

home late at night, I never worry that he was out with another woman. I think of anything but that, because I'm not obsessed with this fidelity issue and we trust each other. But if he was with another woman I don't want to know about it, because then I would think, "*O que é que ela tem que eu não tenho?*" —What does she have that I don't have? I think I'm the greatest, so why would he look for another woman?

I see myself as a woman who likes to enjoy life in all its stages. There exists this myth that women shouldn't reveal their age, but I don't have any reason to hide my age. I'm 54 now. When I entered menopause, I decided to go on hormone therapy because I wanted to go through this next phase of my life feeling healthy.

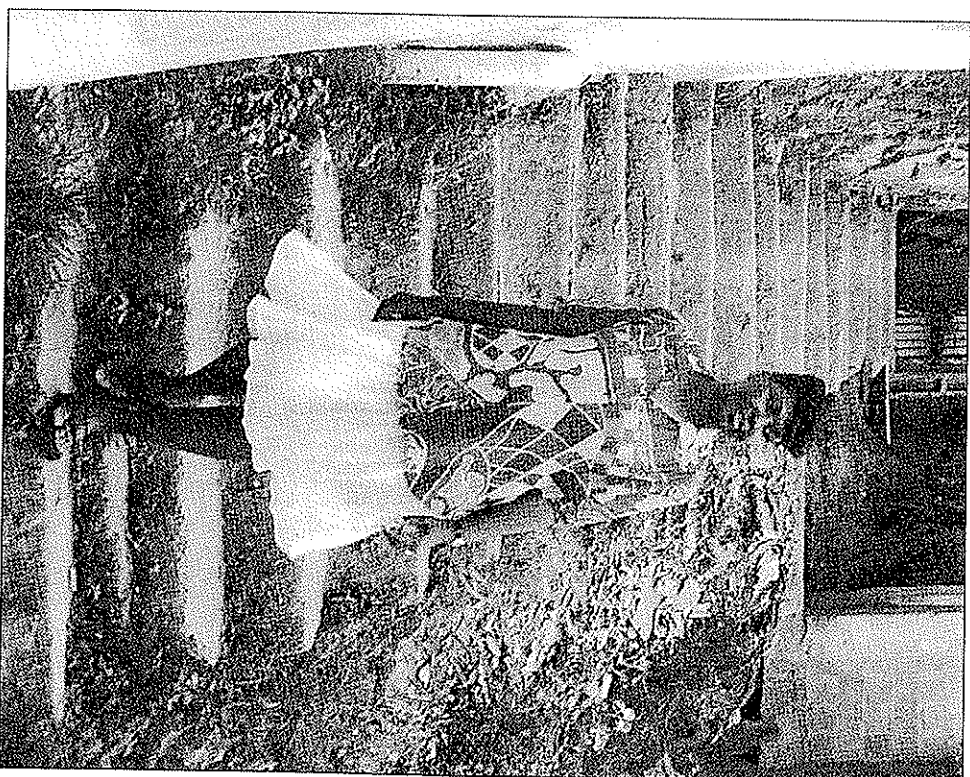
I accept this stage of my life with serenity. I try not to gain weight because this is an age where high blood pressure can be a problem and also because I don't want to gain weight, and then go on a diet and look all shriveled up. Sometimes I get hot flashes, but they go away quickly. Sometimes I get moody and irritated, not just because of menopause but also because of the pressure of my work. But Piranga and the people I work with help cheer me up.

When I'm feeling down I often get dressed up pretty and go out. I never liked to look disheveled, even when I only had one dress and wore it all the time. The other day I was joking with my daughter because we were trying to decide what to wear. I said, "Who'd ever think that one day we would be standing in front of a closet full of clothes trying to decide what to wear?" I never thought I'd have to decide what to cook for dinner because we had so many different kinds of food in the house.

Despite all the suffering I've been through, I consider myself a very privileged woman. It's not because of the material things I've gained, but because I am loved and surrounded by such beautiful people. God always sent me an angel in my most difficult moments. And when you're surrounded by love, it's a lot easier to confront the harsh realities of life.

Chapter Two

A Walk Through the Favela



"Let me take you on a little tour of Chapen Mangueira, the favela where I have been living all my life."

Favela dos rebolados,
sapatados, bem dançados
da lata d'água na cabeça, de mão na
cintura
de requetbrados.

Favela dos patins improvisados
do chinelo que arrasta
do brinquedo quebrado
de gente que sobe e desce
sem medo do escuro,
sem cerca, sem muro
sem vacilação.

Favela que inspira os poetas
que fala pra ela, dela,
da paixão, da despedida,
da volta,
até do fora que levou no salão.

Favela da mulher traida
do malandro que saiu da prisão,
que chega e não acha nada
nem ninguém no
barração

Favela salto alto
saiu justa e apertado,
sapato bico fino, chapéu de palha
do palito, almgafadinha,
da pipa, da cigarra, do balão
Favela dos tambores,

dos terreiros, procissões
dos crentes batendo às portas,
Folia de Reis chegando
pra todo mundo acordar

Favela do papo de caminhar
dás amarelhinhas,
empadós, pastéis e pés de galinha,
caldo de moocotó e aquela feijoadinha.

Favela de ontem e de agora,
tempo que não volta mais
da minha fantasia

Favela of the dancers
who shake their hips and their feet
with buckets of water on their
head, hands on their waist
shimmying.

Favela of the improvised roller skates
sandals that shuffle
broken toys
people who go up and down
with no fear of the dark,
no fence, no wall
no hesitation.

Favela that inspires the poets
who speak to her, about her
speak of passion, of loss
of returning

and even of the broken heart on the
dance floor.
Favela of the betrayed woman
of the *malandro* who left prison
and comes back and finds nothing
and nobody home.

Favela of high heels
tight skirt and hoop earrings
pointed shoes, straw hat
toothpick, decked out,
kite, cricket, balloon

Favela of the drums
ceremonies, processions
preachers knocking on doors
carols arriving
waking everyone up.

Favela chatting along the way
hopscootch
pastries, snacks and chicken feet
caf's soup and that special *feijoadá*.

Favela of today and yesterday
time that will never come back
from my fantasy

de fazê-la sorrir,
cantar, brincar,
esquecer
e viver.

Favela, meu tesouro,
seu encanto me seduz
mesmo sem água e energia tu és feita de
luz
és minha musa inspiradora, meu lugar,
meu chão

Aguenta firme, Favela
que as coisas vão melhorar:

to make her smile
sing, play
forget
and live.

Favela, my treasure
your charm seduces me
with no water or electricity, you are
still made of light
you're my inspirational muse, my
place, my land.

Hold tight, *Favela*,
things are gonna get better.

—Benedicta da Silva

Let me take you on a little tour of Chapéu Mangueira, where I have been living all my life. In Brazil, we call these poor neighborhoods *favelas*, which I suppose you would translate as slums. Chapéu Mangueira is considered a very small *favela*, with only about 2,000 inhabitants. Like most *favelas* in Rio, it's perched on a hillside. There are no paved roads and cars can't come up here. The few people who have cars park them down below and then walk up.

Tourists who visit the Copacabana beach would never know that there is a *favela* just minutes away. Two blocks from the beach is little alley called Ari Barroso, with a square where the local children play soccer. This is where the *favela* begins. If you walk up the stairs and continue along the dirt path, you'll see what the typical *favela* houses look like. Most of them have just two rooms, with about six people living there, and the houses themselves are not very sturdy. There's no sewage system and no regular garbage collection, which is why you can see a lot of garbage around.

To foreigners the conditions here might look terrible, but things in Chapéu Mangueira are actually much better than in most *favelas*. At least here we have running water, and we have a health

clinic and an elementary school. It is also a small *favela*, so there is still a sense of community. People sit outside and talk with their neighbors. The kids are out playing, climbing on the trees. If someone gets sick, people rush to help. My neighbors are always coming to my house to chat, to borrow a cup of sugar, or to tell me about their problems.

The history of the *favelas* goes back to the *quilombos* where the blacks, Indians and some poor whites formed independent republics in the hillsides as a way to resist slavery. The *favelas* are also a result of the rural exodus, with people streaming out of the countryside to the city in search of a better life—just like my parents did. These rural folk, mostly small farmers and their families, are expelled from the land by the big landowners or are already landless and have no way to survive. So they come to the city, look for a piece of empty land, and then occupy it and set up their shacks. Little by little, others join them and form communities. There are now about 480 *favelas* in Rio, which are home to some 2.5 million people.

Most *favelas* in Rio grew up on the hillsides because that's where the empty land was. In addition to the danger of living on steep slopes, we also have to contend with constant struggles over property rights. The struggle around land—with land occupations and conflicts between poor urban dwellers and wealthy landowners—has been a permanent feature of urban life in Rio. After years of fighting for land rights, just 30 percent of *favela* dwellers in this city have legal title to their property.

You have to remember that the *favelas* grew—and continue to grow—out of poverty. No one lives in these neighborhoods because they're nice places to live, but because they have no choice. In many *favelas* conditions are terrible. There's no water, no electricity, no sanitation, and people live crowded on top of each other.

Look at Rocinha, which, ironically, is located in the southern part of the city where Rio's elite live. It's the largest slum in Latin

America and probably in the world. This community of over 200,000 is made up mainly of poor, defenseless, humble people. They don't get any government help, they have no infrastructure or public services such as sewage, water and electricity.

Conditions in Chapéu Mangueira are different because we've had a strong neighborhood association that's been fighting for years to improve the living conditions. I've been working with the association since the time I was 16. I've been president of the association two times. During all these years, we've managed to turn Chapéu Mangueira into a model *favela*. Look at the houses. They have poor sanitation and people are crowded together, but about 95 percent of the houses are made of brick. In other *favelas* you'll see houses made of everything—plywood, stucco, tin, even cardboard. And here we all have running water and electricity in our homes.

Through the neighborhood association, we've managed to get a lot of services for the community. Here on the right is the health center we built. It includes preventive medicine, pediatrics, prenatal care, and special services for seniors and adolescents. We offer dental assistance with services like filling cavities, making crowns and false teeth, and applying fluoride.

This building next to the clinic is our elementary school. We fought hard to get this school in our community, because it makes it so much easier for the children to attend school. And over there, that building under construction, that's going to be our daycare center. Unfortunately, we've had to stop work on it because we don't have enough money to finish it. The daycare center is my pet project—it's my baby. I've been dreaming of having a daycare center here for years. We received some donations from churches to start it, but we still need more money. My idea is to use the profits from this book to fund the rest of it. It will be so wonderful to have a decent place for the little ones to play—something I never had as a child.

If you look up there to the top of the hill, you'll see our water tank. We all helped build that tank, carrying the stones and cement up the hill on our heads—men, women, children, everyone. Most of what we've done here has been thanks to our own labor. The government did almost nothing, and when it did get involved it was mainly to fight with us. In 1968 we asked the government for help in shoring up the slopes of the hill, but we had to wait until 1995—27 years—for them to start!

We're proud that we did everything ourselves, but today we're starting to question whether that's the way it should be. We're aware that our government has the duty to use our taxes to improve our community. No one asks the people who live along the plush Vieira Souto to go out on Saturdays and Sundays and join work brigades! Now we have an agreement with the state to pay the people who work in the clinic and the school, but before they were all volunteers and the community had to pay for all the materials. We still do all kinds of fund-raisers to fund our projects—parties, cultural events and sending proposals abroad. We've had some help from Canada and from some local churches. But most of this should be the government's responsibility.

You see that small store front over there? That's the *broxa*, where they sell a little bit of this, a little bit of that. Notice the young girl helping her mother mind the store. She's only about seven years old. It's very common in the *favelas* to see children working. The children help their parents with the household chores, and they also help earn money. Nowadays most of them also go to school, so they have little time to play. I know they have to help their parents make money but it would be so much nicer if they could just go to school and play. They have almost no childhood because they have to take on so many responsibilities.

Poor Brazilians begin working at a very early age. That's why we're trying to change the law so that people can retire after a certain number of years of service instead of at a certain age.

Over there are the garbage bins. They're collected once a week, but as you can see, they're already overflowing. There aren't enough bins and the garbage isn't collected often enough. People are also not very conscious about sanitation; some people throw their garbage right in the street or in back of their houses. We're trying to educate the community more about sanitation and also to implement a recycling program, but it's a slow process.

One thing that people in the *favela* are really conscious about is preserving the trees and plants. We try to keep as much of the greenery as we can. When we build our houses, we build around the trees. Look at all this beautiful greenery—we have wonderful fruit trees, like mango and *jaca*. It gives the community a rural flavor, even though we're in the middle of the city.

I used to climb these trees when I was a child. We'd tie ropes from one to another to make our own swings, and we'd play hopscotch here in the street. That's because when we tried to play in the public squares people would chase us away. "Only children can play here," they'd say. Poor children weren't even considered children; they only wanted children accompanied by their nannies.

Over here is the meeting place for the neighborhood committee. It looks like just another house, but it's really our community center. Unfortunately, I don't go to community meetings very often anymore. My friends expect me to go but I just don't have the time. They come to me when there are problems, though, and I try to help out. Right now there's a problem with the water that I'm trying to get fixed. I also participate in cultural events, like organizing a carnival group to commemorate the abolition of slavery.

We have lots of cultural events in the community center. Right now there's a theater group in there practicing a play. It's important to do cultural work with the young people because through art they can explore their creativity and their leadership abilities. It's an opportunity for them to participate in a project they can be proud of. That's why we promote theater groups and samba groups.

That guy I just said hello to, he's a wonderful musician and he's involved with one of the *escolas de samba*, the big samba groups. We were just commenting on how sad it is that carnival has become so commercial and has lost its roots. Carnival really started to change for the worse when the middle class got involved. First of all, it became intellectualized. Today the samba groups are not judged by the community itself but by a commission that uses academic standards to analyze the rhythm and the rhyme.

Another change is that they are now so extravagant and commercialized. The *sambista* that dances in the front with the *bateria*, the drummers, is not necessarily the best dancer but the one who is young and beautiful and has the prettiest legs. Groups like Império Serrano that have maintained their traditions have suffered—they don't win awards because they don't fit into the new criteria. The most popular samba group in Rio today is called Mangueira, but my favorite is Salgueiro, which is one of the more traditional groups.

It's just like in soccer—the most popular team is Flamengo, but I like Botafogo better. What can I say? I've always liked them because they're a team that recruits poor, black players. So many kids in the *favelas* dream of being soccer players, but they don't have many opportunities because the soccer schools are for middle class kids who can afford them. But Botafogo is trying to change this. It doesn't have big name players on the team, but it has a lot of soul.

I'm such a Botafogo fan that it has been really nerve-racking for me to watch these last few games. It was the first time in 20 years that Botafogo had a chance to win the national championship, and the suspense was too much for me. When the final game between Botafogo from Rio and Santos from São Paulo took place last week, I was flying between Brasília and Rio. I purposely took that flight so I wouldn't have to watch the game and suffer through it. I even took a Walkman with me to listen to music and distract myself. I didn't want to hear the score until it was over. But halfway

through the game, the pilot got on the loudspeaker and announced that Botafogo was winning 1 to 0.

I was thrilled, but soon after he announced that the score was tied and that was too much for me. I couldn't stand it. I called the flight attendant to see if he could ask the pilot to stop talking about the game until we landed. When we got to Rio, the streets were already full of people celebrating because Botafogo had won. I went home and watched a tape of the game on television and the next day I went to the Botafogo headquarters to celebrate with them. Everyone was dancing and singing and cheering—we had such a fabulous time. After all, we'd waited 20 years for this!

In our organizing work with youth in the *favela*, sports are very important. These kids don't have money to join sports clubs and get formal training. Here in Chapéu Mangueira, the neighborhood association uses sports and cultural activities to help the kids develop their creativity. Whether it's a sports team, a theater club or samba group, it's a chance for young people to work together and to develop their self-esteem. It's also a way to keep the kids out of trouble.

I'm in favor of all kinds of cultural expressions. One of the most popular cultural expressions in the *favela* today is funk music. Down in the square at the entrance to the *favela*, just below my house, the kids have had funk dances every Friday night with DJs playing loud music. The dances used to last until four or five in the morning until the neighbors started to complain, so now they end earlier.

Funk music and dance is exploding in the *favelas*, and it's not just attracting poor kids, but middle class kids as well. I'd say that 80 percent of the youth at the dances are middle class kids slumming it in the *favelas*. You see them come here in their cars or fancy motorcycles. Some people think that funk is associated with delinquency and encourage the police to ban funk dances. A lot of the better-off parents don't like their kids going to the *favelas*. I remem-

ber a letter a mother wrote to the newspaper complaining that thanks to funk, "my children now think that poverty is beautiful and that the *favelas* are wonderful places." But I think it's really healthy to bring the youth of different classes together.

The more we understand each other's realities, the better. When outsiders come to the *favela* and meet people here, they realize that most of us are hard-working people who, if given a chance, could do a lot to improve our community. You see that guy over there building another room on top of his house? People here have the skills to build good houses, they just don't have the financial means. We're the ones who build the houses where the rich live, so we know how to do it. When houses in the *favela* collapse it's not because they're poorly built but because they're made out of cheap material.

My first house was a small one-room shack. The roof was made out of old tin cans, and the walls were made from wooden boxes. The second was more sophisticated—it was made of old pieces of wood left over from construction sites. When it leaked, we'd fill the holes with rags. The third house was made of wood and bamboo that we covered with clay and then whitewashed. Today I have a house made out of brick.

It took me 15 years to build the house I live in today. I designed it myself and I'm very proud of how beautiful it is. Everyone in the family worked on it—men, women, and children. Some say it's a bourgeois house because it has three bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen, a bathroom and a verandah. If that's what they call bourgeois, then I wish everyone could have a bourgeois house.

Providing decent housing should be a national priority, but instead the government is cutting public investment for urban projects and low-income housing. So people have no alternative but to continue to stream into the *favelas*, and build shacks on the banks of rivers and dangerous hillsides.

From the time the *favelas* first appeared, we've had to rely on our

own organizing efforts to get anything done. I started working in our community organization here in Chapéu Mangueira from the time I was a teenager. I worked with a group of women to teach other women and children in the neighborhood how to read and write. I wasn't trained as a teacher and we didn't have a formal school for giving classes. We started out using a space in the church, then we used a room in the health clinic. It wasn't until years later that we managed to build our own elementary school.

While this literacy work was useful, many of us felt the need to create an organization that would work to improve the basic living conditions in the *favela*. With the support of the Catholic Church, we started organizing committees to work on issues like housing, electricity, health and education. For example, tuberculosis was a very serious health problem and, with the help of a Dominican nun named René, we started a health campaign that virtually eradicated tuberculosis.

The government never helped us; in fact, it considered the *favelas* illegal communities and felt threatened by our organizing work. Families would move into the *favelas* during the night and quickly put up their shacks, and during the day the police would come and tear them down. When we tried to get a sewage system put in, they refused to extend the pipes to our community. Can you imagine that? They didn't even want the feces of the rich to be contaminated by the feces of the poor!

In the 1950s, these neighborhood committees were cropping up all over the *favelas* to push for our basic rights. The government decided that the best way to try to control these groups would be to take them over. So they created government-run neighborhood associations in the *favelas* where they dictated the rules and regulated what the government was trying to do, and we resisted. We took back the associations and put them under popular control, and then we created the Federation of *Favelas* to group all the asso-

ciations together. This way we were able to gain more power to pressure the government to meet our demands.

In 1958, when I was 16, I became the secretary of the neighborhood association of Chapéu Mangueira because I was one of the few people in the community who knew how to read and write. As the secretary, I mainly did small administrative tasks and things like serving coffee to the leaders. Later I worked on the committee that was trying to get electricity into the community, and then on the committee in charge of building the water tank. I also helped Sister René in the health clinic and literacy program.

My husband Mansinho would tell me that my community work was dangerous and that I could get arrested because the government would think I was a communist. But he didn't stop me from participating, and I tried to get him more involved by having some of the meetings at our house so he would get to know the people I worked with. He was jealous of my male friends, but I knew how to handle him.

While the government considered the organizers communists, the truth is that the Communist Party didn't have much influence in the *favelas*. Their strength was in the union movement and they didn't see improving the living conditions in the *favelas* as their priority. Even so, the government saw the *favelas* as a hotbed of subversives, and when the military coup took place in 1964, they unleashed a massive wave of repression against us. Many *favelas* were physically destroyed. The military would come in and raze whole neighborhoods. Then they'd move the people to remote areas that were far from where they worked. It was difficult for children to get to their schools. Women who did laundry for a living lost their jobs because there was no room to wash clothes in the new neighborhoods. Men would often start second families because they were unable to return home after work every day.

Those who managed to remain in the *favelas* were targets of repression. The army invaded our neighborhoods and destroyed our

shacks using any pretext they could find—a fight in the family, an illegal addition on a house, things like that. If our roofs were falling apart we weren't allowed to fix them. They wanted our houses to collapse so we'd abandon them and move away. We weren't allowed to expand our houses or build new houses. So the *favelas* began to grow vertically as a way to get around the restrictions.

People didn't get married because they weren't allowed to build new houses. That's when we started to see more pregnant girls, more prostitution, and a general breakdown in social relations. It was a difficult period, not only economically but from an ethical and moral standpoint as well.

The repression touched every part of our lives. We didn't have the same visibility as the intellectuals or middle class activists who went abroad into exile. We were exiled in our own country. We weren't allowed to sing our religious hymns or celebrate our festivals. We dug holes in our houses to hide our books and notepads. We couldn't keep minutes of our meetings because it was considered subversive to demand better living conditions like electricity, plumbing or paved roads.

Some community organizers had to leave home and go into hiding. Many people were arrested, including my second husband Bola. He was coming out of a meeting one night when the police came and rounded everyone up. Luckily, they didn't find any evidence against Bola because we managed to hide his notes and books. Eventually they let him go.

Because I was a woman, I was never arrested or put in jail. But the officials in charge of controlling the community knew that I was one of the leaders of the neighborhood association, and they tried to make my life miserable. They would spread lies about me to discredit me and create divisions among us.

They also tried to use our own children to spy on us. Children who gave messages and information to the military were called *aviõesinhos*, or little airplanes. The army would come up to the

favelas and ask the children where the meetings were taking place, who attended them, what they discussed or where the people they were looking for were hiding. The children often heard their parents talk about something and would innocently pass the information on. Many of their mothers did the laundry for those in power or for the soldiers, and it was the children who would collect the laundry and deliver it. So when they went to their houses to pick up the wash, they'd be interrogated. I know this for a fact because my own children and my neighbors' children were used that way.

In later years, during the 1980s, the children went on to be used by organized crime, which became more sophisticated during the dictatorship. And today the children of the poor are used as informers for the drug traffickers.

There were not many avenues open for us to organize during the dictatorship, but I started to work with the Catholic Church and with the underground left parties that organized in the *favelas* through literacy programs. We began a literacy campaign here in Chapéu Mangueira and used methods developed by the great educator Paulo Freire, which not only taught people to read, but raised their consciousness at the same time. It was a highly revolutionary way of teaching compared to the official teaching methods, which were very traditional. Brazilian education assumed that there were no inequalities in our society, that there was no class or ethnic consciousness.

Our method for teaching people to read and write was based on relating everything to their everyday lives. For example, instead of using a standard teaching phrase like "o Ivo vê a uva," Ivan sees the grape, we'd say "o Ivo vê a vala," Ivan sees the ditch. Or take the standard phrase "o gato bebeu o leite do prato," the cat drank milk from the plate. We couldn't use that because in the *favela* people didn't have cats as pets—we ate them. Cat was the poor man's meat. It was a feast when you could kill a nice, fat cat.

So instead we used phrases like "o morro não tem água," the

neighborhood doesn't have water—because back then it didn't. That's what our lessons were like and this was our subtle way of doing political work during the dictatorship.

One of the positive changes that happened during the dictatorship was that the women's movement in the *favelas* gained strength. Before the coup, women played a backstage role within the neighborhood associations. We would usually do the administrative work, make the food for the parties, and work on health and education. But when it came to decision-making, the men were in charge.

During the years of military rule, women were forced to take over many of their roles since the men in the *favelas* who were community organizers were persecuted. Many women leaders, myself included, emerged during this period. I became so active that in 1978 the women put me forward as a candidate for president of our association, and I won. It was a first for Chapéu Mangueira.

Since the dictatorship we've accomplished a lot through our organizing work here in the *favela*. But now we have another terrible problem to contend with—the invasion of drugs in our community. There were no drugs in the *favelas* when I was growing up. Now everything has changed. There are some *favelas* that are completely controlled by the drug dealers.

It's very painful for me to see the influence of drugs right here in my own community. The majority of these young people involved in drugs are sons of my friends and colleagues of my children. I try to work with them—both politically and spiritually—whenever I can. I try to get scholarships for them to study because you can't go to them empty-handed. You have to offer some other prospect that might be attractive to them. If they don't have jobs or schools to go to, if there's no alternative, they'll always go back to drugs and crime. But I know that deep down, they really don't want to be involved in drugs. I've never heard a boy say, "When I grow up, I want to be a big drug dealer."

We don't have many drug addicts because people in the *favelas* are too poor to be big consumers of drugs. The consumers come mainly from the better-off neighborhoods to buy their drugs in the *favelas*. And the drug dealers in the *favelas* usually don't commit crimes against their neighbors. They have their own code, their own rules that say they shouldn't bother their neighbors so as not to attract the police. In fact, the people in the *favelas* are usually more afraid of the police than the drug dealers. The police are suspicious of everyone because they think the neighbors are covering up for the drug dealers.

The worst thing about the drugs is the clashes it brings between the dealers and the police. Many innocent people in Chapéu Mangueira have died in these conflicts. In 1990 there was a horrible massacre right in front of my house. One afternoon I heard my neighbor, Maria Helena, screaming, and I ran outside to see what happened. Her 22-year-old son Aginaldo had been shot as he was walking up the steps to the *favela*. Aginaldo was such a nice boy, he was in the Navy and had nothing to do with drugs; he was just an innocent bystander. Maria Helena ran to help him, and then she, too, was gunned down. So was Danião, a young 19-year-old boy who sold flowers in the market. All three of them died.

The killers belonged to a hit squad made up of members of the police force. It seems they had come to find a boy who knew that the police were getting kickbacks from the drug dealers. They came in plain clothes, in an unmarked car, shooting wildly. They call this "*queima de arquivo*," burn the archive, because the boy they were looking for was a police informer.

I didn't know who they were and I ran to the police station for help, but no one was there. Two hours later, more than 10 police cars showed up and when they got near the scene of the massacre one of the drug dealers yelled, "Benedita, the one who did this is a cop called 'Thirty Dollars.'" I felt like *o cavalo do bandido*—a horse's ass. I had called the police for help and then I realized that it was the

police themselves who'd been responsible for the killing. I thought it was my duty to call the police, but I learned a bitter lesson. That was the last time I ever asked the police to come into the *favela*.

In some *favelas* the drug dealers get community support because they perform a lot of services that should be performed by the government. They pay for schools, burials, birthday parties, baptisms, Christmas celebrations. They play the role of the state and godfather wrapped in one. That's why there's a certain idealization of the anti-hero of the *favela* who uses drug money to provide assistance to the community.

Chapéu Mangueira is one of the places that has most resisted the influence of the traffickers. Our neighborhood association refuses to accept drug money. When the dealers offer to help with one thing or another, the neighbors say, "We don't need your help. Benedita will take care of it for us." That's why I go crazy when I can't solve a problem in the neighborhood. In other *favelas* where there's not a strong community organization, it becomes very easy for the dealers to take hold.

The drugs and violence have turned Rio into an urban prison. I'm not just talking about the *favelas*, but the rich parts of town as well. Security systems, condominiums with guards, remote control gates, attack dogs, and bodyguards have become indispensable for the "tranquility" of the rich. Even their children grow up with tremendous paranoia—locked in, surrounded by guards, afraid of being kidnapped.

The rich blame the *favelas* for the climate of violence. They talk about the need to remove the *favelas* that are too close to the nice parts of town. But here in the *favelas* the people realize that the drug dealers and criminals in the neighborhood are a small slice of a big business that moves millions of dollars. We know that these dealers and thieves are the "small fries"—they don't have economic power or political clout. The true sharks, the bosses, don't live in the *favelas*. They're the ones who profit the most but take

the least risks. The big guys take advantage of the misery in the *favela* to make their profits. Crime and delinquency don't come down from the *favela* to contaminate the rest of the city. On the contrary, they come from the rich parts of town and make their way up to the *favela*. The *favela* is violated, invaded, used.

Putting an end to urban violence means seeking out the big-time criminals wherever they are, and cutting off their ties with the *favelas*. Putting an end to urban violence means putting an end to the speculation and greed of those who control the profits. Putting an end to violence means giving people in the countryside a piece of land so that they have a way to feed themselves. It means adequate schools so that everyone can get a decent education. It means generating jobs with livable wages.

It's clear that there are no magical solutions to the problems in the *favelas*. But there is a fundamental principle that must be respected: The people must be allowed to remain in their communities. The solution is not to move them elsewhere but to improve living conditions in the *favelas*.

First of all, people must be given title to the land so they can have more security. There must be infrastructure projects that use the work force that is so plentiful in the *favelas*. Families who now live in dangerous places—on the slopes or the banks of rivers—must be relocated. The *favelas* must have their own schools, health clinics, cultural centers, and training programs that can give young people the skills they need to find jobs.

Today there are some 35 million slum dwellers in Brazil. With just three percent of the GNP, all the *favelas* of Brazil could be urbanized in five years, giving them schools, daycare centers, clinics, paved roads, brick houses, electricity, water and sewage systems. But the only way we're going to get the government to listen to us and to devote funds to the *favelas* is through organizing. Only organized communities can successfully make demands and influence government decisions. If they are not organized, they remain

totally isolated and marginalized. Those of us who live in the *favelas* must strengthen our neighborhood associations, our political parties that are fighting on behalf of the poor, our unions, our religious organizations, or any other grouping that can stand up for our rights. That's the only way to have political clout.

I'm an example of a grassroots leader who was born out of organizing in the *favelas*. After I was first elected to the City Council in 1982, my comrades were so proud! They had seen me going up and down the road to the *favela* endless times, lugging bags of laundry for my mother to wash or balancing buckets of water on my head.

After the election, I went to the market in my slippers one day and when I got back home my neighbors in the association said, "Can we ask you something? Please don't go out again in your slippers. Remember, you're a councilwoman now." The truth is that people who live in the *favelas* don't like to look or dress like poor people. The artist Joãozinho Trinta says that the only ones who like poverty are intellectuals, and he's right.

My neighbors convinced me to buy a car because they didn't want me to keep walking up to the *favela* on foot. They'll soon be telling me that I should buy a house in a nice neighborhood and leave the *favela*. Some people are already saying that it's dangerous for me to stay, that there's no security here.

But I love my house and so far, even Pitanga hasn't convinced me to leave. He tells me, "I married you, my love, to take you away from the *favela* and instead you brought me here." Pitanga is from the middle class, but he came to live with me in the *favela* out of love. I'm sure that I'll leave one day, but I still have a hard time getting used to the idea. I still have to be close to my community, fighting to make more improvements. My son, my sisters, my nephews—they're all here. My whole family lives in the *favela*, the only one who left is my daughter, but that was just recently. I'm not in a hurry to leave here.