

The Most Tenacious Woman in the World

By Patrick Breslin

Many years later, as she faced the threats from Colombia's violent shadows, Nohra Padilla was to remember that distant day when her mother took her through a city dump to discover the small treasures discarded there—bottles, cans, paper and cardboard that could be sorted, cleaned and sold to put food on the table, to clothe her and 11 brothers and sisters, to pay for their education.

It was not quite the magical scene of danger and discovery that opens Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, but it was where Padilla's story started. Over time, she would find in those hills of trash and in the people who mined them, her life's work, and in herself, the leadership that would change the politics, economics and culture of recycling, often over the opposition of entrenched groups who benefited from the way things were. A daughter and granddaughter of recyclers, Padilla now heads Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá, 20,000 members strong, as well as Colombia's National Association of Recyclers. She meets regularly with mayors, ministers, donors and journalists and is invited abroad to share her experiences. At 41, she is on her way to a university degree in public administration, taking courses as her duties permit. Around the conference table, when the lawyers and economists and civil engineers introduce themselves by profession, Padilla simply says, "Recycler."



The story of Nohra Padilla is part of a series for Grassroots Development profiling individuals throughout Latin America who are changing their societies from the bottom up. It is worth noting in this special issue on women leaders that Padilla rose through the ranks of an organization in which most workers are male and that among recyclers, gender is not commonly an obstacle to advancement.

The history of trash

In that tiny percentage of hereditary matter that separates humans from animals, there must be a gene for generating trash. As long as humans have been on earth, we have left trash behind. Most of what we know of ancient ancestors comes through their detritus—fossilized bones and teeth of the game they ate, the rough weapons and tools they fashioned, shards of pottery that once stored their grain and water, unstrung beads

and shining bits of metal with which they adorned themselves and, in their burial pits, the evidence of their age, sex, height, weight, status and of the wounds or disease that killed them.

Modern trash is quantitatively and qualitatively different. The middens we leave for future research are vast mountains and bogs that threaten to overwhelm the cities of consumers that produce them. In Latin America, urban growth has exploded since the mid-20th century, and the volume of trash in municipal dumps has outpaced it. Again and again, reform-minded mayors take office with ambitious plans, only to realize that their first priority must be finding new dumpsites as old ones overflow. Dumps, or "landfills," threaten health, safety and the environment as they pump greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, accelerating climate change. In 2000, an avalanche of trash buried hundreds of Filipinos living in a dump. But as long as there have been dumps, people have gleaned them. One person's trash is another's lucky find. In Latin America, the number of recyclers has swelled with the waves of migrants to the cities. A recent census counted 150,000 recyclers in Colombia. Like hundreds of thousands of rural Colombians, Nohra Padilla's parents and grandparents fled farms in Boyacá and Cundinamarca because of the horrific violence that swept through the countryside in the 1940s. So massive was this flight that Colombia became a majority urban country by the early 1960s. Padilla's family settled in Las Cruces, a barrio near the center of Bogotá that had still open land.

If the migrants found safety in their new surroundings, work and shelter were harder to come by. Housing built on vacant land from odd bits of lumber, flattened cans and sheets of cardboard gave rise to the sprawling shantytowns that mushroomed overnight and became the face of urban poverty in the region. In the absence of jobs, some migrants scratched out a living searching through trash for anything they could sell. Padilla was born to recycling and was experienced at it before she was 10. But even though they needed her in the dump, her parents put education first. With only one year of schooling, Padilla's mother had taught herself to read and write, then taught her husband. Their children combined work with their studies, through high school in Nohra's case. But Nohra's father became permanently disabled in an industrial accident and died when she was 13. Recycling kept the family afloat, but trapped in one of poverty's whirlpools: *Reciclo porque soy pobre y no salgo de pobre porque solo sé reciclar.* ["I recycle because I'm poor and I stay poor because all I know is recycling."] For recyclers to escape from that whirlpool, someone had to provide the centrifugal force.

The politics of trash

In 1999, Marcela Chaves, a field worker with Colombia's Fundación Corona, took me to see a nascent organization of recyclers that she was advising via a program called FOCUS, which was receiving assistance from the Inter-American Foundation. We drove to one of the poorest areas in the southern rim of Bogotá to meet the residents of Las Marías, a community literally built on trash. The area had once been a shallow lagoon that migrants had filled with dirt and garbage, tamping it all down, then building their ramshackle

houses on the new land. A score of those who made their living from recycling had decided to organize as a cooperative within the Association of Recyclers of Bogotá. Their working conditions were as precarious as their houses. Their rickety carts pulled by spavined horses could be seen on the side of highways and major streets, shrinking from speeding cars as they hauled bundled cardboard and piles of newspapers. They stacked their material beside their houses, then sold it for a pittance to middlemen. Recyclers were lucky to earn \$4 a day, but none of those I spoke to seemed bitter. Several, in fact, said they liked the freedom to be their own boss and work the days and hours they wished. By opting for membership in the Association, they came in contact with Nohra Padilla, who was about to change their lives.

Padilla was 29 then, a stocky woman in a heavy sweater and jeans with turned-up hems, her thick brown hair drawn into a long braid or a knot. She coordinated organizing for the Association and she was helping the Las Mariás group position itself to sell its gleanings directly to industry for better prices than the middlemen were paying. Padilla had an air of having just rushed in from a previous meeting, and when she left, she was rushing to the next. But in between, she was focused, listening intently and responding quickly, decisively, emphasizing her words with gestures. Marcela Chaves saw her as an up-and-coming leader.

Actually, Padilla had been a leader since her teenage years. At 14, she began attending school at night to leave days free to help support her family. She and a few neighbors and school friends formed a group that collected material together. Soon, they were busy improving their Tisquesusa neighborhood of Las Cruces, where trash dumped illegally on a daily basis had attracted plagues of rodents and flies, causing skin and respiratory diseases. Padilla's group pressured the authorities and worked to remove the garbage, dig drains to prevent flooding, channel water to public sinks and lay out a park with a sports field.

When Bogotá's municipal government decided in the late 1980s to close the major dump that supported 200 recyclers, Padilla and her friends formed cooperatives to defend their interests. Initially ignored by the city, they successfully pressured for negotiations by blocking roads and setting fires in the dump. City officials persisted in closing the dump, but they recognized the cooperatives, aided their efforts to organize trash collecting and outfitted the members with identity cards and uniforms that gave them a semi-official status. The four cooperatives created at that time became the core of Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá, founded in 1990.

Support for recyclers across Colombia already had been coming from a prominent former IAF grantee, Fundación Social (FS), which funneled profits from several businesses it controlled, mainly in the financial sector, into the struggle against poverty. An FS program helped recycling groups find storage, upgrade transport and access social security, education, health services and childcare. In 1991, FS began to inform Colombians of the benefits of recycling. With assistance from FS, la Asociación bought a deteriorating structure and recycled it into the organization's airy, expansive headquarters that includes an office, meeting space, a kitchen, dining areas in an enclosed patio and a childcare center. When a subsequent banking crisis

temporarily curtailed FS's support, Padilla became director of the recyclers' association.

"Ever since," Padilla said, "we've been trying to reach self-sufficiency. But that's very difficult for an organization whose members are among society's poorest people. I go long periods without drawing a salary, just bus fare or money for an emergency. When do I receive a salary? When I'm successful in getting one of our projects financed and can charge for administrative costs. And I'm not the only one.

Many of us have donated our time and effort to the Asociación." With some IAF support, Fundación Corona, a corporate foundation, stepped in to back the recyclers' attempts to organize and to professionalize their work. But bigger obstacles lay ahead. In 1999, Bogotá's government began working on a master plan for the city, with trash collection and removal the key concerns. In 2003, bids were restricted to registered corporations that provided sanitation services. The recyclers were not only left out but were banned from their usual routes. Help came from an unusual source.

Alfonso Fidalgo was a successful and politically-connected consultant living in a spacious apartment near Bogotá's trendy Zona Rosa. A handsome man with expressive eyebrows, strong features, and thick, wavy black hair, Fidalgo is one of those high-energy people able to hold a meeting and simultaneously manage three cell phones. A few years before, he'd attended a by-invitation-only meeting in the resort city of Melgar that brought together business leaders with representatives of the guerrilleros waging war against the state—part of an ultimately unsuccessful peace process launched by the Colombian government. At the meeting, Fidalgo sat in on a presentation by Nohra Padilla and a colleague on the problems of trash pickers.

"It was love at first sight," Fidalgo told me. "I thought they made the biggest impact of any of the speakers." Impressed by the implications of what they said, both for combating poverty and for improving the environment, he volunteered to help them obtain funding from a Spanish foundation. When that didn't work, he drew a few friends and colleagues, including attorney Luis Jaime Salgar, into an informal support group for the recyclers. Salgar helped the Asociación contest the government decree that had sidelined the recyclers. The appeal was based on the fundamental right of people to work, as guaranteed under the Colombian Constitution of 1991, and it was successful. It not only overturned the decree but gained the recyclers a foothold in the city's trash management system. "This has been one of the best remunerated jobs in my life," Fidalgo told me. "Not in money, but in satisfaction. I've learned a ridiculous amount. Helping the recyclers has no downside. It's good for them, and for everyone else. It's a virtuous circle."

The economics of trash

The second time I visited Las Marías, the group, thanks to Fundación Corona and the Asociación, had started to pull away from the drag of the poverty circle by acquiring a partly-roofed yard, where it could weigh each recycler's contribution and store material until it had truckloads to sell directly to industries.

Working conditions were still brutal. I saw a loaded cart, with a sturdy woman in the place of a horse between its shafts, straining to pull it up a ramp into the storage yard. In a corner of the ground floor of a building in an industrial area, like a baseball pitcher warming up, a young man rhythmically hurled bottles against a cement wall and they exploded like grenades. The resulting mound of splintered glass was a danger to anyone who had to handle it, but it could be cleaned more efficiently than intact bottles—an initial step up the rungs of the reprocessing ladder.

Padilla has long had two guiding ideas about how recyclers could break free from the poverty trap: gradually take over the reprocessing and move into steady jobs cleaning buildings and tending public parks. When she talks trash, you forget the squelching, reeking dumps and imagine a corporate boardroom where the CEO lays out the business plan. "We want to control the entire process of recycling plastic, from collecting, sorting, sterilizing, all the way to reprocessed raw material for industry," she said. "Why plastic? Because paper is controlled by a few industrialized multinationals. With metals and glass, the same thing, but not plastic. And you can completely process plastic with relatively simple machinery. Our other focus is non-ferrous metals, aluminum and copper, which are not that commonly found but whose value increases very quickly with whatever you do to it. In plastic and non-ferrous metals, we can compete."

The Asociación put that strategy to work at the Alquería Parque de Reciclaje, a well-organized center occupying most of a city block, which it took over under a contract with Bogotá's municipal government. The ferocious-looking Rottweiler-type dogs patrolling the gate are a reminder that junkyard dog is a metaphor for meanness and that trash has value and must be protected. Past the dogs, trucks drop off tons of unsorted recyclables at one of seven bays.



Under a high roof, uniformed, gloved recyclers from 21 cooperatives, some wearing surgical facemasks, rotate to separate the materials. The day I visited, a proper-looking middle-aged lady was methodically dismembering a glossy magazine full of photos of lingerie models, the pages falling like leaves into the big blue drum. Across the yard were smaller buildings housing offices and classrooms where the recyclers take courses offered by Colombia's Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje (SENA), a vocational-training agency that has been in operation for a half-century. Processing equipment included a long yellow machine roughly the shape and size of the hand-baggage scanners at airports.

The change in working conditions that machine represented became clear in a neighborhood in southern Bogotá, which Padilla said was one of the city's most toxic areas. Men shambled along muddy streets with thick sheaves of tanned skins riding on their bent necks and shoulders. We stepped through a green metal door, crossed a dingy yard and entered a rickety two-story structure where plastic bags were prepared for recycling. Dozens of huge canvas sacks full of plastic bags were strewn everywhere. Up a shaky flight of stairs lined with more such bundles, a pair of youths stood in front of wicked-looking blades fixed to a stand, sharp edges facing up. They took the bags one at a time and sliced them apart. Downstairs, other workers used paddles to stuff them into a solution bubbling and boiling in large open tanks. An OSHA [workplace safety] examiner would have run screaming back into the street.

At the Alquería Park, all that dangerous work is safely contained within the long yellow box. It takes plastic in at one end, heats it to melting, water-cools it and then extrudes it in dark gray spaghetti-like strings at the other end. A little guillotine slices the strings into purified pellets that are bagged and sold to factories that turn them into chairs, garden hoses, more plastic bags—an almost infinite number of products. With the Alquería facility, the Asociación recyclers became an integral part of Bogotá's trash management system, a big step up from the dusty yard where the Las Marías recyclers brought their material more than a decade ago. In addition to this vertical integration, Padilla has also been working to expand horizontally, into the cleaning and landscaping industries mentioned earlier. "There's not the profit that's possible with recycling but there are a lot of jobs that take a recycler who's not earning much on the street and put him in different but related work," she explained.

The culture of trash

If uniforms and identification cards gave recyclers an identity, the arrangement of regular routes and schedules has represented another breakthrough, eliminating competition for the same trash piles and facilitating connection with the people putting out the trash. The realization that they could count on the same individuals showing up helped make Bogota residents receptive to suggestions that they separate recyclable materials from organic garbage. This made the work easier and cleaner, with less sifting through bags and cans of trash. Better communication reinforced the idea that the recyclers were not derelicts but workers providing an important service. "Gradually, there came the recognition that, for example, we help

preserve trees," a recycler said." If this pile of shredded paper were not recycled, think of all the trees that would be cut down." As their efforts became more organized, the recyclers' contributions became more apparent. Padilla estimates that groups in the Asociación remove for recycling at least 15 percent of the trash generated each day in Bogotá, about 100 tons of material. That means their work alone extends the life of the city's landfills by the same percentage.

With set routes and schedules, the freedom that went with scavenging disappeared. Some recyclers dropped out of the Asociación but others appreciated the benefits it provides. These include the center in the headquarters where members can leave their children from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. and receive medical and dental services. Since 2006, the center has participated in the government-funded lunch program Bogotá Sin Hambre [Bogotá without Hunger], serving 300 hot meals a day, mainly to poor people from the neighborhood, as well as to recyclers and their children. Shortly after the program started, Padilla invited me to lunch to show me how smoothly the center was handling the increased responsibility. Behind us, a long line of people with trays waited patiently, quietly chatting, leaving room for busy staff to go back and forth. "People say we're disorganized," Padilla said, "but look at how proper everyone is. There's respect. There's attention to the presentation of the food. That's important."

Her comment about the food reminded me of other grassroots leaders who also notice all the details, especially those that encourage pride. Poverty is in the concrete realities of life, but it also worms its way into the mind, and overcoming it is partly a question of attitude. When Padilla talks about what the Asociación has accomplished, she always underlines how each victory increased public respect for the recyclers and their own respect for themselves.

Fending off the Sopranos

Trash management is a tough business, no place for the meek. The foundation of Tony Soprano's HBO crime principality, let's remember, rested on trash routes and the municipal contracts that awarded them. In the 1990s, as Padilla began her push to enter the bidding process, she and her colleagues received threats from shadowy groups who regarded organizing the poor as subversive. Behind them, Padilla perceived business owners who were profiting from their control of trash collecting and wanted no competition. Attempts at intimidation escalated whenever contracts came up for review, as did offers of bribes. There have been violent episodes; recyclers have lost their lives in clashes over access to dumps. In the face of this danger Padilla says that her organization sought help from the authorities to no avail. In fact, she says, members are sometimes harassed by the authorities and constantly on guard against proposals to strip them of their rights.

Undeterred, Padilla has continued to push, but is also working to improve communication and internal security within her organization. She has taken complaints about threats to the press. And she has relied on

her allies, including prominent Colombians like Fidalgo and Salgar. She has not wavered in her demand that recyclers have a seat at the table when contracts are negotiated and decisions are reached on sanitation and recycling services in Bogotá.

In pursuit of that goal, she has won the grudging admiration of municipal bureaucrats. I sat in on one difficult meeting at a government office on dangerous residue in trash and the laws that supposedly regulate it. The conversation veered off on tangents, but Padilla kept pulling it back. She complained that her organization had not received promised information on proposed legislation. "I'm not asking whether," she said firmly at one point, "I'm affirming that there is no control by the authorities."

A few minutes later, on the sidewalk outside, a woman who had been in the meeting watched as Padilla continued to press her points. "Nohra Padilla," she said quietly, is "the most tenacious woman in the world."

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