

Fall 2019

To the many who have cared,

Much to my surprise, I still had some persuading to do. I was accustomed to having to reason through doubts raised by one of our youths concerning a decision I had reached. It comes with the territory of mentoring young men new to the often-daunting task of navigating one's way through this life. But never did I recall reaching an impasse with members of our Board of Directors, at least not with regard to something so crucial as the future direction of our program.

The shift in focus began to take shape several years ago. At the time of its inception in 1994, Only A Child's mission was to tend to homeless children and youths. Our initial years were spent exclusively working at outreach, sharing the world they occupied. It was at their urging that we expanded our reach and opened a shelter in February of 2000. Before long we launched an in-house carpentry shop and formed a back-to-school educational program, to encourage our home's residents in their desire to leave the streets once and for all.

By 2015, however, it had become increasingly difficult to find candidates to populate our program and keep it not merely functional, but also vital. The causes were many and the reasons behind them beyond our capacity to effectively respond. Facing uncertainty, I turned my thoughts to the future, ours to be specific, but also in the more general sense, to Guatemala's as well.

Not long after, global immigration captured headlines and the collective consciousness of nations around the world, arguably making it the issue of the day. The United States and Guatemala played a significant role in the ensuing struggle and conflicting perspectives which emerged in response to a crisis that was new to the world, at least in terms of the scale of the problem.

It seems that, at that moment in time, Only A Child's immediate destiny intertwined with that of Guatemala's. Pulling back from the street, we began to recruit youths from rural areas saturated by a level of poverty which reduced one's ambitions to the rudimentary challenges of warding off hunger and providing shelter for oneself and one's family, makeshift as it might be. As God or fate had it, the youths we had begun to serve came from the kinds of communities feeding the surge in immigration gripping Northern Central America. We fortuitously found ourselves responding to a largely unforeseen global crisis or, at least, the Guatemalan strain of it.

Our fundamentals remained unchanged. We continued to provide a home, but now to those who had traveled many hours and great distances in search of renewal. As before, our carpentry shop taught a trade while providing a stipend. And education remained a priority. But as our realigned mission began to take shape, it became increasingly clear that the aspirations of our *next generation* residents surpassed those of their predecessors. They aspired to earn a place at the University of San Carlos –

USAC. Not for a second did I doubt the validity of our as yet evolving identity. We found ourselves further refining our priorities.

A paragraph from one of our prior letters captures well our reimagined reason for being. It states: *Our primary objective is to provide university level education to youths coming from predominantly rural areas and impoverished backgrounds. Our hope is that, upon completing their studies, our graduates will return to their communities to serve as examples to other young men and women coming of age a few years behind them. Their task will be to inspire a level of expectation and hope uncommon to the neighborhoods from which they come.*

A piece recently published in the Washington Post addressing the issue of Guatemala's mass exodus served to confirm the wisdom of our shift in focus, while offering sobering statistics in support of it:

- One in 100 Guatemalans reached the U.S. border in 2018
- Approximately 136,000 Guatemalans were apprehended or turned themselves in at the U.S. border between October 2018 and March 2019
- Roughly 8% Of 17-year old's in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador fled their homelands between 2011 and 2016. The face of Guatemala's migrant surge is youthful.

Lack of opportunity to the extreme has given way to unrelenting despair, here. Human beings are wired to suffer through desperate times, assuming there is reason to believe that the dire circumstances they face will one day give way to something better. Such hope is in short supply in present day Guatemala. And for good reason. The conditions compelling so many to flee are deteriorating rather than improving.

It was during the May meeting that I learned that members of our Board of Directors continued to have reservations concerning our vision for the future. In truth I was caught off guard by the reluctance of some members to support the decision to shift our focus. I quickly became miffed. But the concerns expressed were well founded, leaving me to conclude that the frustration I felt was self-directed, and in response to my inability to adequately convey why I believed Only A Child mattered as much as it had in the past, if not more still in the present.

Hanging up the phone at meeting's end, I had an epiphany of sorts. Rather than try to further ease my colleagues' persistent concerns myself, I'd ask our youths to respond to the lingering doubts raised by members of the board. Each was to write a short essay, 3 to 4 paragraphs in length, explaining what led them to us and what they hoped to achieve while under our care, while addressing the primary concern held by members of the board - despite all of our effort and good intentions, success at finding work in their chosen field could not be guaranteed upon the completion of their education.

Once again, God or fate stepped in. Upon informing our residents of the essay, I learned that USAC had scheduled a career fair in the weeks to come. I decided on the spot that each of them would attend the fair to research the possibility for future employment. Their findings were to be included in their essays, which were to be submitted to me in early June, one week prior to our annual meeting

with the Board of Directors. The essays served as my report to the board. The final essays surpassed my expectations. I offer the following excerpts as an example of our residents' collective effort.

Ricardo: *The career that I choose to follow is civil engineering. The reason is because I like to build things and, in this way, I can also help with the infrastructure of my community...in this career there is a wide field of work. Every day we build new house for our comfort, human beings...there is a great lack of development in Guatemala. We need roads, bridges, dams, houses etc. ...it is the initiative and vision that one possesses which can improve society on a daily basis.* **Erick: Reason for my studies in the program.** *Before entering the program, I did not possess the economic or material resources to continue with my studies. That is why I moved away from my family – my studies - which for me remain a priority. Why Study architecture? The career is very versatile and adapts itself to the needs of society, improving its infrastructure. In Guatemala, infrastructure is very deficient in the rural areas. I want to contribute to their improvement.* **Pablo:** *Long term plans I have. They are to continue with my studies and look for a source of work, not worrying about the place or destiny that the opportunity holds for me... I visited a career fair for aspiring students at USAC. The first thing I focused on was a career in medicine...the medical field offers a high percentage of employment at the departmental level (Pablo wants to become a general practitioner and return to his community to help fill the present lack of basic medical care in the area)...there is no failure if one is born to prepare oneself in response to what we desire, for no matter how difficult our goals may be, those we aspire to can be fulfilled.* **Jose:** *The opportunity I receive from the program is very important to me. My (level of) education represents something new to my family because through it we can leave the vicious cycle of lack of progress. I use all of my abilities to take full advantage of what I am receiving. However, I am aware that I will probably not find work in my home town. I must live with these sacrifices which I am willing to make for my people and my family.*

What struck me first upon reading the essays was the courage and vision of our youths. The motives behind their chosen fields of study were not limited to potential income or self-improvement. Through their studies they planned to pursue and hopefully find employment directly involved with building a better Guatemala of the future. Rather than flee an oppressive form of debilitating hopelessness they have chosen, with Only A Child's support, to take a stand. They do and will strive to make a difference by being a force for meaningful and lasting change. Our Board of Directors seemed equally impressed. Their past concerns and lingering doubts were eased if not erased with the reading of the essays.

Only A Child also remains committed to promoting meaningful and lasting change through its mission to provide encouragement, support and resources to young men refusing to accept the bleak status quo in present day Guatemala. Together, we seek to find responses to the many questions and difficulties haunting a troubled land. Thanks for continuing to have our backs.

May God bless.

George

