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To the many who have cared,

Six months after my mother died, I gathered the few stateside belongings I then possessed and walked out the front door of my parents' house for the last time. Two years later, I still struggle to make peace with the loss of what, more than anyplace else on earth has been my home, 18 Wadsworth Ave.

Wadsworth Ave. was but one city block in length, yet provided me with a childhood that, if not ideal, was not far from it in my eyes. It was, perhaps owing to its compact nature, a world unto itself, providing me with an abundance of memorable neighbors, lifelong friends and near constant diversion, all of which nurtured me in key and lasting ways.

My parents bought the house the year after I was born, making it the only home I knew as a child. I moved out at 18, and would spend most of the next 20 years living apart - much of the time, a short drive away, some of the time, far enough away to require a long drive or flight to visit.

In 1995, Wadsworth Ave once again became my primary abode, while living in the U.S. It was then that I decided to divide my time between suburban Boston and Guatemala. Although abroad much of the year, I continued to reside in my native New England several months at a time, and needed a place to hang my hat while there. My parents welcomed me back without hesitation.

My work in Guatemala found me in the company of children who had not been so fortunate as I. Many had fled abusive homes to take up residence in the street. Others had been orphaned or abandoned. All had sought to find a sense of permanence and acceptance while living makeshift lives, no easy task. They were often tormented by the inescapable awareness that by traditional standards, they were vagabonds, if not exactly adrift, not securely anchored either.

From the beginning, my primary task was to make their lives in the street less isolated and lonely. Existing in the margins of society tends to leave one feeling unwanted and invisible. With their cooperation, I worked to create a sense of belonging, despite that fact that their address was a public park in Guatemala City. Our efforts yielded surprising success and, with time, I began to think of Concordia Park as my Guatemalan home also.

Our work as an outreach ministry continued for several years, at which time, several of the Concordia residents expressed the desire to move on from the street. It was time for Only A Child to expand. I began to look for a home. It seemed logical that I restrict the search to an 8 to 10 block radius of Concordia Park, for that was their neighborhood. Over the course of the next several months, I viewed several properties. Each of them met our needs reasonably well, no more, no less. In the end, however, the functionality of the houses didn't matter, for upon revealing my intended use to each of the house's owners, I was politely, but repeatedly turned away.

I was despondently returning to my apartment after one such rejection. Still depending on public transportation, I decided to exit the bus ½ mile before my stop, to walk and clear my head. As my right foot touched pavement, a small but assertive voice took control of my thoughts, declaring, "this is where you should look for your house." Intuitively, I understood where I was being directed and looked to my right. I noted the names of the two neighborhoods filling the area, then made my way home, only to give the matter little further consideration.

Guatemala's most read newspaper publishes a classified section twice weekly. Maintaining the routine I had established, I purchased *La Prensa Libre* the Thursday following my unexpected revelation. My eyes were drawn to a listing in the section's front page. It offered minimum details for a house located in one of the neighborhoods where I had been advised to redirect my search.

That Saturday morning, I met with the house's landlady. She was formal but not unfriendly and, after showing me the house, seemed pleased that I was interested. "Now tell me," she asked, "are you planning on living here yourself?" "Well actually, no." I responded. Then thinking *well here we go*, I proceeded to explain my intentions for her house.

Not saying a word, the landlady clasped her hands before her, then looked skyward as if awaiting celestial guidance. There her gaze remained for a minute or two, after which she lowered her head and spoke. "You know I'm Christian, and I've a very good life by Guatemalan standards, I've been much blessed. For six months now, I've felt that the Lord wanted me to give something back, by using my house to help children in need." She smiled before continuing. "In truth, I didn't imagine children as old as yours, but I believe the Lord has delivered you here today. So yes, you can rent the house."

On the first day of the following month we moved in. The house served us well and felt like a genuine home. But with the passing of time, six years to be exact, we outgrew the house and needed something that offered not only more space, but also a second bathroom. I looked at several properties nearby, all of them dismal. But I trusted that God had long before chosen our new home and would lead me to it when the time was right.

Sure enough, shortly after, I was driving through an adjacent neighborhood when I passed a house with a large yellow sign hanging from a second-floor balcony. In large red letters it proclaimed, *HOUSE FOR RENT*. I gave the sign a quick glance, but paid it little notice, for my search had been limited to our then current neighborhood. The small voice returned and, once again momentarily hijacked my thoughts, declaring, "that's your house." "Oh, okay," I responded verbally and, without thinking, stopped the car in the middle of a rather busy street, put the car in reverse, then back tracked to copy the two phone numbers also listed on the sign. The drivers of the cars coming up behind me let me know in no uncertain terms what they thought of my reckless impulsivity, but being a seasoned Boston driver, I shrugged it off, completed the task before me, and continued on my way.

The following week, the landlady's husband showed me the house. It suited us perfectly. Once more I was asked, "Are you planning on living here yourself?" I answered the question without hesitation. The landlady's husband responded without delay, as well. "My wife and I are Christian. It's clear that the Lord has sent you here today and wants us to rent our house to you. It's yours if you'd like it."

More than thirteen years later, that house is still our home. It is not only spacious and comfortable, it also provides a welcome refuge from the congested chaos, clatter and unrelenting danger characterizing present day Guatemala City. During the course of a generations time, and drawing from an ever-changing cast of characters – our residents and staff – we have managed to create and maintain an in-flux family, an unorthodox family perhaps, but a family nevertheless.

Not long after leaving my parents' house, my brothers and I put it on the market. Not a year later, it would no longer be standing, replaced by a luxury duplex condominium. Several other Wadsworth Ave. houses have been razed to make way for contemporary homes. All of the houses once belonged to the families of friends. Today, the first half block, my half, of Wadsworth Ave bears little resemblance to the Wadsworth Ave. of my youth, or so I have been told. I've yet to return since saying goodbye to my longtime home, despite the fact that, when stateside, I now stay with friends who live just several blocks away. For now, at least, I prefer to remember it as it was.

Wadsworth Ave. will always be a part of who I am. And I'd like to think that, perhaps, something of my former life there has taken root, remains in my absence, and will carry on well beyond the days I will ultimately be granted in this world. God knows a piece of my heart will forever reside there, will never move away, whether or not I one day decide to revisit.

Only A Child opened its first shelter on February 1st, 2000. This past February 1st marked the twentieth anniversary of our offering a home to those in need of one. During the past two decades, more than 70 youths have called our house home, in many cases, for years at a time. While with us, they learned to better care for themselves and for their future families. They planned for their renewed lives, then, with our support, worked day and night to realize the plans they had made. I believe it is not an exaggeration to state the impact of our collective efforts will touch lives for generations to come.

I fondly remember my childhood. It seems the older I get, the more I reminisce. Many of our program's residents, past and present, prefer to avoid recollecting their younger days, for often times they were not happy ones. There can be little doubt, however, that the time they spent living in our home provided them with memories they will readily recall, and hopefully, share with their families. If you had not faithfully supported Only A Child these many years, the outcome likely would have been drastically different. Thank you.

May God bless.



George

PS This year's spring fundraiser will once again take place on a Sunday - (April 5th) at 2 PM. Our Board of Directors decided to forego our fall fundraiser this past November, therefore, it is imperative that the spring event be a success. For more information, to purchase tickets in advance or simply support the event, please view the attached donation card or visit our web site at www.onlyachild.org