

Spring 2016

To the many who have cared,

Mischievous is the word that comes to mind when I think of Eleazar in his adolescent days. Although he grew up in the streets of Guatemala City, he could have been one of any number of kids raised in suburban America. Soccer was his passion, but he also enjoyed horsing around with his buddies and getting into the kind of trouble that usually caused no one harm and was easily forgiven.

We first met in 1995, several years after I began to work with a group of homeless children in a Guatemala City park named Concordia. Eleazar was 15 years old at the time and not new to the park, or a stranger to its residents. He had simply taken a leave of absence from the place that, more than any other, had been his home. Unlike most of his under-aged homeless peers who eventually settled in a park, a run down bus terminal or a lonely and neglected side street, Eleazar resisted taking up roots. It was a pattern that would follow him into adulthood.

A vagabond's vagabond, Eleazar was known and well liked in various circles. But even among those who knew him best, there were large gaps in his life of which they knew nothing. A life shared with Eleazar was measured in months rather than years. As sure as you could count on Eleazar to one day vanish without warning, you could also be sure that, unannounced, he would eventually return.

Towards the middle of 1999, Eleazar was among the group of Concordia Park residents who came to me stating that they wanted to leave the streets once and for all, asking me to help them make it possible. It was at their request that I first considered opening a shelter and shortly after, began to search for a home.

Eleazar was not around when we christened our home in February of 2000. But shortly after he reappeared and joined us and, to my surprise, settled in. Eleazar would come to stay with us for several years. Little by little, the goofiness that characterized his adolescence gave way to a new found maturity and sense of purpose. He graduated from high school and studied carpentry at a nearby vocational school. Then, just before completing the two-year course, Eleazar's restless ways returned and he moved on from Only A Child.

Communication was sporadic as Eleazar resumed pursuing a life on the move and found work with a construction company that contracted work throughout Guatemala. Between jobs he returned to a small room that he kept in the city and called me on occasion to get together and not lose touch.

Several years in to that arrangement, Eleazar began to tire of life on the road. We met with greater frequency, often times to consider his options. Eleazar seemed worn beyond his years and grew despondent as his search for stable employment in the city proved unsuccessful. God or fate

intervened when Only A Child found itself in need of a new foreman to oversee our in-house carpentry shop. Eleazar's vocational training and experience working in our shop as a program resident years earlier qualified him to fill the job. And his former days at Concordia Park enabled him to empathize with the struggles of his successors in ways that someone who had never lived in the street simply could not.

It was clear that Eleazar needed us as much as we needed him. Years of living without roots had left him empty and lonely and clinging to a future that extended to his next job and no further. For all practical purposes, he had returned to being homeless. Perceiving his hunger to once again have a home and belong to a family, I invited Eleazar to return to live in our shelter. He accepted without hesitation.

Eleazar found a place with us as the weary but wiser-for-the-wear uncle, advising his younger housemates as to how they might best avoid the mistakes he had made. He soon began to look to the future with renewed enthusiasm, desiring to return to school and study at an English language academy. I encouraged him, first with words but shortly after with financial support in the form of a supplement to his salary as our carpentry shop foreman, much to his approval.

The course in English was 16 months long and intensive. But Eleazar was determined to graduate and find employment as an English translator, and did not waver in his dedication to his studies. Then, two months before completing the course, Eleazar once again walked away from his life with us. And as had been the case before, his departure came without warning.

I have come to understand that Eleazar is the kind of person who usually manages to trip himself up at the point of attaining a major accomplishment. It is reasonable to assume that his self-defeating attitude is grounded in the failure of his parents to properly nurture him when he was young, especially his mother who abandoned him when he was a small child, severing all contact at the time. Perhaps his tendency to disappear without warning or explanation had its beginning at that moment when, consciously or otherwise, he decided that from there on in, he would be the one to walk away from those he would come to care for, rather than risk being forsaken once again.

Two years have passed since Eleazar last took leave of Only A Child. During that time I had heard from him just twice, first, a few months after he left us and then again this past Christmas Eve. He called a third time in late-February to say that he planned to return to the city for a couple of days between jobs, as his work once again required that he travel the country. He lacked the nerve to ask that we meet, but readily accepted my invitation to get together, stating, "How could I possibly consider not seeing you when you're the reason I'm still alive?"

Eleazar greeting me tentatively, his head hung low, suggesting that he was not particularly proud of where his life had gone. The fact that his most recent departure from Only A Child could have been handled better may have also contributed to his shame. Years of on again off again battles with addiction had taken their toll on his appearance. His most recent battle had been with alcohol, although when we met he had been sober for 5 months, his sobriety an unforeseen blessing resulting from an accident at his job assembling 100 foot high communication towers.

The accident was serious and required 6 weeks of rest and recuperation. Eleazar was cared for by his elderly aunt, who took him into her home, as she had done many times before, whenever Eleazar had needed a place to temporarily hang his hat. During his period of recuperation, Eleazar was befriended by a young woman who lived in the same village. With time they began to confide in each other and develop a relationship. Eleazar revealed that the young woman's concern and encouragement had helped him to become and remain sober since September.

Eleazar continues to visit with his aunt between jobs. He and the young woman have grown closer. Eleazar returned to the city in February to begin to look for employment as an English translator, processing international phone calls placed in search of customer service. It appears he is yet again hoping to settle down. For now at least, the dream that was born in our home several years ago has not died. It had merely been put on hold. I promised to assist Eleazar find work that will enable him to put his English studies to good use. I failed to mention, however, that I am prepared to pressure and even nag him should his own resolve ultimately falter. We remain in touch.

We move forward, haltingly at times, the future and its infinite possibility always a step ahead of us, preparing the way for our arrival.

Twenty two years ago, Only A Child was founded to reach out to young lives that were lost and forsaken, perceived to be beyond repair and beyond hope. Since then we have offered an attentive ear, encouraging words, a helping hand and a shoulder to lean on to hundreds of young lives. Relatively few of those relationships were short term, lasting but days. Most endured for months or years, and some even seem destined to stretch across a lifetime. Our presence in these lives has genuinely made a lasting difference. Eleazar stated that Only A Child's presence in his life actually *saved* his life. There are probably at least a few others who would gladly make that same claim. Without your support, such claims would never have been possible. Thank you for caring.

"...I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

Matthew 25:40

May God bless.

George

George

PS Our yearly fundraiser will take place on Saturday, April 9th. Additional details are available in the enclosed flyer. This event continues to be a major source of funding for our program. Even though we are operating on a barebones budget, we are currently facing the need to make significant cuts. It's more important than ever that our event be a success. Please support our fundraiser generously. I hope to see you on the night of April 9th.