

Winter 2009

To the many who have cared,

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me ... I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of my brothers, you did for me.” (Matthew 25: 35,36,40)

Sometimes when you least expect it, you learn that something you did earlier had a greater impact than you ever would have imagined. Acts of kindness often yield such results, especially when they are performed in response to an existing need, without looking to gain anything in return. Many years ago, when Only A Child was still a fledgling organization, I had such an experience.

As many of you know Only A Child’s beginnings were humble. We functioned exclusively as an outreach program, going out into the streets that the children we served called home. Our work focused on a group of 15 or so children and youngsters, living in a small park named Concordia in downtown Guatemala City. Initially the goal was simply to get to know the children, talking with them, listening to their stories, trying to give them something that sadly, was rare in their lives — the time and attention of caring adults. For although most street children run away from homes where neglect and abuse are common, they are often seen as “bad seeds,” responsible for and deserving of their fates. This means that they grow up on the margins of their society, largely forgotten and made to feel that their lives do not matter in any significant way.

Back in the mid-1990’s, youngsters living in the street were routinely picked up for vagrancy in what were known as police sweeps. Once convicted of being homeless, they were usually sentenced to 30 days in prison. It was not unusual for us to lose park youngsters to the sweeps on a fairly regular basis. It often left them badly disheartened; therefore I began making weekly visits to the prison. Given that it was unwise for me to enter the prison alone, I took one or two of the older Concordia youngsters to accompany me. It was their responsibility to serve as my protectors. They preferred to refer to themselves as my bodyguards.

We always brought our youngsters something to eat, as it was widely known that the prison food was barely fit for human consumption. I was uncomfortable with the visits at first and frightened for my safety. With time I became known within the sector where our youngsters were housed and was treated with respect and even affection by the other inmates. Our visits came to be appreciated not only by those we knew, but also by those we came to know through those we had come to see.

Several months into the visits, I arrived to the prison one day to find that morale was unusually low. Christmas was approaching and the thought of spending it in prison was difficult for everyone in the sector. Our youngsters were unusually quiet, their sadness unmistakable. I asked what I might do to help. It is a cherished custom in Guatemala to dine on tamales with family and friends on Christmas Eve. Our youngsters asked if we might bring them tamales on the day of visitation closest to Christmas. The families of those within the prison were afforded such privileges, making a request I could easily fulfill. I consented and the youngsters brightened immediately. But as our time together neared an end, our boys grew serious and asked to speak with me in private. They wanted to know if I could bring tamales for everyone in the sector — 50 in all — as many of them

had no one to come and visit. I agreed to do so, not knowing how we would secure the 50 tamales or how we would deliver them to the prison, which was an hour and a half's journey from the city. Our usual mode of transportation, a public bus, was not a viable option.

But I have found that logistical problems can easily be resolved when one sets one's mind to undertake and complete a task. Sure enough, a friend named Clara not only offered to make all 50 tamales, but also convinced her husband Luis to provide us with transportation in his battered, but usually reliable pick up. The addition of the pick up gave an air of added importance to our mission, and as we departed Concordia with the tamales, we were sent on our way to the cheers and well wishes of the park's youngest residents. My two companions/bodyguards and I sat in the back of the pick up, huddled for warmth around a large steaming pot of *ponche* — a hot, sweet beverage filled with small pieces of fruit. It was the 22nd of December not yet Christmas Eve, but the spirit of Christmas had taken hold of us, and the journey to Pavoncito, the prison we were visiting was a joyous one, filled with laughter and happy chatter. We basked in the glow of knowing that we were doing something worthwhile.

The entire sector had been awaiting our arrival and greeted us as if we were visiting royalty. The atmosphere was decidedly festive. It was our time to celebrate together, and everyone was determined to make the most of it, relishing their tamales, savoring as well the still hot ponche that accompanied them.

After partaking of the holiday meal, we spent the afternoon together sharing memories of Christmases past, pulled from better days. Even so, the mood remained upbeat and genuine feelings of good will filled the sector. Listening to the others speak, I became aware that something wonderful was happening. It seemed as if a kind of grace had settled over everyone present. Feeling at peace, I thought to myself, this really captures the spirit of Christmas. The caring and warmth present here today, these are the true gifts of the Christmas season. It was with a touch of sadness that we said goodbye. Expressions of gratitude were offered and continued uninterrupted until we parted company. If I have ever been given a more sincere thank you, I don't remember it.

Several months later, I was walking the streets of Guatemala City in search of a new soccer ball for our kids. The one we had been using had given out the day before after serving us nobly for some time. My search had taken me to the outskirts of the downtown area into a neighborhood considered to be somewhat dangerous. As I emerged from passing under a bridge where assaults were common, I noticed that a young man who had been walking along the far side of the street had stopped and begun to eye me with cautious interest. His appearance showed signs of neglect, adding to my uneasiness. I assumed the worst when he crossed the street and approached me. Preparing to defend myself, I felt my back arch as my hands balled into fists at my side. I narrowed my eyes as he drew near, staring him down with a look that suggested that he had better think twice if he intended to do me harm. I took a deep breath and waited for him to make a move.

"Estas Jorge?," he asked. Are you George? I immediately relaxed, surprised that the young man knew me. "Yes," I responded. He continued, "Are you the George who brought us tamales at Pavoncito last Christmas?" "Yes, I am," I felt myself smile as I struggled to adjust to the situation's sudden and unexpected turn. "You remember our visit?"

"Of course I do. It meant so much to everyone. We talked about it for days. Many of us had no one come and spend time with us. It is not easy to be alone at Christmas, especially in prison. But you gave us our Christmas, and the thought of it helped get us through the difficult moments. Perhaps you don't remember me, but that's ok. There were many of us, I know. But I haven't forgotten you."

I didn't know what to say and shook my head in amazement, marveling that our paths had crossed. The young man continued, "I'm glad I got to thank you. I wasn't sure if I should bother you, but ever since you brought us the tamales, I've wanted to say thank you."

I had to say something, lest he should think that I didn't want to talk with him, but words still did not come easily. "I had no idea it meant that much to you and the others. Thanks for letting me know. I'm so glad you came over to me. I'll remember this for a long time. I won't forget what you've told me."

And I haven't. Every year as Christmas draws near, I never fail to recall our Christmas dinner at Pavoncito. I also wonder what became of the young man who took the time to let me know how much our visit mattered. The thought of our gathering inside a Guatemalan prison always fills me with joy. To this day, it remains a favorite Christmas memory of a shining moment in the history of Only A Child.

It was in December of 1999 that I first began to write and send these letters, which means that the one you have just read marks their 10th anniversary. Many of you have told me how much you enjoy reading the letters. I equally enjoy writing them and do so with all of my heart. I feel it is appropriate to include that first letter here as it provides a fitting close to the Pavoncito story.

Anniversary Letter 1999

Despite the fact that the Christmas season has become for many a stressful time of frenzied shopping and ever increasing financial burden, it remains for most of us, the magical season of good will, good cheer and above all, hope. For in spite of all the madness, Christmas still manages to bring out the best in us and give us the chance to experience a little heaven on earth. As we witness each other at our Christmas best, we are reminded of our unbounded potential as human beings, of our generosity, of all we might still be. It is therefore easy to see why, at its finest, Christmas remains the season of kindness, the season of peace.

I am ever mindful that our finest example of human potential was born during this wonderful season and in fact, gave name to it some 2000 years ago. He was born of love and compassion to show us the way out of our self-inflicted darkness, to offer a living model of all that we should strive for and dare to try to be. It is in fact His spirit that remains at the heart of all that is right with Christmas: the reaching out to others, the caring beyond our own needs, the daring to show our best selves to a world that often mocks such things.

May the Babe in swaddling clothes remain for us all a symbol of love, peace and hope. May His star of wonder and might and beauty burn brightly in your hearts this Christmas.

Thank you for your support of Only A Child through these past twelve months. You have made it possible for its work to continue and in doing so, have kept a little of the Christmas spirit alive throughout this year.

Sincerely,

George