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University of Dayton

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NEWS RELEASE

(Note to editors: Bruce Harris will be available to meet with the media at 10:30 a.m. Thursday, March 1, in St. Mary Hall room 113.)

BRUCE HARRIS, ADVOCATE FOR 'STREET KIDS' IN LATIN AMERICA, TO RECEIVE ROMERO AWARD AT UD CHILDREN'S RIGHTS CONFERENCE

DAYTON, Ohio — For Bruce Harris, it's the story of one child that fuels his dedication to serving the "street kids" of Latin America.

It was about midnight when Nahaman Lopez, 13, was sniffing glue with seven or eight friends on the street. A group of policemen passed by, and some of the kids ran away. Lopez, caught, pushed a policeman's hands away, and the police reacted to his show of defiance. Four of them threw him to the ground and kicked him until his liver burst, six of his ribs broke and he suffered brain damage. He died 10 days later.

Harris, as executive director of Casa Alianza, serves the scruffy, hungry, abandoned glue-sniffers, crack-smokers, beggars and thieves who had the misfortune to be born in countries with no social services safety nets and little regard for the lives of the homeless.

As part of "A Question of Conscience: Making a Better Life for All Children," the University of Dayton's international conference on children's rights, Harris will receive the Monsignor Oscar Romero Award for Leadership in Service to Human Rights at 7:30 p.m. Friday, March 2, in the Kennedy Union ballroom on campus. The presentation and an address by Harris about his work are free and open to the public.

"Street kids aren't easy," Harris told Kerry Kennedy Cuomo for *Speak Truth to Power: Human Rights Defenders Who Are Changing Our World* (Crown Publishing Group, \$50). "When you see a kid who's been beaten or has a black eye or bullet holes in him and he's not crying, then serious emotional damage has happened to that kid."

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Casa Alianza, the Latin American branch of the New York-based Covenant House, has programs to rehabilitate and defend the street children in Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Nicaragua. Its facilities provide food, shelter, medical care, drug rehabilitation, counseling, education, skill training and other services to nearly 9,000 children a year. Most of them have been orphaned by civil war or abused or rejected by dysfunctional and poverty-stricken families.

Casa Alianza started out in 1981 by offering food and shelter for the children. "It is a noble task to feed the hungry — and quite honestly it would be more comfortable just to feed them — but as an agency we have matured into asking why the children are hungry and why they are being abused and murdered," said Harris, who started his work at Casa Alianza in 1989.

Despite threats of violence and a drive-by shooting of the crisis center, Harris personally led the campaign to curb violence against street children in Guatemala, with more than 392 judicial cases against police officers and others logged by 1998.

"One of the greatest favors the perpetrators of this violence did for us was to spray our building with machine-gun fire because it was tangible evidence that we were doing something that affected interests. ... We were challenging the status quo, the way Guatemala had for decades operated, challenging the assumption that if a man had the gun and the uniform, he could get away with murder — literally," he said.

Harris' work has been profiled by ABC News, *Prime Time Live*, NBC's *Dateline* and the BBC's *Man Alive* documentary series, and he was featured in an HBO documentary called *Innocents Lost*. Casa Alianza and Harris received the 1996 Olof Palme Award, named for the peace advocate and champion of the world's poor who served as prime minister of Sweden from 1969 to 1976 and again from 1982 to 1986.

And in 1991, Harris was named a "human rights hero" by Amnesty International after Casa Alianza won the conviction of the four Guatemalan national police officers who beat Nahaman Lopez. It was only the second time in Guatemalan history that public officials were convicted for human rights violations.

Harris will receive a sculpture of Romero created by UD student Emily Trick with Brother Gary Marcinowski, S.M., associate professor of visual arts. Harris will be the second recipient of the award after human rights lawyer Juan Méndez received the honor in 2000.

Monsignor Oscar Romero, 1917-1980, served as archbishop of San Salvador. He spoke from the pulpit in defense of the poor of the country and publicly denounced the state-supported death squads. He was assassinated in 1980 while he was celebrating Mass.