

CRISTINA, from page 4

an unconventional teenager. She listened to rock music in English, wore dirty tennis shoes and never styled her hair.

When she was a senior, she said, she was “forced” to join the Girl Scouts.

“You have to do social work in your last year of high school. You can either go to a community and teach them how to clean their toilets, which is ridiculous,” she said. “The other option was the Girl Scouts.”

But it was her troop leader, Elias Pino, who would ignite her passion for helping others. He was a social worker from a rough area in Medellín, hometown of the infamous drug lord Pablo Escobar.

One afternoon, Elias took his Scout troop to the children’s section of a local hospital. All the walls were a bland and lifeless white, and it was all the children had to look at. An artist himself, he thought his troop should paint the walls bright colors.

There was an orphaned baby boy at the hospital who was skinnier than the other children. Hospital staff told Cristina and her fellow Scouts not to touch him because he was dying and they could catch his virus.

Two weeks later, Cristina visited Elias’ home and was surprised to see that he had adopted the sick little boy from the hospital.

“That was the first shock for me,” she said. “This is social work. This is what it means. Working with kids and creating a change. Do something – not just say it; not just think it.”

The little boy lived until he was 4 years old in Elias’ care.

Cristina’s youngest uncle, Carlos Augusto Castaño, was always

involved in some sort of community project, whether it was fixing a soccer field for local children or helping out single moms. So when she decided she wanted to go to college to pursue a career helping people in need, she told her Uncle Carlos right away.

Upon hearing her plans, he took her to the outskirts of Pereira where he was helping a community of hundreds of displaced Colombians living in a shantytown built out of scrap wood and cardboard.

“There was no law, no electricity, or water, but they were running away from violence,” Cristina said.

“He showed me all the things that were happening,” she said. “The night before, a little girl was raped, and he was trying to figure out what was happening and how he could help. And I was like, ‘But you are not the attorney,’ and he was like, ‘No. But you are supportive, you are a friend, you show that you are willing to help and support. If you can do it with the little you have, just go for it and see what happens.’”

Cartel violence de-escalated following Escobar’s death in 1993, but the civil war intensified, and Pereira took another blow on Jan. 25, 1999, when a magnitude 6.1 earthquake struck. It killed more than 1,200 Colombians, and 250,000 people were left homeless.

“I remember all that change – of how the

city was before the earthquake, how the city was after the earthquake,” Cristina said. “I remember seeing my city coming out of that and becoming stronger and becoming bigger and nicer, the kind of city where everybody wanted to live.”

In the years that followed, Cristina attended the Technological University of Pereira, working toward a degree in ethnic education and community development.

She graduated in 2008 and began seeking government contract work in rural areas around Pereira.

“I didn’t want to stay at a typical nonprofit in the city,” she said. There were too many communities in remote areas that had far fewer resources and were in more urgent need.

Her last job in Colombia before she came to the United States was in the sugarcane-producing valleys north of Pereira. She traveled to remote villages where she would perform tests and confirm children’s disabilities so their schools could access badly needed funding.

She would educate parents and teachers about their children’s medical needs. She had one case where a child who was labeled as defiant was actually deaf, and she met a teacher who had labeled a child’s light skin as a disability. Some children she confirmed

as disabled because their starvation had advanced to debilitating.

She had learned in college about the problems faced by these communities, but to actually see it was different, she said.

Bountiful fruit trees lined the roads leading to these areas, and fields were full of livestock. But upon arrival, she could see the children were starving.

Villagers told her that guerilla fighters would force their way into their homes and steal food from them. Then, right-wing paramilitary would come in afterward, only to accuse the family of helping the guerillas even though they had no choice. This could result in punishments such as the rape of a daughter or execution of a son.

“There were areas where the paramilitaries wanted part of the money single mothers were making with their micro-organizations, and if they didn’t want to pay, they would kill their kids in front of them,” she said.

These same paramilitaries guarded the crops of rich land owners.

In Colombia, government contract jobs for social workers frequently involve long hours in dangerous and unforgiving environments. For this reason, workers are encouraged to take six-month breaks between contracts so they can rest and regroup before taking another assignment.

In 2012, Cristina had been out of work for eight months. Unable to secure another contract, she was starting to wonder how she would pay her bills.

On top of that, blackmailers had recently targeted her, threatening to hurt her mother if she didn’t give them money. They knew where her mother lived, so she had to relocate her. She explained matter-of-factly

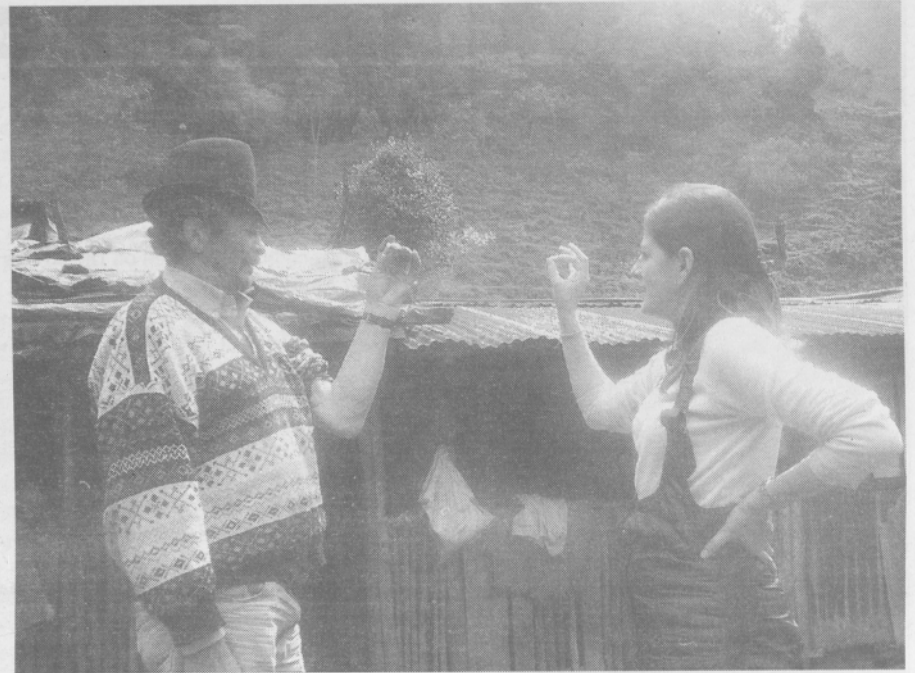


PHOTO COURTESY OF CRISTINA CASTAÑO HENAO

Cristina Castaño Henao was sent into the Andes to work with people such as this farmer, whose family had been living near the Ruiz Volcano for three generations.

that such threats are a common way for people to make money in Colombia. As is kidnapping. But she never paid, she said.

It was around the same time that she was surprised to learn she had an opportunity to leave her country.

Unbeknownst to Cristina, one of her aunts living in the United States had added her name to an immigration wait list in the 1990s. Back then, guerilla warfare in Colombia was intensifying, sending the country into another peak of violence.

Seventeen years later, Cristina had made it up the list. She was 29 when she got the first call from the U.S. Department of State, letting her know she could begin the application process for an immigrant visa. But at first, she wasn’t sure she even wanted to leave her country.

Life in Colombia was not easy, but that’s part of the reason she wanted to stay.

She thought to herself, “Where would I find homeless children in America?”

But, considering that she was unemployed and under threat when the application process was completed, she decided she might as well give life in the U.S. a shot.

“For me, it was like, I have to do something – I have to survive somewhere,” she said.

She had family in Naples, Fla., so she went there. She didn’t like it, and she wondered why everyone was so old – and so overweight.

“It was shocking to see people using wheelchairs because of their weight,” she said. “Everyone is really big, everyone is really white – huge cars, no people in the streets, which was boring for me.”

She soon accepted a cousin’s invitation to come to Portland to stay with her.

While Cristina has found that many things in the U.S. bear little resemblance to Colombia, one of the greatest adjustments was in social work.

In the U.S., degrees earned in other countries are usually worthless. She would have to start all over if she wanted to earn similar credentials here, and it would come with a financial burden.

Luckily her experience was enough to get

her back in her field. After a brief stint as a server, she took a job at a family shelter run by Human Solutions, and that was soon followed by a job offer from JOIN, where she continues to work today.

JOIN is a nonprofit that serves the needs of people experiencing homelessness and other vulnerable communities in the Portland area. It needed someone to work with Spanish-speaking families seeking services, and she came along at just the right time.

Her co-workers at JOIN say they were immediately impressed with her ability to jump right in, as well as her dedication to the people she serves.

“She can work with people from a broad range of countries,” JOIN outreach worker Quinn Colling said. “And she understands what it’s like to be an immigrant here, and she has gone through the immigration process. It opens up knowledge for folks she works with that other workers don’t have.”

Street Roots asked Cristina to compare her experiences as a social worker in Colombia with the way things are done in the United States.

“Both are governments and systems that push people away, but in different ways, and you see different shapes of it,” she said. “The common thing is individuals – they are alone.”

One thing she said she wasn’t prepared for in the U.S. was seeing homeless families.

“Here, seeing kids with their families living in their car? That is something I never thought could happen,” she said. “In Colombia, I dealt with kids who were living by themselves in the street, who were survivors, who were fighters, probably drug addicts – but you never see them with their families.”

In Portland, where it’s common to hear advocates and politicians say there aren’t enough resources to go around, Cristina saw an abundance.

The first time she walked into a donation closet at a local charity, she said she was shocked. She couldn’t believe there were so many donated clothes that people could choose their favorite styles and colors.

See CRISTINA, page 7