casa M.A.N.U. a home for children living with HIV and AIDS

Photos by Michael Aidan

When Silvia Casas, a volunteer at the Red Cross, cradled in her arms a three-week-old baby, abandoned by his mother, she first noticed the blood under his fingernails and his damaged knuckles. A paediatrician confirmed that the wounds were from having continually scratched and thumped at the boards of his cot, having been left alone for prolonged periods of time by his biological parents.

Manu, as he became to be known, was left at a Buenos Aires' hospital in June 1990 with syphilis, hepatitis B and an ailment that nobody really knew too much about in those days: HIV. Manu's prognosis was terrible. According to doctors he would live, at most, for just a few months.

The coordinator of Silvia's section at the Red Cross phoned her one evening, as a last resort, and asked her whether her family might be able to take Manu in for a few days, or at most, a couple of weeks. Silvia already had a family; married at 15, she had a husband and three children when she was called on to make what would be a life-changing decision. "I asked for some time to think about it. I phoned my husband and he just said: if they're calling us it's for a reason."

Silvia Casas consequently became the first Argentine woman to adopt a HIV-positive baby, an adoption which was finalised when Manu was three years old, already having greatly transcended his original life expectancy. The Casas family had begun to look for answers, for information, to educate themselves about HIV/AIDS in a time where it was still an unfamiliar and alien illness, the first case worldwide having been named just eight years previously.

Manu enjoyed a relatively normal childhood under the care of the Casas family. He went to school, complained about eating his greens, played and ran around as much as his health would permit him to. Everybody that knew him tells of a child full of life, hope and happiness, but Manu's health deteriorated rapidly. At the age of seven he managed to have his first viral load assessment to gauge the progress of the virus in Lyon, France, thanks to an event organised by the Red Cross. It was there where Dr. Jorge Vila made adjustments to Manu's medication and informed Silvia that although Manu was now clinically compensated, his immune system was destroyed. After this modification Manu lived some 'wonderful months' with the new lease of life that the adjusted medication had given him, but his fate had already been sealed, and he died shortly after his eighth birthday.

Silvia's husband would die a year-and-a-half later from multiple sclerosis. "Casa M.A.N.U. was born from a terrible pain, but from taking something positive from that pain, and moving forward." Says Alejandra Casas, Silvia's daughter and coordinator of Casa M.A.N.U., which stands for '*mucho amor nos une*' (much love unites us).

The idea of Casa M.A.N.U. was to create a home for children where Silvia and a team of volunteers could do for others what the Casas family had done for Manu.

Casa M.A.N.U. opened in 2002 as a non-government organisation, and with only two bedrooms has a capacity of around 12 children, currently aged between one and 17 years old Many children arrive at Casa M.A.N.U. with AIDS and in under a year, with the care, medication and love that they receive there, have undetectable levels of the virus (HIV).

Being in Casa M.A.N.U., until you see the multicoloured cards on the kitchen wall with the children's daily medication on them, it's easy to forget why they're there at all. Apart form that, and occasional other reminders, Casa M.A.N.U. is like any other family, only bigger.

Over 20 children have passed through the doors of Casa M.A.N.U. in the last five years. Whilst some have been there since the home's opening others were found adoptive parents and left the house to start a new life with their new families.

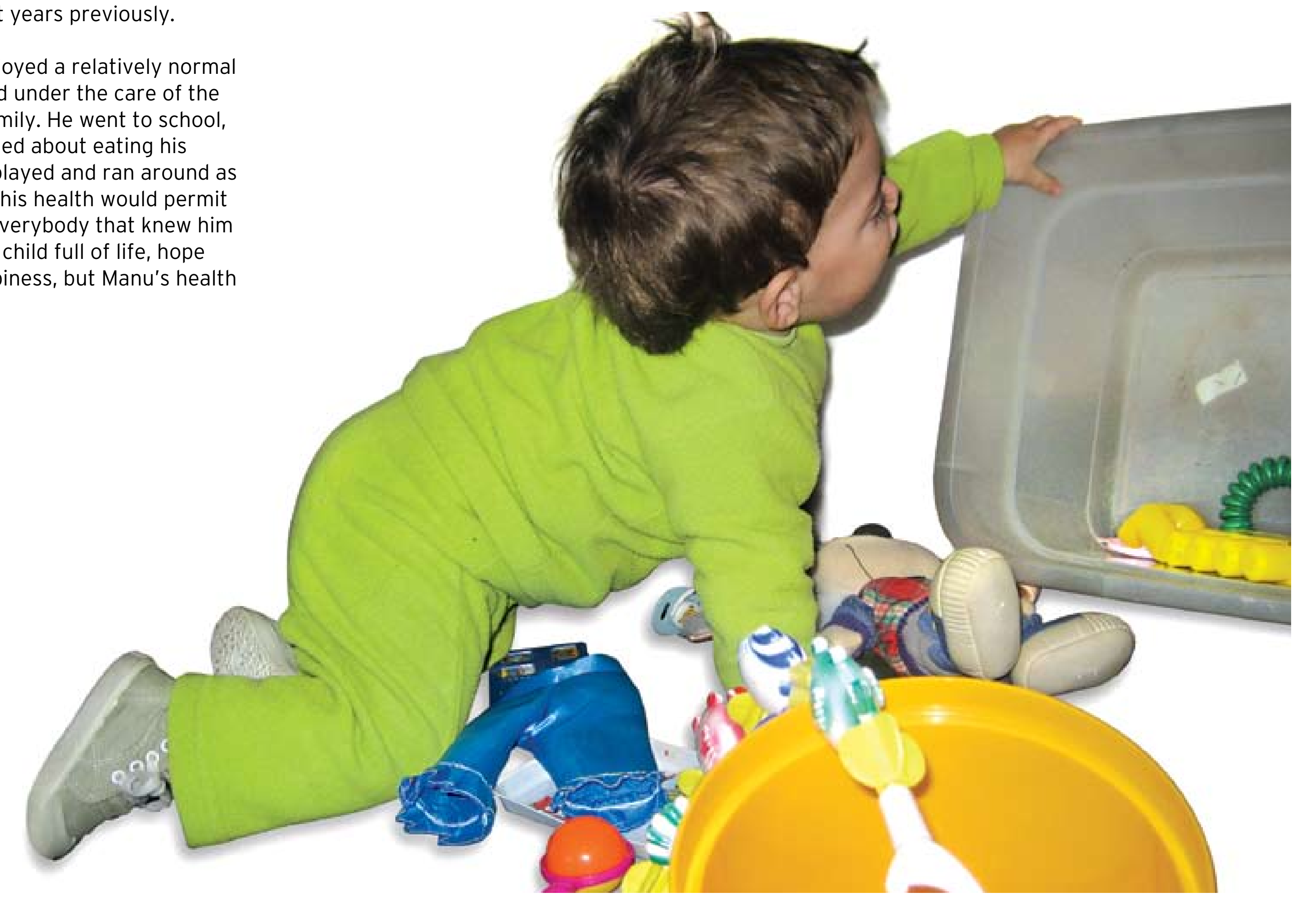
Children that acquire HIV usually do so from their mothers during pregnancy, the labour process or breastfeeding.
A smaller percentage contract the virus through sexual abuse. It is expected that by 2010, 25% of the world's population living with HIV/AIDS will be children and that in the same year there will be 10-15m children orphaned as a result of the virus. One might imagine that it was because of these figures that Argentine president Néstor Kirchner recently became interested in Silvia's work. The NGO was awarded a government subsidy enabling them to buy a vehicle to take the children to school and a new premises. With time and funds, the new house will be refurbished and ready as a more spacious and viable option for the children of Casa M.A.N.U., present and future.

Silvia has since adopted another HIV-positive child, continues to work with the Red Cross and travels the country with the National Programme of HIV/AIDS giving talks and workshops on prevention and other HIV/AIDS related issues.

"I had the choice of turning into the eternal victim or forming a permanent defiance, I know I've got it in me to fight." Says Silvia, reflecting on her story.

BY **MICHAEL AIDAN**

Message from Silvia Casas:

This project has a dream and together we can realise it. We need help to be able to make the new Casa M.A.N.U. a place to carry on working for a better quality of life for children living with HIV or AIDS. All contributions are greatly appreciated.

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