

## Fundación Tropicalia's Soy Niña, Soy Importante Program Is Making Sure Girls Know Their Worth

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*One organization's efforts in the Dominican Republic is positively impacting the lives of local children.*

BY ALISANDRA PULITI



Despite hearing over and over that “girls are the future” and “girls run the world,” the unfortunate reality is that they continue to be at a disadvantage compared to boys when it comes to education, resources and support. Around the world, their schooling is often sacrificed because they are needed in the home, or they become teen moms, perpetuating the never-ending cycle of poverty.

In the Dominican Republic, where several features were shot for the 2023 Swimsuit Issue, Adriana Cisneros is trying to break that cycle. She's the CEO of Cisneros—a global, family-owned and operated real estate, media and communications business helping girls in the remote area of Miches through its Fundación Tropicalia's Soy Niña, Soy Importante (I Am a Girl, I Am Important) program. SNSI was launched about a decade ago as an extension of Tropicalia—the sustainable tourism and real estate development arm of Cisneros—to ensure a better future for these girls, which very much aligns with SI Swimsuit's Pay with Change initiative.

Initially introduced in 2012 with the help of USAID/REDDOM as Miches Saludable, a four-day camp to encourage healthy eating for farmers' children, the organization noticed that 43 of the 45 participants were girls. The next year, had 100 girls ages 10 to 15. “There's a huge curve of informing, socializing what these kinds of activities are for children, and there's a learning curve for parents to understand what it is that we're doing with their kids,” Fundación Tropicalia president Sofia Perazzo says. “And that was when we realized the potential of working directly with children because before that we were working with farmers and teachers.”

In 2014, the age range was lowered to 9 to 12, where it remains today with more than 300 girls attending each year. “Our takeaway was that we need to start with a younger age, because 15% were pregnant, divorced, married or already had kids,” Perazzo adds. “We realized that the power of our institution is going to be in messaging, prevention and education.”

About 80 volunteers, mainly from Santo Domingo, come to Miches to educate and expose the girls to many aspects of life beyond their small town. “There’s been so many shifts on so many levels, not only just from the girls but also from entire communities and families,” Perazzo notes. “The first year we had to go door to door because families didn’t know what a summer camp was, let alone geared just to girls. The other reaction of the parents was, ‘I would rather you take my little boy. I need the girl here to cook, clean and take care of her brothers and sisters.’ That lasted for two years, and then the third year everybody was like, ‘When’s the summer camp starting?’ We created demand for this.”



Since its inaugural year, more than 1,200 girls have come through SNSI, with many pursuing education past high school and even returning as volunteers. One important aspect of the program is that it offers lessons in self-esteem and education and the nearby Cisneros project, Tropicalia, has jobs for the young men and women of Miches who have high school diplomas. “A pair of sisters from one of the poorest communities graduated from high school and got full scholarships to the University ISA to study agronomy,” Cisneros says. “Another girl studying to become a doctor returns to SNSI every summer as a volunteer.”

With recognition from the United Nations and new partnerships, SNSI has become much more than a summer camp. During COVID-19 there was an at-home program and now there is a teen empowerment element helping 13- to 15-year-old girls. “We would love to have our own girls center. Thinking about teen moms who are pregnant, taking that girl, helping her or giving her the structure she needs to confront motherhood at such a young age. Giving her a life plan, supporting that baby from zero to 5 and then getting them into public schools because school here starts in first grade,” Perazzo says. “A Soy Niña town, that’s our ultimate dream, but it’s a giant project and there are a lot of steps toward that to make that happen.”

In the meantime, the foundation has taken on a more active role in the community with local and municipal authorities. “It’s to actually bring the social protection systems that Dominican law mandates but don’t necessarily exist at the municipal level for an array of reasons,” Perazzo adds. “We’ve helped the municipality revive these structures locally, ones that help girls get the support that they need when they are reporting cases of abuse. The second part of it is activism through communication campaigns, raising awareness, giving parents information about how to be better parents, giving them new tools for raising their children with love and effect.”

The future for SNSI is bright and will hopefully include boys. “Finding a perfect partner organization who can help us develop how we involve boys in all of this because we need the boys to achieve a complete cultural shift,” says Cisneros. Perazzo agrees but notes that the immediate need is to address how vulnerable the girls still are. “The biggest change is that they grow in self-esteem and confidence,” Perazzo says. “By [the end], her vision of who she is, what she is and what she’s going to become is totally different. It’s really amazing.”



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