones and striking color combinations. A collection of notebooks full of art is tangible proof of her innate talent.

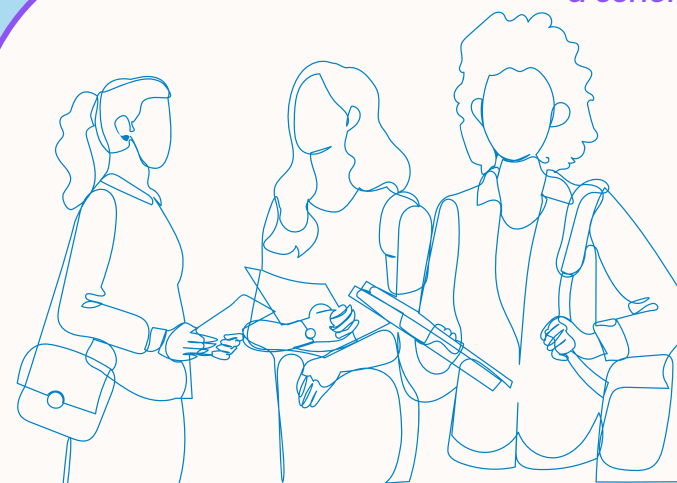
The actions shaping her future

Currently, Andrea is part of the Plan International Ecuador leadership school** and is in the process of defining a life project that entails enhancing an innate or acquired skill so that it becomes a job or the basis for an enterprise able to produce income to pay for her education. *"I only have two years left before I leave school. I hope to get a good source of income right away and hopefully a scholarship later on, because I understand that private universities in Quito are not cheap, and Venezuelans cannot study in public ones without a visa."*

She is also taking a beauty course because she loves it, especially makeup, so much that in her free time she practices over and over doing makeup on her mother, her friends, and her- self.

She even draws makeup experiments to later use them on someone's face. She was in charge of doing the makeup for a large part of the cast of the Quito teen clubs, who staged the presentation "Expresiones": "Juveniles por la no violencia" (Youthful Expressions for Non-Violence) show where, through theater and dance, they protested

"I only have two years left before I leave school. I hope to get a good source of income right away and hopefully a scholarship".



and raised their voices to bring to light, raise awareness, and commit the community to acting together in support of the exercise and respect of their rights.

Andrea recognizes that it is not easy for her to make friends, but she admits that she loves being part of the group of people who, for whatever reason, come to the community house in her neighborhood and even enjoys going out to eat with them. But what they call being outgoing ... she confesses she is not, because she actually only has two girlfriends, and one of them is in Venezuela. Of course, she very much appreciates getting along with her Ecuadorian friend.

She says that it was her mother, Ida, who encouraged her to join the ELLA project, because as soon as they arrived from Venezuela, Ida started to take as many courses as she could and constantly encouraged her daughter to do so as well, but Andrea repeatedly refused because she felt a little embarrassed. Until she finally agreed to go to the teen club on Thursdays each week. "I got to know other teenagers, and I began to lose my shyness, to understand that the things I think and say aren't bad, because we all have different opinions. What I've learned in the club I couldn't have learned anywhere else. Now, I not only know my rights as a migrant but as a woman. I know how to take care of myself and defend myself, and I know about sexual and reproductive health, gender equality, self-esteem, and a lot of other subjects."

* This is given only to Venezuelan citizens who enter Ecuador through regular channels. This document is required to apply for the VIRTE (the visa that allows Venezuelans to stay for two years and is renewable only once).

** The Leadership School seeks to enable diverse young women and adolescents from 15 to 21 years old to build their leadership and resilience capability and strengthen their self-confidence and skills based on rights, gender equality, and intersectionality approach to become leaders who actively participate in all spaces where decisions are made.

Despite her initial misgivings, Andrea sees her mother--now a community leader -- as an example to follow "because she's one of those people who cooperates in everything and always endeavors to help people, even if they are strangers."

Andrea remembers that she never thought she would ever have to pack her bags and leave Venezuela, until one day her mother told her in no uncertain terms and with her characteristic assuredness, "We are going to Ecuador to rejoin with your brother and start a new life." Most of her family stayed behind in Venezuela: her father, all her cousins, as well as many memories. Today she feels homesick because she's so far away from them, but she hopes to see her family again one day when she has her passport, enough money, and is free to go for a visit.



JHON

A young man preparing to share his experiences with other teenagers

In 2016, Jhon — now 15 years old — arrived in Guayaquil, Ecuador, with his father, mother, and three brothers on a direct flight from Caracas, Venezuela, to their new country of residence. From there, they took a bus to Manta, the coastal city where his mother was born. She was the only one who, being Ecuadorian, traveled with only a one-way ticket. The rest of the family, as tourists, had return tickets, since the children's dual nationality had not been processed on time in Venezuela, where they were born. Each of them had arrived carrying just a small suitcase of clothes and one or another personal item or favorite toy. But without a doubt, faith, hope, and perseverance were a major part of Jhon's baggage and every other family member's as well.

While flying in a plane for the first time is generally an unforgettable experience for any child, for Jhon and his brothers, it was sad because it meant moving away from their birthplace, from friends, from school, and from the rest of the family. "I was almost nine, but I already realized the situation, and I was afraid of the unknown, of how we were going to live, and if I was going to be able to study and have new friendships. nuevas amistades. Sentía que nunca más iba vol



"I felt like I was never going to go back," says Jhon, who confesses that despite the time that has passed since he arrived, he still has not fully adapted to rural life, very different from life in his native Caracas.

Jhon's maternal grandmother had migrated from Ecuador to Venezuela quite young in search of better job opportunities, she got married and started her family there. While pregnant, she visited Ecuador, where Jhon's mother, Ines, was born. Ines made her life in Venezuela, got married, and had four sons, Jhon is the second sibling.

Ecuador, a safe harbor with new opportunities

There were several reasons behind the family's migration to Ecuador, among them an armed robbery that happened to Johnny, his father, in Venezuela, in which his taxi, a major source of family income, was stolen. Another was the difficulty of getting enough food to feed the large family. Added to this was the anguish because the money that Ines earned from a stable job

in a pharmacy chain was now not enough to live comfortably, much less buy a new taxi or their own home.

At first, they came to see how things would go, to try their luck. Ines' boss even offered to keep her job open in case they returned, since she had worked for more than ten years in the same company. However, after almost three months, and before the return tickets expired, they decided to stay in Ecuador. "Honestly, it hasn't been easy, despite being Ecuadorian. We've had to work hard, but at least we've been able to do it. We've achieved so much in a relatively short time. We now have our own piece of land and our own house; even if it only has cane walls and a dirt floor, it's ours," says Ines while clarifying that this house is temporary until she can get a soft-term loan to build a cement block home, because she won't give up her dreams, and she and Johnny will persevere in their pursuit of a good life for the family.

As soon as they decided to stay, they began the process of obtaining an Ecuadorian nationality for their children. They had not brought all the necessary documents for the procedure from Venezuela and, in six months, Jhon and his brothers became Ecuadorians.

"Now I know that I can go to a public university and possibly become an accountant or go into the army to train as a soldier, which is honestly my first option," says the teenager, who at this point is already clear that he will never live in Venezuela again.

Concerned about his son's future, Johnny sees another occupation option for Jhon in a course in heavy-duty forklift operation. "It's good that he's starting to look at alternatives. This course would give him an occupation that is in high demand at the port of Manta. There are very few people qualified to handle these machines," explains Johnny, for whom being a taxi driver, although in a rented vehicle, is allowing him to work in Ecuador and support his family.

Although Jhon will be finishing school in almost two years, what he will do with his life is a family concern now. "What I'm doing is studying and learning as much as possible. I want to build a good future for myself. My parents have taught me by example that I must work hard to achieve my goals. Nothing is easy, but it's a matter of setting my mind to it," says Jhon, while thanking his parents for everything they have done for him and his brothers.

Plan International and the ELLA project, part of the family's and his personal growth

As the older brother of two boys, still in primary school, one of Jhon's duties is to help them with their schoolwork. Preparing dinner for the whole family is also one of his chores. "I give them arepas with cheese, egg, or chicken almost every night. Sometimes, at Mom's insistence, I prepare cooked green or ripe plantains, but for me, there're always arepas," the teenager says naturally. Also, he and his brothers are all in charge of drying, folding, and putting away the clothes their mother has washed, cleaning the house, feeding the farm animals, and helping their paternal grandmother — who recently arrived from Venezuela and has joined the family.

"The truth is, at home all my four sons help with the housework. They must learn to fend for themselves and understand that housework is everyone's responsibility, regardless of sex or age. Furthermore, it is important to me that they



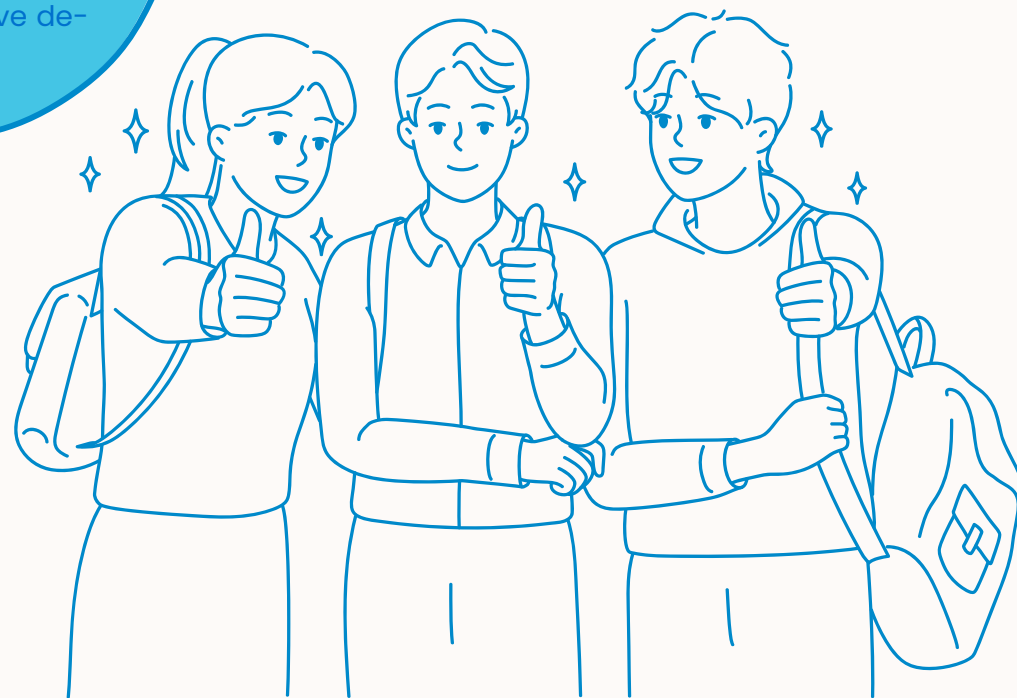
see how well I treat their mother, the respect that I have for her and my mother,” Johnny says. Jhon’s father finds ways to share quality time with his boys and even attends positive parenting workshops of Plan International’s ELLA project with his wife, despite working exhausting hours. “Along with another dad, we’re the only two men, but that doesn’t bother me. I learn a lot from the female participants. The most important thing is the advice we receive on how to connect with our children, how to talk to them about serious and everyday topics, and how to face the most common problems of adolescence.”

The connection of the mother and father of the boy with the Plan International project arose from Jhon’s participation in the teen club that operates in his town. The outstanding work and commitment of the teenager in this training process led him to become part of the group of six young people – three girls and three boys – selected to replicate the knowledge acquired to other adolescents. Likewise, Jhon has taken part in

transformative masculinities workshops, spaces aimed at young men to strengthen their capacities as allies of girls, adolescents, and young women in gender equality.

Hundreds of young people, both from their club and from the eight others that Plan International’s ELLA project runs in Manta, Quito, and Loja are trained on the issue of sexual and reproductive rights, human rights, xenophobia, gender-based violence, managing emotions, and self-esteem, among others are particularly important for young people’s positive development.

Jhon has taken part in the transformative masculinities spaces aimed at young men to strengthen their capacities as allies of girls, adolescents and young women.



"The club has helped me maintain my emotional stability and state of mind, to dedicate myself to my studies, my development, and, in general, my life. I have learned a lot about rights, how to defend them, how to respect them, and the responsibility I have for my body and sexuality. It will be great to convey to more adolescents what I now know so that they can safely navigate this stage of their lives."

Jhon does not miss an opportunity to talk about these things with his two younger brothers because, he says, he feels a certain amount of responsibility for their upbringing. "If I am going to teach other young people, I must start at home. If it's up to me, my brothers will enter adolescence knowing everything they need," concludes this young man who, according to his parents, is growing up well to be a good human being and a caring person.

Good for Jhon, good for his brothers and parents, and good for those teenagers who will learn from his knowledge and experience!

"If I am going to teach other young people, I must start at home. If it's up to me, my brothers will enter adolescence knowing everything they need."



JESSIMAR

Three small adhesive glitters on the upper eyelid of each eye and a few stars on her forehead were the accessories that ended up brightening the face of 16-year-old Jessimar. What really made the teenager shine, however, was the singular spark in her eyes and her permanent smile, which continuously radiated happiness.

It turns out that having a key part in one of the choreographed dances in the “Expresiones Juveniles por la no violencia” (Youthful Expressions for Non-Violence) show put on by 90 teenagers from the fourteen clubs that Plan International’s ELLA project runs in Quito was the perfect setting for Jessimar to express her love for dancing and corporal expression in an artistic composition emphasizing the empowerment of the body and resilience in the face of xenophobia and gender violence issues.

It was the first time that the girl had danced in public, and — to make the moment even more special — in a theater in front of more than 350 spectators, no less. This was something difficult to do, if not unthinkable until recently for a rather shy and introverted teenager for whom dancing has been one of her private activities since she was a young girl, her personal

An example of drive and perseverance



way of relaxing, having fun, and connecting with herself. When we have free time at the club to do what we like the most before and after the activities, I put on my headphones and in a space behind the blackboard, where no one sees me— because I feel embarrassed, although less now— I just start dancing. I love K-pop. Blackpink is my favorite group and doing their chores puts me in my zone,” says Jessimar, a young Venezuelan who arrived in Ecuador a little over three years ago with her maternal grandmother and her older brother to be reunited with her mother and stepfather after two years.

In addition to dancing, Jessimar shows remarkable talent for choreography. She’s got flow and the smooth moves her slim body enables her. In Venezuela, for birthdays, Mother’s Day, or Christmas, a dance was her gift for both her mother and her grandmother, who saw her granddaughter’s passion and enrolled her in salsa-casino classes, one of the most enjoyable times Jessimar had in her native country. For now, having a good grade average in school is the only condition that Jéssica, her mother, has set for her to enroll her in an institute or dance group. Jessimar’s got that very clear, which is why she spares no effort at school. Jessica tries to give her support and guidance at all times. “I always insist that if she needs help, she should ask

me, and if I don’t know something, then we can look it up and we’ll solve it together,” says Jessica, while acknowledging that patience has not always been one of her virtues, but her participation in the positive parenting workshops of Plan International’s ELLA project with the “Papás que cuidan” (Caregiving Parents) approach, has helped her to connect better with her daughter, as well as with her son and husband.

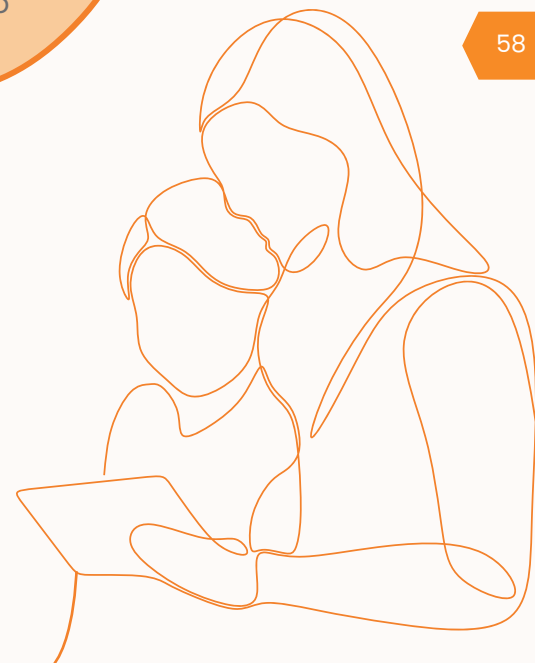
The spaces that strengthen the family

Since Jessimar and her mother started going to the teen club and the parenting workshop, family sharing has become something of a healthy routine at home. The time when everyone ate dinner on their own, locked themselves in their rooms, and mom was left to wash and dry the dishes by herself is behind them. “Now, we talk, there is trust and collaboration. Jessimar and I share with my son and my husband what we learned

in each session. Now she sits on my bed and tells me about her daily life and when she has a problem,” explains Jéssica, highlighting her daughter’s progress since she joined the teen club, both with respect to her mindset and behavior and to her relationship with others.

Jessimar herself is an example of this. She sees her extreme shyness being left behind and her circle of friends growing — although she’s not becoming altogether sociable, she clarifies. Likewise, she points to the knowledge

“Everything I’ve learned about rights, gender, sexual health, preventing violence and xenophobia ... I feel like it gives me security and protection.”



and skills acquired in the club: “Everything I’ve learned about rights, gender, sexual health, preventing violence and xenophobia ... I feel like it gives me protection and security. This experience in the theater rattled my nerves, but it also made me happy. When it was over and people applauded us, I knew that I would do it again, that I would really like to repeat the experience.”

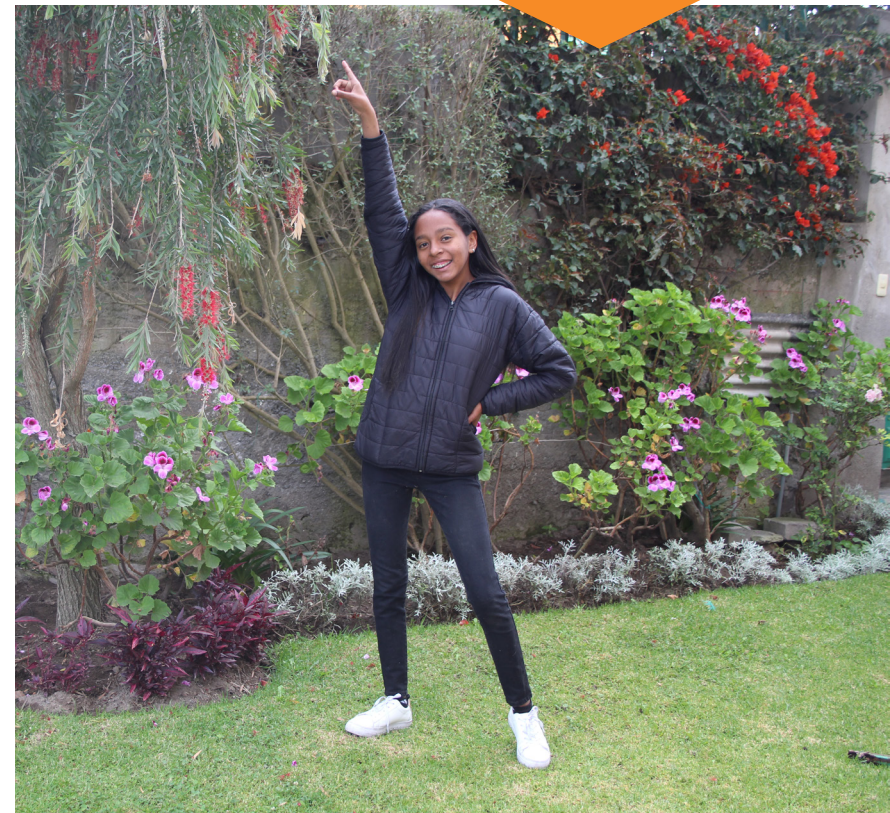
Thinking about the immediate future

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Jessimar has started her last year of high school and will soon face one of the biggest decisions of her life: choosing her college degree program or financial and career path. Losing her Venezuelan ID has complicated the procedures for her legalization in Ecuador. Her mother continues her efforts to formalize the young woman’s situation, especially in view of Jessimar’s dream of becoming a professional.

“I’d like to study psychology to help people feel good about themselves and their context.” She recently found out that she could link that profession with dance through dance therapy that uses both disciplines to help people be comfortable with their bodies and connect better with their emotions. “I would like that very much. I hope to be able to make my dream come true in this country that has opened its arms to us and where I’m studying, living beautiful moments, and meeting good people. At the beginning, I underwent three episodes of xenophobia at school from teachers and a class-

“I’d like to study psychology to help people feel good about themselves and their context.”



mate, but my mother knew how to give support and put a stop to the situation in time.”

Accordingly, at this point, Jessimar — with her stepfather in a steady job, her mother earning income from occasional ventures, and her brother also working — already knows she will not be returning to Venezuela to live, at least not in the immediate future, or perhaps just to visit her grandmother, who returned to her homeland right after leaving her and her brother in Ecuador. Despite the years that have passed, the family has not lost their traditions, personal contact with their compatriots, or their culinary style.

In fact, after Jessimar’s show, since it is Sunday, the family heads to one of the largest and busiest parks in Quito where, every week, dozens of Venezuelan people gather. Some sell typical foods from their country, others offer Venezuelan souvenirs and accessories, and a few have sports paraphernalia and clothing for baseball or soccer. This is how they give each other support and a hand to get ahead.

Around noon, as soon as they arrive, Jessimar has a sweet corn cachapa with cheese — a typical Venezuelan omelette — along with a sizable portion of Ecuadorian cebichochos for her Sunday lunch. It’s a perfect binational mix, a combination of two things she loves, which she gobbles down in a heartbeat.

Enjoy your meal!



OSCARY

The teenager who decided to migrate in search of a better future

“That’s me, sweet and colorful,” says 14-year-old Oscary spontaneously, while picking off the colorful sprinkles that fall on her purple dress with each bite of her chocolate banana, a treat she enjoys as an almost unmissable part of her trip to the landmark Jipiro recreational park, one of the most visited destinations in Loja, a city in the southern inter-Andean region of Ecuador.

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The running track, the castles, the lagoon with dozens of swans and ducks, the streams, bridges, and paths — all these are some of the favorite places for this teenager who arrived almost two years ago in Loja, a city she says she already feels a part of.

“Since I arrived with my mother, my nine-year-old sister, and my stepfather, I’ve been treated well; I’ve been welcomed everywhere I go. I like this city, although it’s a little cold for my taste; it’s small, but pretty. I’m living here, and I think I’ll be staying for many years, so this is my city now, and that’s why I love it,” she affirms, with her innocent smile and lively black eyes that have apparently begun to see the world in a more realistic way, because despite her youth, she



has already had to make decisions that will definitely shape her future.

When her mother and stepfather decided to migrate, her parents gave her the option of choosing to stay in Trujillo, Venezuela, with her father or traveling to Ecuador. “Despite the pain that leaving my father caused me, I decided to go because I’d realized by then how difficult things were in my country: the economic problems and the lack of employment. “Also, I felt that I wasn’t making much progress in school, that I wasn’t learning much, and that this could hurt me when it’s time to go to college,” she says.

Oscary promised her father that if she gets the chance to return, she will not hesitate to do so. In any case, she does not believe she will be doing so — at least permanently — until she has a profession, which she hopes to be able to practice in her country if conditions allow. “A diploma earned in Venezuela has little value, but if I get one in another country, it’s good and will enable me to work anywhere. I would be happy if it was in my own country,” says the teenager, whose goals are reuniting with her father and meeting her new little sister.

Adapting to her new home

Her maternal aunt had arrived in Loja years before and prepared the way to make the family’s stay more comfortable. As soon as they arrived, they already had a place to live, new jobs waiting for them, and Oscary and her sister were able to go to school right away because their aunt had already seen to enrolling them. “At first, I had difficulty in English, but now I speak it better. It was also hard for me to use a pen, since in Venezuela you only write with a pencil. I stained the notebooks and had to do everything all over again, but I finally learned. You just can’t make mistakes, because you can’t erase them, which has made me more careful actually” says Oscary, for whom talking about school means talking not only about learning, but about fun, games, and making friends.

She and her five best friends, who are all Ecuadorians, are the most restless group of girls in the eighth grade. Sitting in parallel rows, they do not stop chattering, giggling and sometimes interrupting class. They always manage to end up to-

gether even though every so often they get split up at desks far from each other. Her high-pitched voice always gives her away, so that the teachers ask her to quiet down without even having to turn around from writing on the blackboard, and this makes the whole class laugh.

The same thing happens at the teen club of Plan International’s ELLA project, which all six friends in the group attend, but since this is a more open and spontaneous space, Oscary has greater freedom to speak and express herself all the time, laying out her points of view and giving rise to one or another hullabaloo in which everyone joins without hesitation.

Both at school and at the club, she is the one who organizes the soccer teams for a game at recess or at the end of the day. “Football is one of the things I like the most. I can play every day. I get a group of girls together and we challenge the guys to make up a team. Sometimes we all bet \$0.25 to \$0.50 a player. We women almost always win, but at the end, we usually share the drinks and snacks we buy with our winnings — although not always — so they don’t refuse to keep playing and we don’t end up squabbling,” she says laughingly.

Her vocation, passion, and dreams

Playing football — not so much watching it — is one of her passions, so much that it is in second place as a choice of profession. Despite her immense love for this sport, what comes first is medicine, specifically surgery. “When someone gets sick at home, I worry a lot. I give them their medications, and I investigate the symptoms. When I have a diagnosis, I review what the doctors say to learn how to cure a certain pain or ailment. I don’t see myself attending to patients in a doctor’s office, but rather doing surgery in an operating room. Blood doesn’t scare me, nor do I find it repulsive ... it’s something natural.”

Her little sister is her play patient. She pretends to have had an accident, to be injured, and have deep wounds. Oscary, of course, is the surgeon who saves her life. She cleans the wound, sews it up, bandages it, and prescribes antibiotics. The prescription usually includes actual names of medications.



When they drew up their life plans at the teen club and sketched out how they envisioned the future, her self-portrait in a doctor's uniform caught the group's attention: "Since then, they call me 'Dr. Oscary,' even at school. They ask me to cure them, and I say sure, when I'm a surgeon I'll operate on whatever you need. When my friends say they're about to drop from exhaustion, I tell them to let me revive them," she says with a constant smile full of mischief and a special gleam in her eyes, the unmistakable gleam of someone who dreams of something big and has the gumption to strive to achieve it.

Oscary says she is now adapted to her new life. When she goes to one of her friends' homes, she is well-received by their families. She has never felt rejected nor has anyone asked her about the situation in her country, why she came to Ecuador, and what her life was like there, she says. "The only thing my friends have asked me is to teach them how to make arepas. They love it when they come over to my house and my mom serves them arepas with chicken and cheese fresh off the grill." They also tell me that if I ever visit my country, I should take them along because they would like to

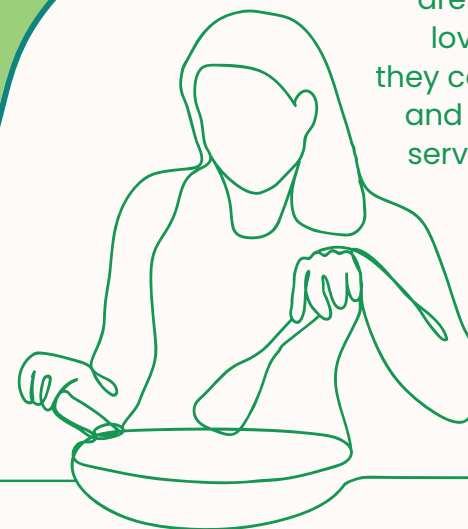
see Venezuela and also my father and his little farm, my grandparents, my aunts, uncles, and cousins, who I told them about because I miss them very, very much."

New experiences and knowledge

Oscary figures that she has learned a lot since she arrived in Ecuador, not only at school but in the teen club of Plan International's ELLA project. Joining the club has meant meeting more teenagers, traveling, discovering her passions, making efforts to grow up happy and safe, and learning in depth about issues that are either not covered in school or are touched on superficially. "Knowing about gender equality, sexuality, my rights, the kinds of violence, respecting people's identity and origin, and the importance of drawing up my life project now are among the things that have most interested me."

A trip to Catamayo to a meeting between project clubs, was an experience that left her with beautiful memories, not only because it was her first trip since coming to Ecuador but because of how beautiful the place was, with its exuberant flora and fauna and warm climate, the special treatment they got, and the chance to share with more kids from the city.

"The only thing my friends 4 have asked me is to teach them how to make arepas. They love it when they come over and my mom serves them."



“At first, we just wanted to be with the girls from our group. We were self-conscious, but little by little we caught the vibe and mingled more. That was positive: it helped us understand that in life you’re always going to meet new people and must adapt to different settings and circumstances.”

She experienced this again during the rehearsals and staging of the “Celebrating Diversity, Bringing Borders Closer” festival, an initiative which presented the play “A Trip with the Girls and Boys” featuring the 80 teenagers from the Unstoppable and Making the Difference clubs sharing their skills and learning gained during the My Paths of Transformation training process.* The circus and theater work — which was presented in one of the largest theaters in the city and attracted an audience of 1,200 people — carried implicit messages of sexual and reproductive rights and prevention of gender violence and xenophobia aimed at raising awareness of these issues in the Loja community.

When you talk to Oscary, you don’t feel the clock ticking and there is no shorta-

ge of funny remarks. She has a captivating, sincere, and spontaneous way of speaking. The chocolate banana covered in sprinkles fell short and a second dose was needed, this time covered in dark cookie and coconut. “Sometimes, I’m also like this — in black and white — because I have my moments of sadness, like any girl, and my doubts and fears about the future, but I still have a long way to go before I have to settle down and decide what I’m passionate about. If I’m not a surgeon, I’ll likely be a professional soccer player. What I do know is that I’ll do what it takes to achieve something great in my life,” she concludes, again with her broad smile and that singular look in her eye.



* My Paths of Transformation is the methodology used by the ELLA project to strengthen the agency and empowerment of adolescents and youth in contexts of human mobility who, along with their host communities, participate in the teen clubs. The document emphasizes gender equality, protection, health, and sexual and reproductive rights.

DIEGO

It is well-known that people who are grateful are happier and more optimistic. Diego is undoubtedly a case in point. He is a 16-year-old Venezuelan student who did not hesitate for a moment to swear allegiance to the flag of the country that has welcomed him for the last four years. Diego is highly aware of the deep benefits he has reaped from his stay in Ecuador, and the commitment undertaken before the national emblem was none other than his best opportunity to express the unbounded gratitude he feels in his heart.

That morning, Flag Day, the intense heat of the sun was only comparable to the immense joy playing over Diego's face. With a quick, sober movement, he put aside the lyre, the instrument he plays in the school band, and — kneeling on the ground — sealed his promise with a kiss. His “Yes, I swear!” sounded firm and convincing.

Living every stage of his life to the fullest



"It was an intensely emotional moment. I did it with deep love and respect for this country that I now consider my own. It is my home, the place where I am happy and at peace. That moment I felt Ecuadorian. In fact, besides being Venezuelan, I now also feel Ecuadorian. "This is where I want to live, study, work, and even start a family," says the teenager, who had earned the right to carry the school flag because of his academic achievements but was prevented from doing so because he lacked the academic transcripts to corroborate his studies in Venezuela and Peru.

In 2018, when Diego was just 11 years old, his mother, then 6-year-old brother, and he arrived for the first time in Ecuador after seven days of traveling by road. Their first stop was Santo Domingo de los Tsachilas, where his father and most of the family already were. The lack of job opportunities took them to Peru, where they lived for a year. The consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic forced them to return to Ecuador and, once again, reunite with the family who, by then, had settled in Quito. "We were fine in Venezuela, we were needy, but one day we arrived back home from a trip to Caracas with a lot of luggage and were mugged just as soon as we opened the door to the house. The criminals

thought that since we had family in Ecuador, we had traveled here and then returned with wads of U.S. dollars. They didn't find what they were looking for but stole what they could, even the shoes off our feet, and worst of all, they threatened to come back." It was this experience that forced them to leave their country almost immediately.

Plan International, an important pillar in his adolescence

Diego says the first years in Ecuador were not easy. It was difficult for him to level up in his school subjects and to adapt to the educational system as well as the social environment. He was starting to become a sad, introverted teenager, distrustful of other people, he remembers. "A girl in my class was worried about me and told me, 'You know, I'm in a club, I want to invite you so you can have a little fun.' I grudgin-

gly agreed and went one Saturday, liked it, and didn't hesitate to sign up. I made friends right away with two other girls and a guy. Those four are now my best friends."

Diego is one of the most committed members of the teen club run by Plan International through the ELLA project. He has almost never missed a session and has also taken part in several related workshops such as one on transformative masculinities and another on training trainers, which aims to prepare youths to replicate the knowledge they acquire to other adolescents in various spaces.

"The one about masculinities has gone straight to my core because it's not only about being allies of women in defending their rights and equality but about understanding that we can also freely express our feelings as men. There are still people who think that men don't cry, don't suffer, can't be weak. Like every human being, I have a right to break down and cry, to feel weakness; that doesn't make me any less of a man."

The most notable change Diego sees in his way of being is that he now has a strong stage presence, enjoys speaking in public, and conveys his ideas freely and

with assurance. In the last training workshop for trainers, he realized that those traits had now become part of his personality and behavior, because he was chosen more than once by his workgroups to be the one to report results “I was a shy person; I didn’t talk to anyone. When I had to speak, I literally shook with fear. During my time at the club, I learned to express myself, to share my knowledge, to talk directly with people without fear of being judged and, at the same time, to respect other people when they speak or give presentations, because everyone’s ideas are worthy of being heard. When you speak with ease, then you always want to be heard.”

And, in fact, Diego was one of the adolescents who spoke on behalf of their club in front of almost 300 people who attended the opening of the self-portrait exhibition “Agents of Change,” an initiative that brought together 34 oil paintings showing the self-awareness of each young person, their inner and

outer individualities. “What was it like to do a self-portrait? At first, it was stressful because I thought everything had to turn out just right, almost a copy of my photograph, but then I understood that what I had to do was look inside myself. With each stroke I accepted myself as I am; it was like loving myself more just as I am. I really like the result because I’m not like what I look like in a mirror or in a picture, but what I feel like and how much I love myself, with my virtues and defects, my feelings, my way of being.”

“During my time at the club, I learned to express myself, to share my knowledge, to talk directly with people without fear of being judged and, at the same time, to respect other people when they speak or give presentations, because everyone’s ideas are worthy of being heard. When you speak with ease, then you always want to be heard.”



The techniques he has learned give him the confidence to continue painting. He likes landscapes and especially sunsets and the moon in all its phases. He has several photographs he took that he wants to turn into paintings. "I'm going to continue painting because I discovered that it relaxes me, gives me peace of mind, helps my imagination fly and discover new things."

Everything in its time and place

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With less than a year left to graduate from high school, Diego is beginning to think about his short-term future. He would like to study to be a doctor, or a lawyer as a second option, but what he will do straight off is work to help his mother with household expenses, or maybe go for a while to the United States, where his father migrated, and then return with some money to be able to start a business and go to college. Nevertheless, making a final decision now does not keep him up at night ... all in good time, he says.



"I'm one of those people who make every moment count. Now I'm in school, in the band, and in the club, and I want to fully enjoy these moments. Time flies, so I don't want to rush anything. "I'll be graduating soon and entering adulthood, and I'll have new and bigger responsibilities, which is why I'm living my adolescence to the fullest now, and that makes me happy."

Part of his happiness is seeing his 11-year-old brother and almost 2-year-old sister growing up free of worries, with love, pampering, games, and advice. "I want to be, and to always continue to be, available to them, for them to trust me, to be their support. "I want them to have a carefree childhood with enjoyable memories," he says, while buying ice cream and a couple of juice drinks for his little sister and brother, who are undoubtedly waiting expectantly for their older sibling to arrive. Despite his youth, he feels that they are his greatest responsibility and affirms, with a sweet and genuine smile: **"That really gives meaning to my life!"**



ENYERLI

Her struggle for equal rights

She went to the public hospital to give birth, but because she did not have an Ecuadorian identity card, they turned her away. This event marked the life of Enyerli, a then 23-year-old Venezuelan who ended up giving birth to her daughter in the Santa Martha secondary healthcare facility in Manta, Manabí Province. That was the moment when she decided to devote time and effort to learning about and defending the human rights of migrants. She now spreads among her compatriots the correct idea that every foreign person — as soon as they set foot on Ecuadorian soil — automatically has the same rights as any person born in this country.

“I said ‘No, no, no, we have to put a stop to this here and now, because even if migrants don’t have the documentation from this country or even from their own country (since they often lose it), they still have the right to receive medical care.’”

As soon as she could, she joined HIAS, an international organization for the protection of refugees in vulnerable conditions, where she learned about rights, forms of involvement, and



authorities to turn to in cases of domestic violence and crimes. After three months, she earned a certification as a community promoter on the condition that she replicates everything she has learned.

In addition, she has participated with impressive success in the women's circle that carries out Plan International Ecuador's ELLA project, where, through the mirror technique – an activity that promotes boosting self-esteem – she managed to strengthen her self-respect and accept herself as she is, with her virtues and defects, as she stresses. "I said, no more of this. There are skinny women everywhere, period. I have to stop being uptight about my body. I got over it because now I look normal, so to speak. Likewise, I learned to accept everything I have inside."

In this space, she takes an active part in motivating other women to share their stories, to help others overcome adversity, accept themselves, move forward, and transcend socially imposed beauty stereotypes.

Generosity marks her leadership

As soon as she arrived in Ecuador and settled in Manta, Enyerli followed the example of a TikToker and began – on her own – to prepare 15 weekly lunches to give to street peddlers who sell candy and clean windshields at traffic lights.

"And it's not that I have everything, I have something, although there are times when it gets complicated, but we always manage to get through it."

She remembers with deep sadness that the situation in her country was so untenable that it would have been complicated to think about giving away prepared food:

"And it's not that I have everything, I have something, although there are times when it gets complicated, but we always manage to get it through it."



"If we had breakfast, we didn't have lunch, and if we had lunch, we didn't have dinner. At most, I managed to change a hairdo or fix a hair style for a bag of flour or rice."

Since she also knows about beauty, she gave courses on braiding hair with only a comb, gel, and hair ties, something that people in her community learned easily and could put into practice to earn a little money. That was when an Abdon Calderon neighborhood leader suggested that Enyerli becomes the community leader for the parish where she lives, since the woman had realized how she liked to help people. And that's what she did, because she saw that was the most expedient way to connect migrants with humanitarian aid organizations or to help them gain access to government public services.

Enyerli now leads a civil society organization called United by a Border, which brings together mostly Venezuelan women who act in support of women, girls, boys, and adolescents who are most in need. These initiatives are focused on educational support and entrepreneurship to provide women with

income. The organization has received support from Plan International to strengthen its action plan and its strategies for enhancing its representative and inclusive role in society.

"Many people arrive here with nothing. They have nowhere to sleep; they don't know where to find a shelter; they are unaware that they have to schedule an appointment at a call center to receive medical attention at the nearest health center; they cannot find anyone who can give them a helping hand. I have accompanied them or facilitated their contact with organizations many times," affirms the leader.

The need to mobilize and act to achieve change is what drove Enyerli to work for equal rights for all people. She is a genuine activist who now has more than 18 certificates from her participation in courses and workshops on such pursuits as beauty, painting, vacation planning, volunteer work, and small businesses, among others. "Well, right now they have to give me one certifying my training as a mental health promoter ... and to think that in Venezuela I didn't have anything at all."

Enyerli managed that the Ministry of Economic and Social Inclusion provides a larger space to hold the courses and workshops in which she replicates her acquired knowledge and skills in the community. Her home was too small to handle the substantial number of people who attended, although many no longer came because they had gone on with their migratory journey.

"Many people arrive here with nothing. They have nowhere to sleep; they don't know where to find a shelter."



Going for it

Enyerli understands that nothing is better than having her own business, and that is why she has been buying the equipment and accessories to complete her hair salon little by little. She now has almost everything at home: a hair washing unit, mirror, chair, hair straighteners, hair dryers, and raw materials. “Here I have things I never thought I’d have in Venezuela; not a lot, perhaps, but I have them. I’m doing well. I’ve put out the word all around. Mostly, I stand out in the area of straightening and braids. “I do all kinds of hairstyles and braids in less than 5 minutes, really fast,” she states confidently.

It has been four years since Enyerli left Caracas with barely 20 dollars in her pocket, two arepas with butter in her bag, and carrying her little two-year-old daughter Ariangeles in her arms. She had just enough for the ticket, and if it hadn't been for the generosity of another migrant woman, Josselyn, who was on her way to Chile, she and her daughter would not have eaten anything during the journey. “Josselyn kept giving me food and fruit because I didn't have anything. She also had a baby girl like mine and a somewhat older little boy.” This act of human kindness plus what she experienced in the border city of Tulcan, Ecuador, where the



Red Cross and other social aid organizations donated food, diapers, gloves, and a sweatshirt to withstand the intense cold staying overnight at the border ... these experiences marked the road map for Enyerli's life purpose: Help whoever needs it!

She had arrived with nothing, but after reuniting with her husband and sacrificing for over half a year to save from what she earned working in a restaurant and her husband made in a motorcycle repair shop, they managed to purchase some equipment for her hair salon and to set up his motorcycle workshop. "I earned \$50 a week working Monday to Monday from 7:00 in the morning to 7:00 at night, and my husband had good days and sometimes bad days at the workshop. We slept on a small mattress and didn't buy anything at all that wasn't absolutely essential."

Not long ago, Enyerli and her husband managed to regularize their immigration status with an Exceptional Temporary Residence Visa (VIRTE).^{*} They look forward to getting a Temporary Protection Residence Visa,^{**} which would let them settle permanently and work legally under regular immigrant status. That's even more important now that their family has

grown with the birth of Cataleya, an Ecuadorian national now two years old. She also mentions the fact that they are informally in charge of a niece, whom the Ecuadorian government would be in charge of regularizing, apparently with few requirements and little paperwork due to her status as an "unaccompanied Venezuelan minor," according to the information her aunt has gathered. "We want to stay here. Right now, we're saving money to see if we can get the passport and opt for a permanent visa, since the VIRTE visa is only for two years."

Enyerli stresses the fact that she is among the group of Venezuelan compatriots who have been capable of adapting to the culture of their host country and going for it (getting ahead despite adversity). She says she has even come to love her neighborhood, her neighbors, and to love encebollado (tuna fish stew cooked with onions and cassava) and fried fish with peanuts. Half-jokingly she says. "Now, I just eat encebollado. I love it so much, you could call me a local," she concludes, with a big smile, sure of her food preference, but, above all, of her fervent desire to stay in this land where she was able, on her own merits, to earn a place in the hearts of those who have received her help.



^{*}VIRTE: This visa is issued to Venezuelan citizens and their family group. It is granted as part of the special regulation process for a stay period of two years and is renewable only once.

^{**}A temporary residence authorization granted by the Ecuadorian government to foreigners, children, spouses, or partners in a de facto union who are legally recognized by a foreigner with a VIRTE visa and intend to settle in the country.

KEIMBILY

The plan that will change her life

"I am Keimbily, I'm 28 years old, and I'm ready to tell my story, not to revictimize myself, but so that many women — mainly adolescents and youth — can see themselves in my mirror and be inspired by me. If it changes just one life, I will feel good. If it changes many, I will feel really blessed and extremely happy.

I've lived in a rush. I practically skipped most of my adolescence and now the weight of responsibility I carry on my shoulders is almost more than I can handle, but I have six reasons that drive me to succeed every day: my daughters and sons.

I now have a life plan. I know what I want and how I'm going to achieve it. I'm taking the first steps toward what I want my life to be like in the future. It's never too late to reconsider, change, and start over."



Keimbily has been blaming herself one hundred percent for how complicated her short life has been (although she feels like she has lived for 100 years), but now she knows that not everything was her fault, but rather that of her environment, as well: the lack of communication and instruction from her father, mother, and educators, the absence of timely advice or not having listened to it, the violence she has suffered, and how she was raised.

She was born in Caracas, Venezuela. Her father is Ecuadorian, one of those who migrated more than 30 years ago to the then prosperous Venezuela in search of better days. There he met her mother, and they started a family, built a house, and raised Keimbily and her brother.

"I became a mother at the age of 16, and at 17 my second child was born, both from my first relationship. Then came the third daughter from a short-term relationship. The fourth was planned, wanted, and hoped for; however, her father left us three days before she was born and vanished completely. None of my partners were good to me: insults, abuse, beatings, and irresponsibility were my daily fare. The best thing that

happened to me was separating from them in time," reflects Keimbily.

"I don't want my three daughters to go through what I did. I struggle with the nine-year-old — seeing her is like seeing myself at that age."



Her mother, in an attempt to make up for the mistakes she had made during her childhood and early adolescence — where physical punishment was the norm and turned her into a rebellious young woman — took charge not only of the upkeep of her first four children as soon as they were born — diapers, milk, medicine — but of their care and upbringing. *"I would have liked her not to release me of my responsibility as a mother; that in exchange for her help, she had forced me to study, for example; that we had looked for information and learned together about gender violence, sexual and reproductive health, and contraceptive methods ... my life would certainly be different and more bearable,"* she reflects.

It is the role of both parents, she says, to guide their daughters and sons. *"You have to speak to them directly, clearly, and plainly."* She openly tells her three girls and three boys about her mistakes and the consequences, motivates them to have dreams, to study, and asks them to always want to be happy and to do everything to achieve it. She instills in the boys that they should not be like their fathers that they should respect and support everyone, starting with their sisters. *"I don't want my three daughters to go through what I did. I struggle with the nine-year-old — seeing her is like seeing myself at that age. I tell her not to follow in my footsteps, that I will be with her every step she takes, advising her, accompanying her."*

A new life began in Ecuador

She left Venezuela six years ago, alone. She came to Ecuador because she has dual nationality and was attracted by the dollar currency used in the country. When she first arrived, her work rights were violated: they made her work and

did not pay her, or they paid her less than what was agreed. **"I was also harassed at one of my jobs. I reported it, and up to today, I'm still waiting for justice and to get back my job."**

In Ecuador she met the father of her youngest son and daughter. He is the only one who fulfills his obligations and covers their expenses. He shows concern for them and visits them. **"He's a good father, but not a good partner for me because we fought a lot."** She says she experienced psychological and emotional violence. **"It overwhelmed me, made me lose the desire to keep up my appearance, to look after myself, to stay strong."** They separated by mutual consent and have become better friends since then, she says.

The first Christmas gift he gave her, almost five years ago, was to bring her two daughters from Venezuela. From that moment on, and then after the birth of her fifth child in Ecuador, she just began to learn how to be a full-time mother. When her mother died, he also brought her two oldest children. Up until then, she had not had the slightest idea of how complicated raising so many children was, and it

got even worse when the last child, now a year and a half old, was born.

"My last cesarean section, at 27, was the shock that brought me down to earth, and made me take the first step toward a decisive change: I told the doctor I wasn't leaving the hospital until he had tied my tubes. I say that was my first sign of maturity. Since then, every step I take is with my feet very firmly on the ground. I'm convinced that's the way for me to progress, slowly but surely." Accordingly, the ongoing psychological therapies that began during her pregnancy bore their first fruits because when she found out she was expecting her last daughter, she felt as if her world was falling apart, so she sought psychological help.

In Manta, where her father was born and now lives, she has met good and bad people like anywhere else, she clarifies. She does not have a steady job, but she pays rent, food, school expenses,

and she struggles through. **"My landlady is an angel. I owe her five months of rent, but she tells me to pay her little by little. When she has extra food, she shares it with me. She asks me to prepare empanadas, so that her friends can buy them from me. The owner of the hotel around the corner calls me to do the**

"My last cesarean section, at 27, was the shock that brought me down to earth and made me take the first step toward a decisive change."



cleaning when she has guests. "Ilega gente". The neighbors ask her oldest son to run errands, and he gives his mother the whole tip he receives, as well as whatever the owner of the corner store gives him for his help, especially on weekends. That's how they survive.

"Even though I have the house my parents own in Venezuela, it wouldn't be easy to go back, especially because of the food situation. Here, for two dollars, I can feed my kids lunch, even if it's rice with eggs. Besides that, the first five go to school and they get books and some supplies. Their education is assured," she points out as the main reasons that make her put down roots in Ecuadorian soil.

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She has taken several courses to learn bread baking and food handling. With the bonus that Plan International gave her in the ELLA project, she made bread flour empanadas with cheese, meat, and chicken and sold them in the neighborhood. Part of the profit went to buying more ingredients to continue this business. "My desire is to have my own business: a cart to sell natural juices, empanadas, and sandwiches outside the school on the corner. I already asked the teachers, and they've offered me their support. Now, the only thing I lack is the money to buy the cart. I've already got the blender, the dough mixer, and the oven."



With total conviction, Keimbily lists the three specific things in her life plan: finishing high school, establishing her business, and building a house. I'm taking the first steps: I've already taken and passed the exam to enter the fast-track (one-year) high school program. I'm going to do it online in the morning while my kids are at school, I'm looking for a public day-care to leave the youngest one, so that I have time to study, work, and set up my business venture. Finally, with the income from my work, I'll buy a piece of land and build my house little by little."

The women's circle is her healing space

Being part of the women's circle of Plan International's ELLA project is healing her heart and giving her the incentive for her life to take the major turn she needs. The circle, she says, is her space. It de-stresses her and helps her to forget her problems. Although she takes her youngest daughter with her, they take care of her

there. She plays and has fun while mom chills out. The other sisters and brothers stay home in the care of her oldest son, 11 years old, under the landlady's supervision.

"I talk with other women ... I know I'm not alone ... we help each other. In the circle, I've also learned to control my temper and be more patient with my children, not to get carried away by what others say, and to love myself as I am." Meditation with soft music is one of her favorite moments. It gives her a feeling of liberation. She likes that a lot, and always thinks, "May this never end, please!"

"When I look in the mirror, I see that physically I'm not even a quarter of what I was when I was 15, 18, or 22 years old; but then, I was not even a quarter of what I am now, internally. I see the world differently now, with optimism, and that's what I try to teach my children.

This is my story. I don't want my life to be a sad tale in the end. I want it to be a testimony of growth, of resilience, an example of what you should and shouldn't do in life.

I sincerely hope the story that I've lived and I am living is strong enough to spur a change in the lives of thousands of adolescents and young people. If it changes yours, believe me, for me that will be wonderful."



Conclusions



Thanks to the ELLA project's empowerment and capacity building processes, migrant girls, adolescents, and young women were able to see themselves as people with rights and authors of their own life projects.

Plan International successfully applied its strategy of strengthening leadership among adolescents and young people as agents of change, an essential factor in promoting spaces where they can participate and work with public and private organizations to ensure their access to protection and quality sexual and reproductive health services.

Promoting the inclusion of Venezuelan people in all project spaces and activities has been key to creating closer ties between Ecuadorian and Venezuelan people, thus reducing discrimination and xenophobia.

The methodology of club work has allowed interaction with adolescents to go beyond being a formative learning process to being a support network to strengthen their self-esteem, enhance their life project, and increase their sense of belonging and group cohesion.

The "My Paths of Transformation" methodology developed to train adolescents and youth made it possible to provide — in a timely and clear manner — scientific content regarding gender and rights approaches that paved the way for adolescents to identify the cultural patterns that promote violence, deal with them, question them, and become activists for equality. On the one hand, working with parents enabled raising awareness of the importance of positive and active parenting and parenthood and provided them with tools to improve their rela-

tionship with their children; and on the other, it engendered a relationship of trust for adolescents and youth to attend the training processes and feel supported throughout their participation in club activities.

The solid positioning of Plan International as a development and humanitarian aid organization with broad inter-institutional and community recognition enabled the ELLA project to act as a nexus between civil society organizations and public institutions for effective care and aid to the target populations at the local level.

Creating and strengthening community-based protection mechanisms in all communities was key, because adults in the communities have become aware of their role as protectors of the rights of girls,



boys, adolescents, and women, and were allies in all activities of the project, thus ensuring its sustainability.

The initiatives of all strategic partners were supported and their capacity to act allowed them to monitor and demand compliance with the rights of girls. Likewise, efforts aimed at preventing cases of xenophobia, gender-based discrimination and sexual violence were consolidated.

Close collaboration with health and protection agencies as guarantors of rights made it possible for project participants to learn about their services and to contact them. They have furthermore been vital strategic partners in responding to a variety of rights violation cases identified during the project's implementation.

The ELLA project has demonstrated the importance of providing opportunities to adolescents and young people in conditions of vulnerability like Pamela, Danniela, John, Sara, Andrea, Diego, etc., to recognize themselves and value themselves, thus bringing out their potential and resilience.

We are certain that the work carried out by Plan International has been the stimulus they needed to thrive, join forces, and pursue a fulfilling life, empowered to achieve their worthwhile objectives and goals.

