

## Post-event Letters from Youth Participants



*From left to right: Luis Mendoza, Cristina Ramirez, Juana Barrera, Maxsalia Salmon, Guillermon Asiain*

### **Guillermo Asiain, Ciudad Juarez, Mexico**

I was preparing for a half-ironman triathlon that was to take place June 24, when I receive an invitation from Carlo Arze from Youth:Work Mexico. He asked me to participate in a forum in Washington DC that talked about the importance of building alliances to support the employability of the youth at risk. At that moment It sounded interesting, but letting go a year round of training for that ... I wasn't sure. Then I read the program, and was challenged by what I read: How to scale a program? How to build the right partnerships to obtain the maximum gain for the beneficiaries? What are the better practices in employability for youth at risk? These were the kind of issues that were going to be discussed at the conference. They caught my eye and engaged me, because they are important issues for a city like Juarez where youth without employment is one of the main factors contributing to increased violence -- according to SEDESOL (Secretary of Social Development). So I decided to skip a year of triathlon training in order to go to Washington. I was really excited about the event. And this is what happened.

Not only were we invited to go to the event but then I realized that IYF really wanted to empower the youth leaders – and that we were going to deliver some presentations and give opening and closing remarks. Personally I was so excited to have this opportunity that would open up the door to youth participation in such an event. But I was also nervous because for me it was an opportunity to tell the world about what actions youth are involved in and how we can contribute our passion, energy and will to learn.

I was told that four more young people would be at the event -- Cristina from Perú; Juanita from Guatemala; Maxsalia from Jamaica; and a good friend of mine Luis from Ciudad Juarez. I realized that even when we live in different countries and different social realities that we share common problems such as lack of work opportunities. I truly believe that this is a problem that can “cut the wings of their dreams.” And I know that when vulnerable youth realize they cannot achieve their dreams then they stop trying to succeed.

I was thinking at the time that I would do a small program and if it worked I would look to scale it up and make a difference. But at the DC Conference, I heard from multiple experts from around Latin America who said how important it was to run a pilot having in mind that the program needed to be scalable in the future and that the ultimate goal of the program is to influence public policy.

For me hearing these ideas and strategies was a life changing experience. Recently I have had some problems with my employer because he said I always had how to improve our society in Juarez on my mind. So he asked me a lot why I was putting so much time and effort on these issues – and not focusing in the work. But I realized that this big desire and passion that I have to help other people was a level above what I was doing. And when I met so many people in Washington DC, and realized the quantity and quality of SOCIAL PROFESIONALS, I understood that I have another big barrier to break.

In Ciudad Juarez and in Mexico in general, people believe that working in the social development context means you are not a professional or that you cannot find a “good job” or that you are poorly paid. So a lot of people don’t believe in doing this kind of work.

After this IYF experience, I decided to actively become a professional in the area of social development. For many people in Washington, this conference was a very special forum. For me, it empowered me to dedicate my life to these issues of social development. Please continue to give this kind of opportunity and experience to young people like myself. If you do, you will change not only our lives but our countries.

### **Maxsalia Salmon, Youth Ambassador, Jamaica**

I believe the Youth -Partnership-Employability Conference hosted by the International Youth Foundation (IYF) provided a wonderful opportunity for the exchange of ideas through structured as well as informal discussions. Throughout the event I observed and was a part of several such dynamic discussions which took place in the meeting rooms, the lobbies and even as we walked the streets of D.C. As I write this review I can’t help but smile as I fondly recall some unforgettable moments as I interacted with my fellow youth colleagues from Latin America outside of the structured sessions. Let’s just say the language barrier sparked moments of resourcefulness and laughter☺.

As a participant at this event I felt honored to represent the youth of my country. I am thankful for the opportunities I had to provide youthful insights on issues related to partnerships and employability for at risk youth. Ideas coming out of the discussions on topics such as collaborating with the public sector to increase the scale of youth programs, promoting job training and engagement strategies for youth living in violence-affected communities and measuring the long term impact of youth programs have resonated strongly with me and are being shared with my peers here in Jamaica as we continue our own work in youth development. With that said it is my hope that the IYF and its partners will continue to see the need to invest in the development and empowerment of youth in developing countries throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

Overall I view the event as successful as it generated meaningful discussions around the issues of partnership and youth employability. With that said I eagerly look forward to hearing more about the ways in which the programs are being strengthened and brought to scale throughout the region. Congratulations to IYF on a job well done.

**Luis Mendoza, Youth Leader, Ciudad Juarez, Mexico**

I remember clearly it was a Wednesday afternoon of April and I was going through a draft of a social project which intended to set up a team of young people to work as reporters, journalists, bloggers and photojournalists to one objective: communicate good news about our city to the world. Ciudad Juarez is the fifth most important city of México and since 2008 the most dangerous city –of a country that is not at war- in the world. When you realize those facts, you kind of feel alone.

That very same afternoon I received an email from a member of the International Youth Foundation to inform me about an event where IYF, IDB and USAID along with other organizations and collaborators, would share their best practices and lessons learned from two of their successful programs. He was inviting me to actually meet and listen to all these people and to be part of the event. It could not have been a better day for that, for I realized how much talent is out there working, heeding and looking out for youth's development and inclusion to a better life opportunity, across Latin America.

I had the highest expectations on this event and I was more than glad that they were exceeded. The organization was truly outstanding, and all the people involved in it seemed to be happy and satisfied with the results. They looked so connected and coupled you could not see all the stress they surely had the last three months putting together that great happening. The panelists and mediators were, in my opinion, absolutely wonderful. When I attend an event of this nature, I always worry about boring or ambiguous speeches or presentations, but in this case all of them were precise and with a clear idea in mind to communicate to all of the attendees.

Five young leaders – that's how they called us- were for the first time actively involved in an IYF event. The youth invited were Maxsalia from Jamaica; Cristina from Perú; Juanita from Guatemala; Memo (Guillermo Asiain) from Ciudad Juárez, México; and me, also from Ciudad Juárez. We all work with young people in very different types of projects in our respective countries and cities, and we all had this great desire to learn more of what is going on regarding sustainable youth development in other countries of Latin America.

The first thing that caught my attention was how little intervention of IYF programs or allies there is in Mexico. I know that IYF is starting to actively work for the youth in Ciudad Juárez, which makes me really happy, because maybe in a couple of years; good results of the experience in Juárez could be shared with other organizations in an event just like this one.

I took back home a lot of ideas, a lot of energy to keep working for a change in my city and to keep involving youth in significant actions to achieve sustainable development in a community and in their personal and professional growth. But perhaps the most important thing I came to realize is the need to persuade programs and organizations to seek to influence public policy, for it is a very effective way to scale it up and make its growth and success sustainable. It was amazing to listen to directors and coordinators of different social enterprises throughout Latin America of the partnerships and joint efforts with their local and national governments. And the way they spoke about it was almost as if it was part of their organizational culture. A culture and vision we lack in a lot of Mexico's programs for youth and other social causes.

I had the amazing opportunity to know and converse with many different professionals of the social work field and with people from the IYF and it was great to hear that they also learned from us –the five young leaders-. They learned that even when they work for the youth they sometimes forget to involve them in key stages of a project. Let us always work not only keeping our beneficiaries in mind, but also in the middle of the action; when planning, when executing and when evaluating our impact.

My sincere thanks to you all, to the International Youth Foundation for being responsible for this great orchestration, to their collaborators and allies for sharing their experience and letting us talk to them and learn a little bit more after every session or panel, and to all the attendees, who were the best company to also learn from... and who are journey companions in the work for and with youth.