

Fall, 2010

To the many who have cared,

We each find our own way in this life, moving forward, at times retreating, at our own pace and in our own time. A gifted few are life's prodigies, while most of us are perfectly ordinary, exceptionally average. Then there are those who struggle and stumble, while seeming to be forever immersed in the act of catching up. Many of the youngsters who have called Only A Child home fall into the latter category. Giovanni was one of these.

Giovanni came to us when he was in his late teens, already a long term, hard core resident of the street. He left home as a child to escape from his alcoholic father who never missed the opportunity to belittle his oldest child, leaving Giovanni to feel that he was worthless. Giovanni was prone to be combative, especially with anyone representing authority. But he was also outgoing and chatty, and showed a side that was serious and thoughtful, especially when we spoke in private.

Throughout his time with us, Giovanni maintained a clear sense of what he wanted for his future, and displayed the ability to develop specific plans to accomplish his goals. But he often tripped himself up whenever things were going well. Giovanni seemed determined to confirm his father's assertion that he would never amount to anything. Even so, during his time with Only A Child, Giovanni managed to complete three additional years of traditional studies, as well as graduate from a yearlong culinary program at a local vocational school. He seemed to lose himself in the kitchen and briefly manage to forget his problems while working with food. It was Giovanni's dream to one day be a chef.

Giovanni easily found work after completing his culinary studies. And as he had throughout his time with Only a Child, Giovanni occasionally continued to visit with his family. His connection with his mother had remained strong, and Giovanni was also close with his younger brother and sister. But Giovanni's relationship with his father remained strained, something that increasingly came to haunt him. It mattered little what Giovanni had accomplished. His father continued to have little use for him. Giovanni grew disheartened, and eventually returned to the street, falling back into his old ways, devouring amounts of alcohol that far surpassed anything he had consumed before.

Giovanni stayed in touch with me after leaving Only A Child, but the timing was erratic. Months passed without word from him and then he would call and I'd hear from him every few weeks. Early one morning, Giovanni came to see me unannounced, looking shabby and disoriented. He never came by without first calling. And his appearance was always in order when he visited, to show me proper respect, as well as to try and maintain some sense of dignity, a challenge when living in the street. But for some reason that morning, Giovanni had not bothered to clean himself up. I invited him in, led him to the living room, and got right to the point, "what happened?"

The evening before, Giovanni and two female companions had been hanging out at a neighborhood market. His companions decided to steal a cell phone from one of the market's shoppers. Giovanni was quick to assert his innocence and even denied prior knowledge of the botched crime. The phone's owner resisted and cried out, and Giovanni, who by then undoubtedly understood what was happening, fled with his two companions. They were pursued by the market's vendors and easily captured. A mob soon gathered and took matters into their own hands. There was, at the time, a simmering discontent taking hold of the local citizenry, thanks to an ever-increasing level of crime and the perceived incompetence shown by the local police in response. Vigilante justice had begun to surface, as a result.

Mobs, by nature, tend to lose all sense of reason. Giovanni and his companions were led to a nearby gas station where it was quickly concluded that, as the only male member of his band, Giovanni was the architect of the crime. Punishment was to be swift and severe. Giovanni was to be doused with gasoline and set on fire. But by the grace of God, at the last moment, a policeman appeared and dispersed the crowd, saving Giovanni from a horrific end.

Although Giovanni was still shaken when we spoke, his mood, more than anything, reflected a kind of manic euphoria. He had cheated death only hours before. He repeatedly referred to the policeman who had saved him as his guardian angel and concluded that God Himself had given him a reprieve. Giovanni was determined to make the most of his second chance by getting his life in order." Well," I thought to myself, "if this doesn't motivate him to leave the street, I'm not sure what will."

But Giovanni's change of heart was short lived and soon after, he stopped calling. More than a year passed without word from him and I all but gave up hope. Then, as he had before, one morning Giovanni came to see me unannounced. He looked as if he had been assaulted – his clothing dirty and torn, his body cut and bruised about his face and arms. His troubled speech betrayed the lingering effects of having been on a binge. The heavy, sour smell of day old alcohol proceeded and surrounded him. Giovanni was crying.

The morning before, Giovanni had run into a neighbor of his parents on a public bus. Despite the fact that they had not seen each other for some time, the neighbor recognized Giovanni and approached him so that they might speak. She informed him that his sister had been murdered. It was a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The act had taken place more than a month earlier. Giovanni's family had tried in vain to find him, but it can be difficult to locate a homeless person. Giovanni's grief was acute due to his sister's death, but it was the fact that so much time had passed without his being aware of the murder that was, at that moment, unbearable for him. He was heartbroken to think that he had not been with his family to share their grief. And he could not deny why he had been absent during their time of tragedy – his choice to live a vagabond's existence.

We spent the morning together, passing large amounts of time walking through the neighborhoods surrounding my home. Giovanni would grieve, then reflect on his life, and then grieve again. At times, he would break down and sob with such force that we would stop and sit until Giovanni composed himself. I said little, as I felt that Giovanni mostly needed me to listen. It was enough that I was there for him. It was how I best showed him that I cared. By midday, Giovanni had improved somewhat, and I offered to buy him lunch. He accepted, admitting he had not eaten anything for

more than a day. He asked if he might take his lunch with him, as he wanted to return home to be with his parents and younger brother.

We spoke several times in the weeks that followed. Giovanni once again asserted that he was going to leave the street for good. I wanted to believe him but had doubts. Sure enough, he vanished once again, seeming to confirm my doubts. A long stretch of time passed without word and I became concerned. Giovanni eventually called, however, and said that there was someone he wanted me to meet. Several days later, he returned to my home, this time in the company of a poised and pretty young woman who was neatly groomed and dressed. She was clearly someone Giovanni had not met in the street. Her name was Flor, the Spanish word for flower. It's an appropriate name, I thought to myself. It fits her perfectly.

Giovanni and Flor had been together for several months. Flor's influence on Giovanni was unmistakable. He had lost much of the nervous edge that I had always associated with him. They wanted to tell me that they planned to speak with Flor's parents, to ask permission for Giovanni to come live with them in their home. Although Giovanni and Flor's parents were not strangers, he had kept certain aspects of his life hidden from them – namely that he had lived in the street and battled addiction. Giovanni wanted to be up front, but feared that Flor's parents would turn him away if he were. Giovanni asked for my thoughts on the matter. As I always am with our youngsters, I was direct with my advice. "I don't think it would be a good idea to begin a closer relationship with deception. You're asking them to welcome you into their home and make you a member of their family. You're asking them to give you a place to live. You're asking them to trust you. They need to know they *can* trust you. They would be angry if they were to learn that you had not been honest with them. It would damage your relationship and the damage would not be easy to repair. It seems to me there is only one option here..."

I looked at Giovanni. A long silence hung in the air before he ultimately responded by nodding his head in uneasy agreement. I got the impression that he wished I had felt otherwise. Therefore, when I heard nothing further, I assumed things had not gone well. Another long stretch of silence followed and it wasn't until July that Giovanni contacted me. He phoned to tell me that he was well and living with Flor and her parents. Giovanni and Flor had a baby daughter named Angie. He had also assumed responsibility for helping to raise Flor's 7-year-old daughter Wendy. Giovanni wanted me to meet his family.

They joined us in our shelter on a Sunday afternoon in early August. Flor was as I remembered her, but Giovanni had aged beyond his years. His former lifestyle had caught up with him. He held Angie in his arms. She was the image of Giovanni, but possessed Flor's quiet self-assurance. Giovanni presented me to Wendy, referring to her as his daughter. The fact that he did filled me with pride. I smiled at Giovanni, and as I did, I felt my pride shining in my eyes. Giovanni had become a man since I last saw him.

The majority of our time was spent together, gathered in the living room. Giovanni and I managed a few minutes alone, to talk privately in the kitchen. He mostly spoke of his new life with Flor and their children. Then, towards the end of our conversation Giovanni changed the subject and spoke of his own family. "I visit with my mom and dad and younger brother every other Sunday. Flor and the girls accompany me. It's better. Things have changed. My time with them is good. My dad is

not the same now. He really suffered after my sister's death. My mom suffered too, but with my dad it was different. I think the loss of my sister forced him to rethink his relationship with me. He treats me differently. We get along. He treats me well. And my parents really love Angie. They think of Wendy as their granddaughter too, but my God, how they love Angie.”

I have often thought of Giovanni since his visit in August, considering his life and his struggles. It has often been said that we can never truly know someone until we walk in his shoes. But could we ever trace another's steps to such a degree that we come to gain their perspective on life? Could we ever think and feel as they do; embrace their hopes and suffer their disappointments in quite the same way they have? I tend to think not. Giovanni alone can recall from experience and speak with authority as to what it has meant to be Giovanni Oliva. Just as you and I are the only genuine experts on each of our individual lives.

It is safe to say that among those who have known Giovanni in any significant way, many doubted he would turn out well. Given his past, it is still too soon to be sure that Giovanni will not fall back once more. But considering his new life with Flor, he has never had so many reasons not to. It appears that at long last, Giovanni has proven his doubters wrong.

Throughout his struggles, Giovanni trusted that he could turn to us for guidance and comfort even years after he had left our care. It is a point that I'm particularly proud of because I believe it reflects how much Only A Child means not only to Giovanni, but also to all of the youngsters who have found a home within our program. Thank you for standing by us over the years so that we, in turn, can be there for Giovanni and his companions.

Sincerely,

George

P.S. September is upon us, which means that it's time for our annual Friends of Only A Child pledge drive. The times remain trying all over the world. Many of us have been required to sacrifice as seldom before. In an effort to do our part, we have cut our spending within the program by several thousand dollars within the past year.

As I affirmed in the fall letter two years ago, “Never more than when we are tested do we come to see who we are and what we stand for.” The summer months are generally quiet for charitable organizations like ours. Support is usually at a yearly low. Therefore it is imperative that we rebuild our funding base come the fall. Please support our pledge drive as your heart dictates to keep our work alive.