



FIRST PERSON Beyond Just Learning to Cook

Busy woman realizes food skills can also teach youth to survive

Ana Lucia Soto de Escobar is one of the valuable volunteers that gives life to the Búcaro, Mezquital Youth Outreach Center in Villa Nueva, a Guatemala City suburb that is home to gangs and high crime rates.



Photo: Creative Associates/Marvin Méndez

Volunteer Ana Lucia Soto de Escobar (third from left) shares her cooking skills with other volunteers and young students at the Búcaro, Mezquital Youth Outreach Center.

“Good people taught me the skills to survive. I believe we have to give back some of what we get ... these young people are like sponges - like me, they want skills to survive and be happy, not in trouble,” said youth center volunteer Ana Lucia Soto de Escobar.

Búcaro is one of the eight USAID youth outreach centers that provide a place for recreational and sports activities, vocational training, and youth resources. While they provide skills training for those who have left the gangs, the centers are not meant as “rehabilitation centers” for gang members. In fact, the centers are not open to current, full gang members, although some gang members have sent their children or spouses because they want them to stay out of the gang life.

Ana Lucia commits 12 hours a week to her community’s center. As a health nutritionist who lives nearby, she heard of the need for people with skills to teach youth. Her flexible schedule and close proximity to the center led her to volunteer. The mother of three children, themselves considered “at risk youth” by virtue of their residence in high crime neighborhoods, she divides her volunteer time between classes on how to make sausage and delectable desserts.

At first, she didn’t think she could spare the hours to volunteer, but then she realized how necessary her skills could be. Now, after volunteering with the Center, she knows that the 30 youth trainees greatly value her. Having the skills to make cookies, cakes and sausages has allowed Ana Lucia to survive between jobs. Now Ana Lucia wants her students to know that they, too, can survive by learning these skills.