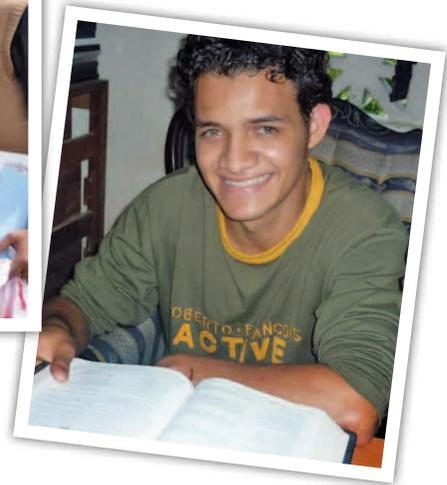




Nelson Araúz, pictured with children and adult leaders on "Children's Day," and below, studying God's Word



Embracing Project JOEL A Source of Hope for Youth By Gregory Koenig

Lutheran Hour Ministries—Panama introduced Project JOEL in 1996, as a Christ-centered, youth-development initiative to meet a widespread need for values education in Latin America. Project JOEL's curriculum is rooted in Scripture and has proven to be so strong and positive that public schools across Latin America have embraced the program. The following is the success story of one young man whose life has been changed by the Holy Spirit working through Project JOEL.

At 13, Nelson Araúz saw little promise in his future. His parents' marriage had been shattered by domestic conflict. He and his three younger brothers had moved with their father to a community where poverty, crime, and abuse were daily influences on the four boys. Nelson's father was unable to care for his sons properly, so Nelson tried as best he could to look after himself and his brothers.

"I was thirteen, and it was too much for me," he recalls. "But the principal at my new school, Professor Luz Torres, invited me to be part of Project JOEL, and I met Franco, Joseph, and Gabriel — my best friends and brothers in Christ." With the help of Luz Torres and his new friends, Nelson and his brothers were able to stay in school, and Project JOEL continued to be a positive force in their lives. "In fact," says Nelson, "my brothers learned to read by memorizing the story of [LHM's holiday book] *Red Boots for Christmas*.

"God never abandoned me," Nelson says. "Somehow, we always had food and a roof. And I'm convinced that Project JOEL helped me avoid all the bad things and the risks on the streets. But most important," he adds, "it led me to the Bible, faith, and prayer."

Project JOEL also helped Nelson develop as a leader. While he was attending the university and working in a Panama City-area hospital, he was also traveling across Panama frequently as a Project JOEL instructor. One workshop he led was "*Mi Primer Empleo*" [My First Job], which provided orientation and resources for young adults entering the job market. In 2012, the LHM—Panama ministry center distributed 3,500 Bibles to children through a Project JOEL campaign titled "*Fiesta de Valores*" [Values Party]. Nelson, by then a seasoned veteran volunteer at age 23, helped spearhead the effort.

Nelson has since married and begun a career in another part of the country where, according to Panama ministry

center Director Edilberto Mendez, he and his bride, Elena, are continuing together to develop Christian leaders. "Nelson's is just one of many stories of hope and spiritual renewal, thanks to Project JOEL," says the Rev. Dr. Douglas Rutt, Director of Lutheran Hour Ministries' International division. "God the Holy Spirit is using Project JOEL to change lives — emotionally, economically and, what's most important, spiritually — often in ways that we in the United States cannot fully imagine. Support from the Lutheran Women's Missionary League (through a grant of \$75,000 approved at its 2011 convention) is helping to make this happen — not only in Panama, but also across Latin America and even in other regions of the globe. All the glory belongs to our powerful and loving God." **Q**

For more information about Project JOEL and other Lutheran Hour Ministries International outreach programs, visit www.lhmint.org.