



Spring 2007

"To each there comes in their lifetime a special moment when they are figuratively tapped on the shoulder and offered the chance to do a very special thing, unique to them and fitted to their talents. What a tragedy if that moment finds them unprepared or unqualified for what could have been their finest hour." Winston Churchill

To the many who have cared:

From time to time throughout our lives, we find ourselves in situations that call on us to intervene, and to varying degrees, have an impact on that situation. Many such happenings are rather ordinary if truth be told, common occurrences which play themselves out on life's stage on a daily basis. The players may come and go but the script remains largely the same. And although the setting could be found in every city and any town, there are usually just enough particulars which emerge from the unfolding of the story to make it personal, giving us the right to call it our own.

Then there are the rarer moments which clearly and cleanly stand apart from the more ordinary events which mostly lay claim to our lives. These are the moments when we are given the chance to do something undeniably extraordinary, as perhaps only we can, given the time and place and circumstance which brought that moment into focus. They command us to sit up and pay attention even as they unfold. These are the moments that we have been prepared for and have been preparing for throughout our lives. Such are the moments that will come to define who we are and what we stood for.

Many of us will experience only one such moment during the course of a lifetime. But there are some who will be given more than one opportunity to contribute in a significant way. Of late, I have come to believe that I may be among that fortunate few.

My first opportunity to do a very special thing came to me via the publishing of *Giovanni's Story*, the Boston Globe article which compelled me to dedicate my life to the cause of homeless children and young adults. This letter serves to tell about the second time God or fate tapped me on the shoulder. It tells the story of Marvin and Bryan.

Marvin first came to Only A Child looking for help in March of 2003. He had lived in the street since he was nine, perhaps ten years old. For all practical purposes, Marvin was an orphan. His mother abandoned both his older sister and him when he was seven years old. He has not heard from her since. Marvin's father responded to his wife's desertion by seeking to console himself with a bottle. Not two years after his wife's departure, he drank himself to death.

Marvin and his sister were separated after their father died. His sister went to stay with a friend of the family. Marvin was taken to live with his grandmother. To this day Marvin does not know what became of his sister. Marvin has told me that he was happy living with his grandmother, but that arrangement was short lived. Marvin's grandmother died within a year of his moving into her home. There was no other family available to Marvin, at least no family that wanted to take care of him. With nowhere else to go, Marvin turned to the street.

Back in the mid-nineties when Only A Child was just beginning, it functioned as an outreach program. We worked exclusively in the street, going out and spending time in areas that children like Marvin called home. I knew Marvin, but not well. He was part of a large group and was rather quiet, not comfortable calling attention to himself. He preferred to remain largely unnoticed, content to be one of the crowd.

Therefore my memories of Marvin from that time are few and vague.

Much time has passed since our early days in Guatemala and many things have changed. Only A Child has grown and so has Marvin. The quiet and reserved boy that I remember from the street has become a confident young man who is sure of himself in most situations, quick to join in conversation, often opinionated, occasionally outspoken. We have had numerous opportunities to speak personally during the past few years. Marvin and I have come to know each other quite well.

Perhaps the biggest change in Marvin's life since then is that he has become a dad. He is father to a five-year old son, Bryan. Like Marvin, Bryan's mother, Aura, grew up without family. Aura has had no contact with her parents for some time. According to Marvin, during the several years when they lived together as a couple in the street, Aura said little of her parents. It seemed her only desire was to forget them, to pretend that they did not exist.

During her months of pregnancy, Aura lived in a shelter for street girls and homeless young women. The shelter's name is El Uno, or The One. There she spent the time leading up to Bryan's birth trying to beat her drug dependency while preparing to become a mother. After Bryan was born, both mother and child lived in El Uno, safe, contented and well cared for. But for reasons that remain unclear, Aura suddenly left the shelter to return to the street when Bryan was not quite two years old.

By that time Marvin had been with Only A Child for six months. He had often confided in me how much he wanted to be a good father to his son. As such he has always been involved in Bryan's life, spending time with him on weekends, using the salary he earned in our carpentry shop to help provide for Bryan's needs. Perhaps this is so because Marvin understands all too well what it means to be abandoned at a young age.

After Aura's departure, Bryan continued to live in El Uno. Aura would come and go, entering El Uno from time to time, staying briefly only to return to the street. Then this past April, Aura returned to El Uno where she remained for a short stay. This time, however, when she returned to the street she took Bryan with her.

I was with Marvin when he learned what had happened. He was devastated by the news. Desperate with worry, he turned to me for guidance. I knew that there was only one thing for us to do. We went out in search of Aura and Bryan. Oftentimes street kids are territorial, settling into a certain area, coming to think of it as home. We quickly found them in Guatemala City's Central Park in the company of a large group of other street kids. Aura was heavily drugged and half-heartedly talking with some of the others. Bryan stood nearby his mother, but not quite next to her. He was just far enough away to leave him looking somehow alone, unmistakably frightened, unsure of where he was or why he was there. Bryan was stunned and the site of him so was more than I could bear.

Marvin and I spoke with Aura and asked her to let us take Bryan home to Only A Child. She quickly consented, but that is not to say that it was an easy decision for her. I have not forgotten the pain in her eyes as she said goodbye to her son. And although she clearly knew that she was doing what was best for Bryan, she also understood that as his mother she was not capable of caring for him as he needed or as she should. I imagine that facing that truth must have been difficult for her. My heart went out to her then and still does today.

We promptly bought Bryan lunch concerned that he had not eaten well during the two days that he had been without a home. Our concern had been well founded judging from how he had devoured his food. Marvin and I spent the next few days getting Bryan settled into his new life at Only A Child. We enrolled him in daycare, shopped for clothes and other necessities as well as a few toys. Lastly we returned to El Uno to make the transition complete. Betty, the founder and director of the shelter, greeted us. She willingly released to us Bryan's personal documents, confiding that she was relieved to know that Bryan was no longer living in the street. Betty encouraged Marvin to take good care of his son, and then made a request before wishing us well. She admitted that for his age, Bryan was well behind in his ability to communicate.

He seldom spoke, and even when he did, he had very little to say. Betty asked that we find a therapist to help Bryan better develop his ability to speak. Her concern for Bryan was genuine and touched me. I assured Betty that we would.

Bryan has lived with us for nearly a year now. Marvin has proven to be an attentive and dedicated father. His son is well cared for. Marvin makes sure that he lacks for nothing. Bryan is always well scrubbed and well groomed. He is also impeccably dressed for most any occasion. Marvin takes his responsibility as a father seriously, to the point where, on most evenings, he can be found at the shelter's *pila*, a concrete scrub sink, meticulously washing Bryan's clothes by hand.

As for Bryan, he is a happy and energetic little boy. He loves to play. He was born to play. He is sharp and funny and immensely lovable. Ultimately, it was not necessary to find a speech therapist for Bryan. His inability to express himself soon vanished after he came to stay with us. Today he chats contentedly about any little thing. Asking questions has become a favorite pastime of his with 'Why?' being his current question of choice.

By now you may be wondering what all this has to do with yours truly, why Bryan's coming to Only A Child has left me feeling that I have been tapped on the shoulder. I mentioned earlier that outside of Only A Child, Marvin has no family to depend on. This has come to concern me as I have worried about what would become of Bryan should something happen to Marvin. What would probably happen is that he would be placed in an orphanage. The thought of such an outcome ultimately came to haunt me.

I could not bear to even consider such a fate for Bryan, and therefore, recently approached Marvin. I shared my concern with him and suggested that we create and sign a legal document stating that if for whatever reason Marvin was unable to care for Bryan, I would be given the right to do so. I would become Bryan's legal guardian. Marvin confessed that he had entertained similar concerns and had also considered much the same solution. As he confided with some relief, he knows that under my care Bryan would lack for nothing.

Only A Child's lawyer quickly prepared the document. Last week Marvin and I signed it in his presence. It was submitted to the appropriate government agency for approval, and just three days ago I received word that it had been accepted and registered as an official legal document. The decision to be responsible for Bryan's well being was perhaps the most important one of my life. Yet as important as the decision was, it was not a difficult one. There was never any doubt as to what I needed to do for this was clearly also what I wanted to do. As Marvin readily states Bryan has not one, but rather two fathers. And so it is. God has filled my heart with an amazing love for this little boy. I could not love him any more if he were my own flesh and blood. I've never experienced anything quite like it. At nearly fifty years old, I have come to know the joy of caring for a small child. As I have not had children of my own, I had come to believe that I would never know such joy, would never be loved as only a child can love. Needless to say, Bryan's arrival into my life has been a wonderful and welcome surprise. I feel utterly blessed. I give thanks for him daily in my prayers.

I still occasionally wonder what might have become of Marvin and Bryan if Only A Child had not been there for them in their time of need. But I do not dwell on such things. I can't, for just the thought of what might have been is too painful for me to consider. But thanks to Only A Child, what might have been never came to be. As always, thanks for continuing to be there for us, so that we can continue to be there not only for Marvin and Bryan, but for all of our other youngsters as well. It remains a genuine pleasure to walk and work with you. God bless.

Sincerely,
George

