

Spring 2011

To the many who have cared,

Adolescence can be a trying time, even under the best of circumstances. Who among us does not have painful memories that come back to taunt us from our youth, even to this day? Fortunate are the few who can honestly say that they were spared the typical sorrows associated with coming of age. Adolescence is a time of profound change and uncertainty, when much effort and grief is spent trying to figure out who we are and how we fit in. It is a time when we struggle to ease our way into adulthood and begin to shape the person we eventually hope to be.

If we are fortunate, we are assisted by others who offer us guidance when we find ourselves uncertain or stumble and lose our way. Parents or other family members often fill the need, but not always. Many of us have had a teacher come forward when we needed someone to serve as a mentor. And occasionally our mentors appear as if out of nowhere, coming from less traditional backgrounds and unexpected sources.

Growing up in the street or in a home where familiar support is absent comes with its own set of unique challenges. In either situation, a youngster is often left to fend for himself and can seldom lean on an older, wiser shoulder for counsel and support. Mentors are in short supply and the process of *becoming* can be a lonely and desperate one.

In Guatemala, a street child is often perceived to be a bad seed, and therefore believed to be responsible for and deserving of his fate. To a significant degree the local press has contributed to creating so negative an image. Few stories on the youngest members of Guatemala's homeless population make it to print and when they do, the subjects of the stories are often referred to as thieves, delinquents and drug addicts. Little has been written investigating why the children left home in the first place and what the long-term effects of youngsters left to raise themselves will be. Guatemala's homeless children and adolescents grow up on the margins of their society, left to fend for themselves, made to feel that their lives do not matter in any significant way. It is an aimless, isolated existence.

When a new arrival shows up at Only A Child's door, he usually comes to us with his self esteem in tatters. His prior life has offered him little chance to learn and grow. The encouragement and affirmation of involved adults have mostly been nowhere to be found,

leaving the youngster to conclude that his life will never amount to much of anything. It is our mission to show our youngsters that, when given the support, resources, and training that they need, they are capable of doing good and great things with their lives, just like anyone else. It is our job to show them that they matter, so that with time the youngsters will come to see themselves in a new and more positive light.

Oddly enough, even among the very few who work to improve the conditions of children living in the street here, there is often times a lowering of expectations, a quick and ready justification for behavior that would be unacceptable with youngsters coming from more traditional backgrounds. And although such compromising of standards may be motivated by good intentions, I have concluded that, in the long term, it is counterproductive and harmful to the very ones they seek to help.

The youngsters themselves contend that they have come to us looking to begin anew; seeking to turn their lives around and one day be seen as a person of worth. They want to earn the respect of their peers. They also want, one day, to be able to look in a mirror and admire the person reflected back at them. Given where they have come from, and considering where they would like to go, the youngsters have set their standards high, indeed. Transitions of that magnitude require considerable commitment and effort, both on the part of the youngsters themselves and from all of us at Only A Child, whom they depend on to see them through the process of meaningful change. It can be tough going at times. There are moments when I feel I am living a south-of-the-border variation on *Pygmalion*, set in the barrios and troubled neighborhoods of Guatemala City. But my commitment remains true, especially with those youngsters who are determined to do everything humanely possible to become ‘the person of their dreams’.

Most charitable organizations prepare a **Mission Statement**. It not only serves to give their work focus and direction, but also, to provide a concise explanation of the organizations reason for being. Only A Child’s Mission Statement declares:

Only A Child helps disadvantaged youth in Guatemala to develop capacities for long term self sufficiency by promoting healthy physical, emotional, vocational and spiritual growth.

We have taken it one step further and come up with an **Organizational Description**, which adds more depth to our Mission Statement. Only A Child’s Organizational Description reads:

Only A Child works with disadvantaged youth living in the streets of Guatemala City, offering hope and betterment to those who have previously had little of either. It is our belief that the success of an individual depends on their readiness for change, as well as a firm desire to make the most of the opportunities that come their way. As such, we

focus our efforts on those youngsters who are motivated and show potential to lift themselves out of dead end lives and into new existences where they can function as valued and productive members of their society. Working together, we challenge them to challenge themselves, encouraging them also to give serious thought to what they want for their future lives, while guiding them as to how they can realize their dreams with honor and integrity.

I honestly feel that our Organizational Description captures the essence of Only A Child. Every concept was considered at length, every line written with care before making it into the final document. But there is one phrase that stands out for me, set apart from the rest of the text as describing what makes Only A Child unique: *Working together, we challenge the youngsters to challenge themselves...* We never condescend to our youngsters. We never lower our standards in terms of what we expect from them. And we also expect of *them* that they set their standards high, as well. This is not to say that there are not challenges to be met. Given the youngsters history, it is all but inevitable that problems that are uniquely theirs will arise. But we work together to deal with such challenges and together, and find ways to resolve problems rather than use them to justify attitudes and behaviors that will ultimately hold them back. The youngsters are taught to be accountable for their actions and decisions. No excuses, no exceptions. As a result, Only A Child has had a level of success that is rare with the population we serve.

Earlier this year, three of our youngsters began their studies at The University Mariano Galvez. The fact that Conrad, Marvin and Rudy were admitted right off that bat speaks highly of them, for the entrance exams are demanding, and many who take them fail on the first try. I also feel that it reflects well on Only A Child, as well as the philosophy behind our work. It is true, we demand much of our youngsters, at times pushing them to their limit when they face a situation that is difficult for them to manage. But it is through the process of learning to manage such challenges in productive ways that they grow and mature and develop the kind of solid character which allows them to achieve the type of success recently realized by Conrad, Marvin and Rudy.

In a letter recently written on the subject, Conrad stated, "I remember when I turned 18 and realized I had not even finished grammar school ... the moment when I came to Only A Child changed my life, not only because it was a new beginning, but also, I could attend school and study and prepare my life to face the future."

Over the years, a good number of Guatemalans have approached me and thanked me for, "... doing the work that, sadly, no one in this country wants to do." And the lamentable truth is that many people in Guatemala *have* concluded that working with our youngsters is a waste of time; that they are too far-gone to reach. In some instances

it is probably true. But then there are those like Conrad and Marvin and Rudy who show that they are still reachable and capable of achieving the kind of admirable success they have shown.

This illustrates Only A Child's reason for being. That is why we continue to work in present day Guatemala, immersed in situations and surroundings that are challenging, dangerous, and at times disheartening; so that by reaching out to many young lives we might touch as many as possible and, in the end, lift some from the hopelessness that previously consumed them. Although I have stated it time and time again, once more I feel compelled to say – without your support, this work simply would not be possible. Thank you for remaining loyal to us so that we might continue to stand by our youngsters. May God bless.

Conrad's, as well as Marvin's and Rudy's letters reflecting on their life at The University Mariano Galvez will soon be printed in Only A Child's Internet newsletter, *La Vista*. Photos of each of the youngster will accompany the letters. If you are not already on our email list, but would like to receive our Internet newsletter and read the letters, you can send me your email address at onlyachild@aol.com And I will personally see to it that we send you the next issue of *La Vista*.

Sincerely,

George

P.S. If you have already seen the flyer included with your newsletter, you know that our yearly fundraiser is at hand. With the increase in violent crime in Guatemala City and recent telephone threats, our paramount concern is to ensure the safety and security of our residents and staff. As a result, we are currently searching for a new shelter that is located in safer area, preferably watched over by neighborhood security. The success of this year's fundraiser will be especially important to help us defray the costs of finding and moving to a new shelter. Thank you for any assistance, however large or small, that you can give us.