



[onlyachild@aol.com](mailto:onlyachild@aol.com)

PO Box 990885 Boston, MA 02199

<http://www.onlyachild.org>

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To the many who have cared,

Adulthood was unexpectedly thrust on Agustin when he was 13 years old. It mattered little whether he was adequately prepared for such upheaval, or welcomed it. The sudden and violent death of his father left him with the monumental task of assisting his widowed 30-year-old mother care for his four younger siblings.

Agustin's initial response to the traumatic loss of his father was debilitating grief. He once confided to me that, apart from attending the funeral, he spent the week following his father's murder immobile, bedridden, lacking the desire or strength to function in any other capacity. Once the week had passed, however, Agustin rebounded, and turned his attention towards taking on the responsibility of replacing his father as the man of the house.

Agustin has long asserted that his mother is a strong-willed woman. Her great resolve not only likely served her well under such demanding circumstances, but moreover, ultimately proved to be an indispensable resource serving her efforts to keep her family well looked after and safe. It is also reasonable to assume that, despite his young age, Agustin's support greatly aided his mother both immediately following the loss of her husband, and longer term, in managing her future and unexpected role as a single mother.

Not long after his father's passing, Agustin found work as a mason's assistant. The work entailed carrying back and forth everything required of the mason to complete the job before him, including the cinder blocks providing the backbone of a traditional Guatemalan structure. Given his relatively diminutive stature as a young adult, it is likely that, at the onset of adolescence, Agustin barely stood 5 feet tall and was yet to tip the scales at 100 lbs. Complicating matters further, Agustin had yet to learn the terminology used for many of the tools at a mason's disposal, requiring him to often ask for a layman's translation, an aspect of Agustin's training for which his boss had little patience. Agustin, however, who has undoubtedly inherited much of his mother's resolve, was not to be deterred.

In addition to working as a mason's assistant, Agustin continued with his studies. With the aid of a member of his family's church, he even managed to earn a modest scholarship to cover most of the cost of his education. Mornings were spent at construction sites, helping to provide for his family, afternoons at school in search of a better future, evenings at home helping his mother as needed before tackling his homework in whatever time remained.

Agustin's mother proved to be resourceful at creating and running micro-businesses, many of them kitchen related. In addition to working at his part time job and academics, Agustin also assisted with

the family business whenever possible, soon to discover he possessed an affinity for working with food, eventually realizing the culinary world intrigued him.

Maintaining the motivation that had characterized his adolescence, once with Only A Child, Agustin began to assist both our shelter cook in the kitchen and yours truly on the days when I covered for her. My Culinary Institute of America education and decades spent working in professional U.S. kitchens piqued Agustin's interest, as he wanted to learn from me both European technique and the unusual dishes I brought to Guatemala, some of which he likely thought exotic. From the beginning Agustin was a dedicated and industrious student. Sharing space and knowledge with him has never seemed a chore.

Agustin first reached out to us shortly after completing 9<sup>th</sup> grade. The school he had been attending did not offer high school level education, requiring him to transfer to another institution. The option available to him charged well beyond what his scholarship had mostly covered at middle school. The finances no longer worked. His education had become a burden on his family.

Our staff psychologist conducts preliminary interviews with all perspective candidates. It was readily apparent that Agustin was an excellent fit for our program. There was one significant obstacle, however. He was 16 at the time of his interviews and the requirements for running a home had evolved significantly by that time, prohibiting us from receiving residents before the completion of their 17<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Determined as ever, Agustin remained in frequent contact with our psychologist, taking no risk that we would forget his person or his desire to enter Only A Child. His instincts as to just how far he could push his communication without becoming a nuisance were unerring. His persistence served to confirm that he understood all-to-well not just the level of opportunity for betterment we offer but also, how rare such opportunities are to come by for someone of his age and circumstances. Agustin moved in days after completing his 17<sup>th</sup> birthday.

From the moment he joined us it was clear that this was a motivated young man. His dedication to his studies proved all I expected it to be, but even so, his commitment to being the best possible student has only grown during the past 2 ½ years. Agustin recently presented me with his first senior year report card. The lowest grade was 92, the highest 98. Agustin studies on the weekend, participating in back-to-school programs for adults. He earned such grades even as he worked full time at our carpentry shop Monday through Friday.

Preparing food with others facilitates conversation. Agustin and I have come to better know each other sharing space and time in the kitchen. He recently admitted that, during the year he pursued his place in our ministry, his mother held serious concerns as to whether such a move would be in his best interest. She worried that living in a group home, her son would be subject to undesirable influences and possibly be corrupted. Agustin's mother accompanied him on the day he moved in. As is our custom, we gave our new arrival and his parent a tour of the house he would begin to call home. We also visited our carpentry shop and introduced Agustin's mother to his future co-workers and house mates. As is usually the case when concerned parents fear leaving their child in the care of

strangers, seeing the program first hand and personally meeting its residents greatly eased previous doubts. Agustin's mother left trusting she had made the proper decision.

Agustin is one of three current residents scheduled to graduate from high school later this year. It would be deceptive to simply state that he plans to continue his studies at the University of San Carlos. He is determined to do so. Even as his life moves forward in search of a better future, he continues to concern himself with the well-being of his family. As does many of his housemates, Agustin sends a substantial part of his carpentry shop stipend to his family. He considers the possibility of taking weekend classes at San Carlos while working full time during the week to enable him to better support his younger siblings, despite the fact that such an agenda will add 2 years to his university career.

Our residents return home during Holy Week to spend several days with their families. April is routinely the hottest month of the year in Guatemala and also marks the end of a 6-month rainless season. Water is often in short supply come April, especially in the poorer neighborhoods, where faucets can go dry for days at a time. Agustin and his family found themselves in such a situation during his recent stay. Still the man of the house, Agustin awoke well before dawn to draw water from a nearby well in response to his family's urgent need.

On the day he was murdered, Agustin's father left for work at 7 AM, as was his custom. Not far from home he encountered a pair of thugs assaulting a neighbor. His father could have walked away, as many people choose to do nowadays, but instead he decided to come to the neighbor's aid. It was a decision that cost him his life.

In addition to possessing his mother's strength and resilience, it appears that Agustin also inherited his father's will to do what is right, whatever the personal sacrifice or cost may be. In any culture such selflessness readily calls to mind other admirable qualities: honor, courage, and worthy of respect.

Agustin likely represents the best his community has to offer, as do his housemates. Without a doubt, they are a bright group, but as much as anything, it was personal integrity and a strong desire to make something of themselves which brought them to our door. Large numbers of youth are currently fleeing Central America, having given up on their home lands. But there are those who chose to commit themselves to staying put and building not only better lives for themselves but also, a better future for their countries. Our mission is to encourage such efforts. Thank you for continuing to believe in and support their efforts and ours.

May God bless.

*George*

George