

Maria Elena Moreno Van Maren

## Power Autobiography

I grew up in a community where there was a lot of poverty. My community in Medellin Colombia did not have schools or hospitals, and the houses were all made of wood. There were no projects to help young people have opportunities, but what did abound was violence, drugs, and abuse in all forms. Every day we had to go through needs like hunger because my mother did not have enough to buy a lot of food. My mother was abandoned by my father when I was born, she had to take full responsibility for my brothers and me. Every day my older brother and I had to walk for five hours to the closest school to study. I was a girl only 6 years old, exposing myself to so many dangers by going alone every day to my school that was so far away. My mother had to go to work very early every day and could not accompany us to school.

Every day when we walked to go study we witnessed deaths and violence. But, the worst was when my brother was killed by accident with a stray bullet. My mother almost died of pain and from that moment, my mother made the decision to withdraw me from school. I was only 10 years old, but she knew it was very dangerous for me to go study alone.

At that moment my whole life changed because I started working with my mom cleaning houses, to be able to survive. I worked for 5 years with my mother, but I always wondered, why did these people with whom my mother and I worked have so many beautiful things in their lives while my community did not even have a school where children could study? At the age of 15, I decided to speak with the leader of my community and ask how I could help improve my neighborhood. At that moment my leadership began. The community chose me to go to represent my community in front of the mayor of Medellin, and tell them about our needs. 20 years ago when I was just beginning my leadership I felt completely alone because everyone in my community surrendered without hope, and with great anger at the mayor of Medellin.

I decided to take responsibility and support my community, and to this day I have no regrets because my community has gone from being a poor and abandoned place to a place full of opportunity. With the community work we did in commune 8 in Medellin, we achieved housing reform, new schools, hospitals, e-projects to create opportunities for young people, libraries, cable cars, rapid transit buses, and much more. Most important was the change in violence. The community went from being a place where many people were killed every day to being the number one community of PEACE. This achievement helped the youth to study and train and our community today is beautiful and different! All this work taught me that there is nothing more powerful than a united community. We also learned to create our opportunities. That's why my work with PAVE is powerful - because, once again, we are the community united for the same cause: education! I know that to achieve change, it takes teamwork and being able to



listen to families about their needs. Doing this job with PAVE every day fills me with Life and Love!

Every day that I work at PAVE I make sure that we continue to plant seeds that change our educational system so that families are involved in the decisions that impact their children. We can all come together to create a better future for our little ones. I feel the responsibility to support the people who serve our city so that together we can create the best for families in DC. Yes, we can do it with Love, Discipline, Responsibility, Courage, and Focus with our community.

I thank PAVE every day for this beautiful work of supporting parents to be leaders in the education of their children because this is the work that is required to provide a better future for our children!

