

Summer 2009

To the many who have cared,

It remains necessary that I return to the U.S. from time to time, to fulfill my duties as Only A Child's Executive Director, good will ambassador and chief fundraiser. Although my visits are brief, it can be a difficult separation for our youngsters, especially the ones who are new to the program. Understanding their need to be reassured that I haven't forgotten them, I call our shelter once a week and speak with each of our youngsters. Thanks to the availability of international calling cards, these calls are now affordable.

It is not unusual to find that a youngster has been awaiting my call; eager to talk about something that has happened in my absence. Such was the case this past March, the last time I returned stateside. The youngster's name was Manolo, and the situation that had caused him grief was still troubling him the night I called the shelter. To better explain the source of Manolo's grief, it is necessary to briefly revisit his childhood.

Manolo's family life offered little security or happiness when he was growing up. He had three siblings, all of whom shared the same mother, but different fathers. To this day, Manolo doesn't know if the man who was sporadically involved in his upbringing is his father or stepfather, his doubt the result of inconsistent reports from each parent. Either way, Manolo's paternal parent left the family when he was a small boy, leaving Manolo's mother to raise him and a younger sister without support. Manolo also has older brother and sister whom he did not know, as they lived outside the home.

Manolo's mother proved to be a less than ideal parent, providing a home in which he was belittled, threatened, beaten and one time severely burned when his mother *accidentally* spilled a pot of boiling *atol* - a thick porridelike beverage - on him, leaving Manolo with a large and disfiguring scar on his chest. Manolo was alternately left alone at home with his younger sister behind locked doors, then dropped off at homes for abandoned and orphaned children. There he would remain for months at a time until his mother returned for him, promising that things would change. But such promises were empty and at the age of thirteen, Manolo decided he had had enough and left for the street.

Several days before I phoned the shelter, Manolo had met his father by chance, at which time he learned that his older brother had been killed. Details of the circumstances of his death were not given. Despite the fact that Manolo had never met his brother, the news of his death upset him, his grief compounded by the understanding that any hope of ever knowing him

had been lost. That is what Manolo had been eager to share with me, which he did at some length. It is difficult to discuss such things at a distance, and I knew that Manolo needed to meet with me in person, so I mostly listened then assured him that we would talk at length once I was back in Guatemala.

When I returned to Guatemala, Cesar, who runs our shelter was waiting for me at the airport along with Manolo, their job to help me deal with the madness that often greets arriving travelers. Stepping onto the street, I encountered an unusually large and restless crowd, making it difficult to find my two-man welcoming committee. They stood perhaps thirty feet away, Cesar frantically waving his arms trying to catch my attention. Next to him was Manolo, far more subdued, staring at me with pleading eyes that announced, "I need to talk with you? I've been waiting and it hasn't been easy." Upon reaching them, Cesar stepped forward to help me with my bags. Manolo waited for me to come to him, which I did putting my arm around his shoulder while asking him, "How are you?" "*Mas o menos*," he said, or *so so*, literally translated *more or less*. "Yes, I know" I responded, "it's clear from the look on your face." "Is it," he asked insincerely, as he'd done little to hide the fact that he was troubled. It was my impression rather that he had wanted to be sure that I would notice. "Yes," I answered not unsympathetically, "it's obvious."

Sifting through the crowd to find a taxi, I asked Manolo, "So what's going on?" "We ran into my uncle on the way to the airport," he said. "He told me that my aunt died." Manolo's uncle is the brother of his father/stepfather. "Really!" my shock was sincere because I had known Manolo's aunt from many years before. In the early days of Only A Child, I had worked daily with a group of children in a downtown park. Manolo's cousin, Manuel, was one of the children I spent time with. Every so often Manuel's mother would come by to visit with her son. I found her to be warm and genuine, the kind of person who always left you feeling better for having spent time with her. There is a term in Guatemala that is often used to describe a nice person - *buena gente* - or *good folk*. Manolo's mother was *buena gente*. She was good folk. Although I had not seen her for more than ten years, her death saddened me.

"Oh, Manolo, I'm sorry. How is your uncle?" "Not very well," Manolo responded matter of factly. "I'm sure he is hurting." I tried to find words to comfort Manolo, but little came to me. "How long has it been since your aunt died?" "Not long," Manolo responded and left it at that. By then we secured a taxi and we put the conversation on hold, as I felt that Manolo wanted to talk with me in private.

Later that evening we spoke again in the shelter's garage. Our conversation returned to the death of Manolo's brother. Details of what had happened were still lacking, but I did learn that the brother had been raised by another couple in a working class neighborhood not too far away. I asked Manolo if he had ever made the effort to find his brother. He had not, for although he had known the general area where his brother had lived, there was no address as to where his home might be found. This left Manolo to conclude that such a search would ultimately be futile. I also suspected that Manolo had never

looked for him for fear of how his brother might respond if Manolo found him, rejection being the feared and expected response. The ultimate death of Manolo's brother meant that these doubts would linger. Manolo now regretted that he had never looked for his brother in earnest. He wondered if his brother had even known that he had a younger sibling. He also wondered if his brother had ever tried to find him. Now in all likelihood, such questions would continue to haunt Manolo for some time.

Manolo looked to me for answers, but I had none to give him. It is not often that I am at a loss for words, especially when advising our youngsters. I felt that I had let Manolo down; making it difficult for me to discuss an issue that each of us knew was pending.

Manolo had not managed the news of his brother's death very well. After taking leave of his father, Manolo had visited a cantina, or local pub, then wandered the streets of his brother's former neighborhood late into the night. By the time he returned home early the next morning, he was in bad shape and disoriented. Remembering that our shelter functions in part as a detox center, Manolo and I each understood that showing up at the door intoxicated at 1 am was normally unacceptable. But I had had time to consider the situation and concluded that, although I preferred that Manolo would have responded differently, given the circumstances, I felt additional punishment would be harsh. I shared my thoughts with Manolo and to his relief, left it at that. I trusted that Manolo would know that the lack of consequences for his action showed that I understood that he had suffered enough. Even so, I sensed that there was more to come with regard to this conversation.

Several days later, I had the opportunity to spend time alone with Manolo once again. An all-program field trip was pending, the destination a somewhat neglected, but lovely park, not far beyond the city limits. It is a doable day trip, even by public bus. Manolo and I would be taking the 90-minute journey to scout the park to see if it would be a suitable location for our planned day of fun.

It was a short walk from our shelter to the bus stop. As we reached the highway, Manolo raised his arm and pointed just ahead proclaiming, "There's my uncle." All at once I remembered that Manolo's uncle, the one whose wife had recently died, ran a shoeshine stand at the edge of the highway. Manolo had introduced me to him a couple of years earlier when we had been shopping at a nearby market. "Should we take the time to stop and talk with him? Manolo asked. "Yes," I responded with authority, "it would be unkind not to."

We could have easily avoided Manolo's uncle as his greeting, "Hello Uncle," startled him. "How are you?" Manolo continued, but his uncle had been lost in thought and needed a moment to recognize his nephew before managing a weak smile in response. Manolo nodded that he understood. An uncomfortable silence followed. "Do you remember George," he asked trying to move the conversation along? Nothing, no recognition from Manolo's uncle. "He runs the program where I live. I introduced him to you some time

ago." Manolo's uncle seemed at a loss for words, so I tried to help him out. "Manolo told me that you lost your wife recently. I'm sorry. I knew her through your son Manuel. I thought she was a nice person. I was saddened to hear of her death." "Yes," he shook his head in agreement, meaning I believe that his wife was a nice person. Manolo's uncle spoke of the illness that had claimed his wife's life, all the while his eyes focused on the ground. "The most difficult part is going home at night," he concluded, raising his head, his eyes meeting ours for the first time. "The house is quiet. It seems so empty without her. I still haven't gotten used to that. I go home and the house is empty." Manolo's uncle fell silent and he wiped his eyes with the back of his hand permanently stained black, the calling card of those who shine shoes for a living. He brightened a little after that and turned the conversation to other less troubling things until we parted company. Throughout our time together, Manolo and I had said little as it was apparent that more than anything, Manolo's uncle needed someone to talk to.

Several hours later we returned to the same bus stop from which we had departed earlier. Manolo and I found ourselves a short distance from his uncle's shoeshine stand. "Come with me," I instructed Manolo, "I have an idea." It was a typically hot April day in Guatemala City, the mid-afternoon sun unrelenting. As we neared Manolo's uncle, I stopped and bought a soda and handed it to Manolo. "Thank you," Manolo beamed in response. "No, no," I shook my head, "it's not for you." Manolo's smile vanished just as quickly as it appeared. "It's for your uncle." Manolo beamed once again, a look of recognition illuminating his face. A moment later, Manolo handed his uncle the soda, saying nothing more than, "It's for you." The uncle looked at us as if to ask why. "It's a hot day," I responded casually, "we thought you'd like it." "Thank you." Now it was Manolo's uncle's turn to smile, forgetting his grief if only briefly.

Manolo and I continued our walk home quietly, each understanding that the silence between us somehow felt right. There are situations where a simple gesture can say much more than a basketful of the most carefully chosen words. Manolo seemed to be pleased. He seemed to agree. By giving his uncle a soda, I had tried to show Manolo that sometimes language can fail us, times when we cannot find the words to express what we are feeling. But there are other ways in which we can show that we understand. Throughout our recent conversations following the loss of his brother and aunt, I found that there was little that I could say to ease Manolo's pain. And so, I mostly listened, concerned that if I forced such words of consolation, they would come across as insincere. But the fact that I was willing to hear him out for as long as he needed me to listen said that I cared and showed that I would be there for him in time of need. The giving of the soda to his uncle said much the same thing. Manolo got it. I now felt satisfied that I had helped Manolo to deal with his confusion and loss. At last it appeared that our conversation regarding death had finally been productive.

Many years earlier, I had left a comfortable and secure life to pursue a less certain path amid the crime and poverty of Guatemala City. I did so in response to a situation that I found unacceptable - children growing up in the

street, ignored and forgotten, mired in hopelessness and despair. More than words could ever say, the life I have chosen conveys to our youngsters that their well-being matters to me. In the many ways that you, our donors, have supported our work over the years, you have also shown that you care.

As always, thank you and God bless.

Sincerely,

George