

What Civitas Means to Me

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If I were asked about the meaning of CIVITAS, I would have to mention many things from different perspectives.

I will start with some history.

In September 1996, I was invited by the Public Affairs Office of the US Embassy in Bogotá to participate in the Civitas Pan American Conference in Buenos Aires, Argentina addressing “Education for Democracy.” One of the most important aspects of the conference focused on the challenges of citizen education to schools and civil society as countries seek to secure a strong democratic system beyond elections and the improvement of quality of life of its communities.

In those years we focused on the significant role of civic education for developing student capacities, skills, and attitudes to learn about civic principles and ethical values sustaining societies and pursue societal commitment to the protection of democratic institutions, the rule of law, social justice, and the protection of human rights and human dignity, among others.

Colombian participants in the conference included five representatives from Presencia and Conciencia Foundations; the NGO Corporación Excelencia en la Justicia; Los Andes University and a representative from Colombia’s Teachers Union FECODE. The conference was a high quality source of information with top-of-the-line guest speakers. It was attended by over 200 representatives worldwide in the city of Buenos Aires. The conference provided an opportunity to establish a network of colleagues and friends sharing similar interests and concerns on the significance of civic education. Since then, questions on what can be done to educate students on democratic values were part of my life for a while.

Answers to those questions were provided when the next year the US Embassy invited me to participate in an International Visitors program to Washington DC and Los Angeles. The trip was interesting but the most exciting experience was the visit to the Center for Civic Education (Center). Program participants included representatives from Latin America and the Caribbean who were not familiar with the Center, its staff, or its civic education programs. At the Center we found answers to aspects of citizen education for democracy. We were offered the seed to grow in each of our countries (photo below).



In 1998, the three NGOs in attendance at the CIVITAS conference in Buenos Aires put together a conference with participation of over 45 NGOs nationwide. CIVITAS Colombia was established with the goal of promoting civic education and developing a network of educators and organizations to capture national attention on the future role of civic education. In 1999 a second CIVITAS conference was organized with representatives from Venezuela and Argentina. CIVITAS Colombia developed formal and non-formal programs on citizen education through the implementation of teacher training and trainer of trainers workshops.

Greater challenges were about to come. USAID contractor, Management Sciences for Development (MSD), funded a project to work in five departments nationwide, three of them impacted by strong guerrilla, paramilitary, and narcotics trafficking activity. We had to adapt Foundations of Democracy training materials and develop a human rights component. The new training booklets were called Foundations of Democracy and Human Rights. Although it may be difficult to understand, teachers were exposed to the dangers of war. Addressing human rights issues in conflict areas was challenging and dangerous. This situation forced us to request that teachers review each one of the training sessions to ensure that we would be able to work at the schools without risk. This was one of the most difficult and significant professional experiences of Presencia Foundation and our professional team. It is worth mentioning that our professionals are young college graduates from law and political science schools, intellectually capable, with strong human values and a commitment to work for civic education.

The work of Presencia Foundation was gradually becoming recognized in different settings and, with the support of the Center, we were able to develop new training materials. *Ciudadanía en Constitución* was adapted for schools using the methodology of We The People; *Proponiendo Soluciones* was developed as a new tool based on Project Citizen for primary schools; *Project Citizen* was readapted to Colombia's context; and a collective project with CIVITAS network in Latin America and the Caribbean to develop a series of pedagogical tools for teacher training in human rights in those countries was also implemented. New support materials were developed for implementing Project Citizen with a human rights focus at the regional level. It is also important to acknowledge the support of the private sector, organizations like GTZ and Konrad Adenauer Foundation as well as several USAID consultants.

The seed planted by the Center with such enthusiasm and generosity in the hearts of those of us who worked in CIVITAS Colombia, and particularly in the hearts of Presencia Foundation professionals, and Center professionals, as well as CIVITAS seminars worldwide in exotic countries with participation of important speakers, was a substantial contribution to expanding knowledge and training experience in civic education materials development and made a solid contribution towards the education of a new citizenry committed with the values sustaining democracy, reaching over 65,000 students and 1,800 teachers in Colombia sharing these democratic ideals.

The knowledge and experience developed through several years of joint work allowed us to develop educational materials in citizenship, civility, culture of legality and citizen participation that we were able to use in training of community base groups and community leaders as well as peasants involved in licit cultivation programs.

This was one of the most significant experiences that we had with the CIVITAS network:

In 2006 the CIVITAS World Congress was held in Warsaw, Poland. The congress was attended by Patrick Davidson, a veteran TV producer dedicated to the development of children's programs, and a special guest of the Center for Civic Education. Patrick found Project Citizen a wonderful setting to show the world through a documentary film an educational program with involvement of 65 countries to help students worldwide seek solutions for community development problems while participating in the public sphere and developing public policy.

Many representatives from countries in attendance at the congress shared their work experience with students in their own countries addressing the transformations of communities through the implementation of Project Citizen program. I invited Patrick to visit Colombia and see first-hand the work of students in various municipalities and cities, in the midst of difficulties and conflict.

Months later, I received an email from him announcing his visit January 27 and 28, 2007. I got working with the Public Works Bureau of Antioquia and our colleges in Medellín, **Fundación Amor por Medellín y por Antioquia**, to plan a visit to the municipality of Alejandria in the Antioquia department. Both organizations have supported the program initiatives since 2005.

On January 27 we traveled to Alejandria where students from the secondary school "Procesa Delgado" had identified the most important challenges facing the community, to incorporate into the manual "Peaceful Life" prepared in collaboration with departmental and municipal authorities. As we arrived Patrick told the students: "I have come to see for myself if what I have been told is true: I want to see in your eyes and in your soul what this experience has meant for you."

After a work day in Alejandria, Patrick Davidson returned to the US deeply moved by the experience. He never imagined understanding the Project Citizen experience through the eyes of students, teachers, a school principal, and local authorities working together for a community.

A few months later we received wonderful news! Colombia would be part of the world documentary film of Project Citizen "The World We Want." The film portrays the transformations of entire communities around the world in Jordan, Senegal, China, Russia, Indonesia, India, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the US through the implementation of Project Citizen.

The Center organized a visit of student delegations from 62 countries involved in Project Citizen to Washington DC. Thirty two delegations were in attendance. The trip was one of the most moving and delightful experiences of my life. Seeing those children so different yet so similar in many ways, their pride in community achievements and the joy and commitment to their work made me feel that all the effort and dedication to civic education was worthwhile. I find no words to describe the significance of Center leadership to all organizations in the CIVITAS network. The sense of identity, friendship, and collegiality built as a result of the implementation of civic education projects with such diverse and wonderful individuals and organizations worldwide can only generate satisfaction, joy, and gratitude.

I could extend myself almost endlessly as other memories come to mind on other world and regional conferences, the work of the CIVITAS network in Latin America and the Caribbean, friends, and the Center for Civic Education.

I can only say, "MANY THANKS!!"