



José Carlos León Vargas (right) with some of the garbage pickers of Oaxaca

## PEOPLE BUILDING TRUST

**Giving something back**  
*Travels in Asia showed José Carlos León Vargas that poverty has no borders. From Mexico's educated middle classes, he has dedicated his life to solidarity with the poorest of the poor, starting with those on the outskirts of his home town. Mike Lowe reports:*

It is a sight all too familiar in developing nations. On the outskirts of the ancient city of Oaxaca – one of Mexico's premier tourist destinations – the city's refuse dump is home to some of the poorest of the poor. Unseen by the wealthy tourists or the city's urban middle classes, these families scrape together an existence by picking over what others have discarded. It is dirty and dangerous work with constant risk of cuts leading to infection.

### ***'I promised myself that I would commit my life to working for understanding and solidarity'***

A week before Christmas, one of them, a 64-year-old woman, became very ill with leukaemia – her condition exacerbated by malnutrition and severe anaemia as a result of her occupation. Help came from a young man, José Carlos León Vargas, who arranged medical care and persuaded the hospital to pay for otherwise unaffordable medicines.

With two Master's degrees and fluent English, León could have had his pick of well-paid careers. Returning from overseas study in 2008 he was offered a job with the Immigration Department, working to repatriate illegal

immigrants from Central and South America trying to reach the US border. He declined. 'I didn't go to good universities and travel the world, learning so much, to then use my knowledge against people who are looking for a better future. It would have been a perversion of everything I received from life.'

'I wouldn't have found a direction in my life if it wasn't for my partner, Aurelia,' he says. Together, they set up a small organization working to help those who are marginalized. Named SiKanda, meaning 'Movement' in the local indigenous language, its first project is with Oaxaca's garbage pickers, and focuses on providing them with gloves, face-masks, boots and protective clothing.

León met Aurelia in Italy while doing a Master's programme in development. Later they decided to move to León's home city, Oaxaca, to work with minorities and vulnerable groups. It wasn't easy. As an Italian, Aurelia found it hard to find a job. León struggled even to find volunteer opportunities with local organizations.

'After finding a house we only had US\$300 a month to cover the rent and other expenses. Our parents gave us a hand, but still we had a lot of bills to pay in a city that is expensive due to its tourist appeal.'

Undaunted, they considered their situation as a test of their resolve, giving them insight into 'the kind of situations thousands of poor families face every day'. Once they had accepted this, it seemed that 'the sky



suddenly opened up' for them. Aurelia found a job coordinating education and intercultural projects and León was offered work with Coffee Kids, an organization that funds poverty-reduction programmes. 'For the first time in many months, we could save a little bit, pay our debts and even get a little second-hand car.'

By working with small cooperatives and grassroots organizations in the coffee regions, Coffee Kids helps families improve their income and quality of life through micro-credit funding schemes for education, health, environment protection and small businesses.

He recalls visiting a children's education and environmental project in a remote community in Nicaragua. On paper it didn't look good – there were unexplained figures, changes introduced without notification and not much evidence of progress. 'I thought I would need to have a long talk with the person in charge.' But the moment he entered a classroom the 20 kids impressed León with a musical performance of great quality. 'None of them had touched an instrument until nine months ago. They were so happy that they didn't mind walking two hours each Sunday to attend music lessons.' Afterwards, the teachers told him that the grades of the kids in the project had improved considerably and that the whole town was cleaner thanks to their campaigns. 'So I closed my folder full of reports, sat down and allowed my soul to be enriched by some of the most resolute kids I have ever seen.'

Asked why he now chooses to work with the garbage pickers as well, León speaks about his time in Asia participating in IofC's seven-month Action for Life leadership programme. 'When we visited Tuol Sleng prison and the "killing fields" in Cambodia I promised myself that I would commit my life to working for understanding and solidarity so that these things will never happen again.'

## **'We want to challenge people to look at the poor with different eyes'**

'In the Philippines we were taken to Manila's shanty towns to meet some of the people who live in the cardboard houses next to the railways. I still remember kilometre after kilometre of improvised houses, where children played in muddy puddles and the only school was the streets. When I thought I had seen it all, our friends took us to the old Spanish cemetery where more than 1,000 families live in the mausoleums and crypts, eating and sleeping on the marble slabs. Each day the children live among the mosquitoes and sewage, facing disease and insecurity.'

'Life has certainly given me a lot. I never experienced hardship. When I visited the city dump of my hometown, I found the same smiles and hopes that I saw in the Philippines. Just as poverty has no borders, I understood that there are no borders to giving and helping. So Aurelia and I decided to use the savings



from our current jobs to create SiKanda to give back at least a little of what life has given us.'

There are currently 40 families: 154 mothers, fathers and children who work for 10 hours every day sorting out carton, metal, plastic and glass. They are all exposed to accidents from the bulldozers that bury the garbage several feet under the soil, cuts from the waste or metal, dog bites, wires and toxic dust. Most of them live just metres from the waste in homes made from cardboard boxes, so a second SiKanda project aims to provide metal sheeting to improve the roofs and give some protection from the rain and sun.

Last but not least, SiKanda aims to build bridges by working with schools to show that there are people who make a living off what is discarded every day. 'We want to smash prejudices,' says León. 'If people with education and every opportunity are working with the garbage pickers then there must be something interesting there. We want to challenge people to look at the poor with different eyes.'

Shortly after starting SiKanda, a couple of Swiss film-makers offered to make a documentary about the garbage pickers' dreams, hopes and challenges. It was premièred at the landfill. 'It was moving to hear the garbage pickers' responses to being depicted as humans with dreams and not as the filthy people that society considers them to be.'

Subsequent showings have helped raise funds towards SiKanda's US\$48,000 budget. 'Many people had tears in their eyes when they saw the film – not because of the terrible conditions, but because the garbage pickers are proud of their job and smile more than any of us.'

'We know that our projects are just a band-aid over a deep wound, but we want to make this band-aid more visible and make it grow every day. There are many successful experiences of change around the world. Aurelia and I believe there can be one more here in Mexico. Since we created SiKanda, I have learnt that dreams are possible and that change is also possible but we have to commit time, planning and passion if we want to help and learn from others.'

If you would like support SiKanda or learn more, please visit the website: [www.si-kanda.org](http://www.si-kanda.org).