

## RISING FROM RUBBISH

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On the last day of the Nuffield Contemporary Scholars Conference in Brasilia, Brazil, we met an unassuming character called Fernando. He lives in a community of several thousand people on the outskirts of Brasilia. We were told not to stray during our visit – it was too dangerous. Yet here, in this roughest and poorest of places is a man changing lives and providing hope - literally from piles of rubbish.

The rubbish – maybe it's wooden off-cuts or wooden scaffolding from building sites that construction companies just want to get rid of; even old packing crates. In an old shed come workshop, this wood takes on a new lease of life – it is turned into something with purpose. Perhaps a simple chair or table or posts used for hanging banners.

But this story is not only one of turning rubbish into a resource. It is about rebuilding the lives.

The cooperative, created by Fernando and aptly named Cooperativa Sonho de Liberdade – Dreams of Freedom is about providing jobs to people that no one else wants to employ. Some like Fernando – have spent time in jail – others are just from the wrong side of the tracks.

“Now I am going really well,” Fernando says. “I have been on the wrong side of life before. Now thanks to God I have an opportunity to help this community, as a citizen. I was sent to prison for 19 years but got out after six for good behaviour. When I got out I said I am going to change my story and I was determined to create good will for other people and retell my story. I looked at the resources around me to create opportunity. This area where we live is a big rubbish tip so all the rubbish from Brasilia gets dumped here and this is what we had to work with. Looking at what was around we said we have got the chance to do good for people and good for the environment and so we are going to recycle waste and recycle lives.”

One of the first products they made was wooden posts used by promotion companies for securing banners. Fernando also tells us about a project they had supplying wood to Bunge to dry grain. He said this provided a good income for the cooperative so they were able to employ a lot of people. But that Bunge no longer needs this wood so they are not currently able to employ as many people until they find new projects. We are always looking for new projects and trying to find new things that people need, he says.

Fernando explains that most of the workers are serving time in jail and are towards the end of their sentence. They sleep in jail but are able to work at the cooperative Monday to Friday and get to spend time with their families on the weekends.

“The challenge society has is the people in corporate or big businesses are not sure about people who come out of prison so they don't want to employ people with this darker past. For us we are the opposite we want to engage with people who have a need rather than people with the beautiful resume,” he says. “Rehabilitation is important to society but it is something society often engages with unsuccessfully and at the end of the day it is a simple thing is to give a chance; to give an opportunity to people. When you invite someone in and give them a piece of wood and say pull this apart it is quite a simple action but it gives them a place to get a start. These are humble products but this is what creates a pathway for people.”

Meeting Fernando, seeing how he has transformed his life and how he is helping to “recycle” the lives of others is a heartening reminder that anything is possible and that one person can make the world a better place.

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