

Summer, 2010

To the many who have cared,

A child does not usually choose to leave family and home without a reason. More often than not, children growing up in the street have fled from homes where neglect and abuse were present. Drug and especially alcohol addiction on the part of one or both of the parents can often be found behind the neglect and abuse. Many of the youngsters who have found their way to Only A Child over the years, have come to us after having endured such hardship.

Marvin *chiquito* is a good example. He is one of two youngsters named Marvin who are with us at present. This explains the need to distinguish him from his namesake by the use of the nickname *chiquito*, or little. Little Marvin is small of stature, slightly more than 5 feet tall, which by Guatemalan standards makes him somewhat short, but not exceptionally so. In general, Guatemalans are not a large people.

Marvin *chiquito*, or simply *Chiquito* – Little One – as he is often called by his companions, suffered through a bruising childhood. His father, who drank to excess, abandoned him when he was a baby. Marvin's mother also decided to forego her responsibility to raise her son, and when he was just 2 years old placed Marvin in a home for children who had been orphaned or left by parents who could not or would not care for them.

When Marvin turned 7, he was moved to a second home for older children. It was large and institutional, and from what I have gathered from conversations I have had with Marvin, understaffed and short on resources as well. Marvin's memories of his time spent there are painful and not easily recalled. I am among just a handful of people with whom Marvin has shared such things; Marvin had lived with us for more than a year before finding the courage to confide in me. Many more conversations have taken place between us since then. Gradually, I have come to better understand Marvin's early years.

Marvin's experience at the second home was traumatic. The staff brought little joy or commitment to their work. They did only what was required of them and nothing more, and at least for Marvin, the home was a loveless and lonely one. He in no way felt cared for. Nor did he feel that he belonged to anyone or anything, leaving him to feel doubly abandoned. Some of the other children had family members who were still involved

with them. Visitations were permitted on Sundays. The children who were fortunate enough to have someone come and see them were allowed to leave the home to spend time privately in the company of their loved ones. Sunday after Sunday, for all of the years that Marvin lived in the home, he waited for his mother to come and visit and perhaps even take him some place special. But she never did. Not once. To this day, it remains one of the most difficult things for Marvin to remember.

Marvin ultimately fled the home when he was 12 years old, then lived briefly on the street before entering Covenant House Guatemala, an organization that worked with homeless children at that time. There he stayed, reasonably happy, until his eighteenth birthday, at which point he was required to leave. After considerable thought, Marvin returned to live with his mother, for all practical purposes, for the first time in his life. It was not, however, a comfortable experience for either of them. Marvin perceived his mother to be cold and distant. During our conversations, he also sometimes referred to her as being a generally angry person.

After a year of enduring such disagreeable conditions, Marvin moved out of his mother's house and rented a room by himself. But not long after, the loneliness became unbearable and Marvin returned to stay with his mother. I asked him why had gone back to his mother's house when his first experience had been so unpleasant. His response was to shrug his shoulders and matter-of-factly state that he had nowhere else to go. Still, I wondered if Marvin had returned, in part, with the hope that somehow, one day, his mother would change and become the kind of parent he had always wanted her to be.

About the time that Marvin returned to live with his mother, she became ill and was eventually diagnosed as having kidney cancer. As is usually the case, the disease progressed steadily. When Marvin entered Only A Child in December of 2008, his mother was still able to care for herself. Marvin continued to stay in touch with her, visiting on the occasional Sunday. The relevance of Marvin's choosing to spend Sundays with his mother was not lost on me. The Sunday visitations increased as Marvin's mother's health deteriorated. Then, earlier this year, her condition took a decided turn for the worse. In early March, Marvin told me that he was considering returning to his mother's house once again, to assist an older brother and sister with her care. He had already been using part of the money he earned in our carpentry shop to help his siblings with the ever-growing cost of their mother's medical expenses. But Marvin had begun to feel that it was no longer enough. He admitted to feeling confused and unsure as to what he should do. I mostly listened and told him that as he was uncertain, it might be best to take more time before reaching such an important decision. Marvin seemed relieved to hear that it was acceptable for him to need more time.

Shortly after we spoke, I traveled to the US, where I spent most of the month of March. Marvin and I continued to discuss the situation via once a week phone calls. Then, in early April, just days after I returned to Guatemala, Marvin informed me that he had reached a decision. He was going to return to live with his mother. He also planned to work once more at a T-shirt factory where he had been employed before coming to

Only A Child. He hadn't enjoyed working there, but it paid more than the stipend he earned in our carpentry shop, which would enable him to contribute more towards the cost of his mother's care. Marvin was heavy hearted as we spoke and torn by the choice he had made. " I don't want to go. I'm really sad. I'm happy here. My life is here. My friends are here. But I feel I need to do this. It's my responsibility. It's my mother. I have to help her. She's bad. She is really suffering. I have to help my brother and sister, too. Believe, me I don't want to go. I'm *sad*."

I was also saddened at the thought of Marvin leaving us. But I felt that his decision was a sound one. He wanted to be by his mother's side to fulfill his responsibility as a brother and as a son. I admired the integrity that Marvin's decision reflected and let him know. I also told him that he would be welcome to return to us once his mother no longer needed him. Marvin smiled and brightened slightly.

The following evening, Marvin packed his things and left us. The morning after that, he returned to his former job. We spoke by phone as often as possible, but did not personally meet. Marvin was working 12 hour days, earning overtime pay so that he could better respond to his mother's needs. His free time was spent at home, relieving his sister in the caring of their mother. Marvin's life was no longer his own.

The month of April passed and Marvin's mother's health improved somewhat, much to everyone's surprise. Then just before Mother's Day, Marvin called and asked if we might talk in person. The following afternoon we met. Marvin and several other recently hired workers at the factory had been laid off. By Guatemalan law, it is mandatory for employers to pay their employees bonuses twice yearly – at Christmas and in mid summer. Marvin and the others had been let go so that their employer would no be obligated to pay them the summer bonus. The cut off date was at hand. Marvin had taken the news in stride. He had not been happy since returning to his former job. The work was unsatisfying and the conditions oppressive. Marvin asked if he might come back to our carpentry shop. It is usually our policy to only employ youngsters living within the program. But I had come to see Marvin's departure as a leave of absence, rather than a parting of the ways. Moreover, Marvin had continued to spend most of his time largely alone, caring for his mother. I suspected he missed and needed his companions at Only A Child. I assured him that we would gladly take him back.

Spending his days in our shop, engaged in work he enjoyed while in the company of friends, helped Marvin considerably. And his return seemed fortuitous, for shortly after, the relationship between Marvin's brother and sister began to deteriorate and with time they ceased speaking. Despite their best and united effort, the siblings were falling into debt. Then recently, Marvin's sister discontinued all communication. She no longer continues to help with their mother's care. Marvin's brother's job takes him on the road 6 days a week. A neighbor now stays with Marvin's mother while he and his brother work. They pay the neighbor what they can. In his sister's absence, Marvin has been left alone to watch over their mother at night and on the weekend. Apart from his time at work, Marvin's life at present is one of isolation, spent with his dying mother, immersed in an environment that, often times must be rather disheartening.

Marvin now often asks to speak with me in private. Sometimes he seeks advice, other times reassurance that he is handling his situation well. But more often than not, I believe he is simply in search of company. He wants someone to listen when he has the need to talk. There are moments when he doubts he will be able to hold up much longer under the strain of his considerable responsibility. Having his brother and sister at odds has understandably upset their mother, making an already demanding situation that much more difficult. Marvin is just 21 years old.

Marvin is aware that he can return to the program at any time. Yet I strive to encourage and support him in every possible way, so that he will continue to be able to care for his mother. Early on in our conversations, Marvin confessed that, for some time, he had hated his mother for having abandoned him when he was a child. He also admitted that, at some point, he no longer wanted to harbor such feelings. That was, in part, the reason why he first returned to live with her as a young man. With time, Marvin was able to let go of his hatred, even though his relationship with his mother continued to leave a lot to be desired. It is an accomplishment he is proud of, justifiably so, I believe. It would be nice at this time to be able to say that Marvin and his mother have reconciled their past differences and today have a wonderful relationship. But it simply isn't so. But they have grown closer and talk more often, and Marvin has told me that his mother has thanked him repeatedly for all that he has done for her. In their own way, things have come full circle.

On some level, I believe that Marvin senses that his relationship with his mother will continue to heal through the care he is giving her. He also is most likely aware that this time together with her represents the best shot for his finding lasting peace. The same may be said of his mother. The fact that Marvin understands these things at such a young age shows remarkable maturity and wisdom on his part. His willingness to sacrifice so much for a dying mother who walked away from him when he was a child shows an amazing generosity of spirit. Marvin *chiquito* may be small of stature, but he surely must have a big heart. My respect for him grows daily. Most people, I believe, would be quick to assert that Marvin's actions have been admirable. Some might even say heroic. All things considered, I agree with them.

Sincerely,

George

P.S. For some time, I have been considering cutting back on the amount of time I spend in the U.S. The demands of running the program in Guatemala have grown considerably in recent years. Then when I was last away in March, several of the youngsters struggled during my absence. Marvin *chiquito* was one of them. Therefore, I have removed my customary early summer return to the U.S. from my calendar. I honestly feel that it is in the best interest of the program and our youngsters. Therefore, please accept a long-distance thank you for continuing to support our work with Marvin *chiquito* and his companions.