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To the many who have cared,

On November 30th, Only A Child closed its carpentry shop. Although COVID forced our hand to some degree, the decision was not made in haste. It was reached after more than a year's deliberation by our Board of Directors, with regular input on my part. Throughout its 20-year history, the shop did not solely exist to turn out product while teaching our youths a trade, which is not to say that the shop did not keep our shelter's residents busy and productive. It decidedly did.

For much of its tenure, our shop was manned by former residents of the street, who had come to us in search of stability and direction – a sense of purpose. They had grown tired of a vagabond's existence, of living lives on the margins of their society, of being made to feel worthless and invisible. They came to Only A Child in the hope that, with our assistance, they would somehow reclaim a place in the same society that had long scorned them.

Our carpentry shop never aspired to be a profit-driven enterprise. More than anything, it served as a training ground. The youths who came to us from the street often arrived with low self-esteem, doubting their ability to make something of themselves. The shop's primary focus was to show these youths that, when given opportunity and resources, guidance and encouragement, they were capable of accomplishing good and great things with their lives, just as anyone else. Our shop existed to encourage our youths to see themselves in a new and more positive light.

More practical goals were also developed. Growing up in the street leaves a person ill-prepared to face the world as a functioning adult. The example of how to do so was absent. Understanding this, it was clearly our responsibility to prepare our youths to enter any future workplace not only with an understanding of what would be expected of them, but also, how meet those expectations. We sought to instill in them a work ethic which would belie their one-time homeless existence.

From the beginning, we sought to ingrain in our youths a sense of pride in their work, a desire to always pursue excellence in all that they do. Our residents' work spoke for itself. I regularly reminded our youths that the quality of the fruits of their labor of love raised the level of their finished product to that of an artisan. Those of you who visited our shop or purchased a box, cross or plaque would likely readily agree. With time, however, it became apparent that our work with young residents of the street had run its course. It became difficult to find viable candidates from the same source that had previously served us well. It was time to rethink our mission.

A solution was soon forthcoming. It had always been our goal to provide opportunity where it had previously not existed. There was no shortage of youths living in impoverished rural areas, looking to

better themselves but unable to do so. Time and again, lack of opportunity proved to be the major obstacle. We began to recruit from those areas and discovered that, not only were qualified candidates readily available, they also shared a common trait. They each possessed a fervent desire to distinguish themselves in this life, to overcome the meager and restrictive expectations of what could be achieved coming from the areas and the backgrounds they had known.

The process of refining our redefined mission proved to be a surprisingly effortless undertaking. We readily identified the details needed to give depth to the general components of the program. Door upon door opened with ease. Understanding the specifics of what we sought to accomplish better equipped us to respond to the goals and challenges now before us.

It was the youths, their lives and the ambitions driving their lives who provided the details. If the youths who, early on, had come to us from the street hoping to begin anew, the youths of our second calling turned to Only A Child looking to augment the considerable academic foundation they had already put into place. Those from the street often resumed their studies at grade or early-middle school levels. Our new hopefuls sought to complete high school before moving on to university level studies. Some have expressed interest in pursuing masters and doctorate level degrees. Such goals are all but unheard of in the worlds from which they come. They are life changing. And in the case of our youths, they may ultimately prove to be community changing, as well.

The contrast between the ambitions driving the youths we served from the street and those we currently serve rendered the function of our carpentry shop largely unnecessary. For if there was one overriding vision compelling our work with the youths from the street, it was to prepare them to one day move on from our program able to care for themselves to such a degree as to never resume a homeless way of life. Without question our carpentry shop played a significant role in meeting that objective... to a commendable degree, I believe.

By comparison, our current crop of residents come to us from modest homes and caring families, better prepared to tackle adulthood. Refining or polishing may be needed, but is to be expected at this stage in their lives. The main lessons learned in our carpentry shop, lessons that proved invaluable to those who had yet to learn them, proved to be less essential to those whose parents had already prepared them to face the world, capable of looking out for themselves when need be.

Understanding this considerable shift in the needs of the population we now serve, Only A Child's Board and Directors and I committed to creating a focus whose primary objective is to provide university level education to youths predominantly coming from rural areas and impoverished backgrounds. It is a commitment we stand behind; one that we trust will bear much fruit.

The ongoing pandemic and its effect on formal education has required that we adapt as needed to the unique and unprecedented demands of online, in-house university studies. The biggest challenge has been securing the technology required to meet such objectives in present day Guatemala. The demand for all virtual study related merchandise has been high and the supply, which can be minimal, quickly disappears once available. Even so, to date we have remained on top of the situation.

The Guatemalan Ministry of Education has thus far struggled to draft a cohesive plan in response to the pandemic. Classes will predominantly remain virtual through mid-year. It appears likely that virtual study will continue indefinitely. The Guatemalan government has yet to produce a secure plan to begin to move the country forward. Updates are all but non-existent, and no information has been forthcoming regarding the implementation of a program and timeframe to vaccinate the general population. At present, there is no light at the end of the tunnel scenario here. It is not unreasonable to assume that, come year's end, little will have changed and we will continue to face the same challenges and uncertainties that we face today.

Our residents would undoubtedly prefer to resume on-campus studies. The present situation leaves much to be desired. The overall quality of education is diminished. The social aspects of an on-campus studies as well as the personal development they provide are forfeited, perhaps never to be redeemed. Spending much of one's day staring at a computer screen can be exhausting and disheartening. More difficult still, our residents traveled many hours to be with us. For much of 2020, travel between the country's many departments was prohibited. When our youths finally returned home to be with family this past December, a year had passed since they had last seen them, at Christmas 2019. Nevertheless, morale remains remarkably good in our home, all things considered.

For the second year in a row, we have cancelled our spring fundraiser, which had been tentatively scheduled for April 11th. In an effort to offset the loss of revenue generated by the event, our Board of Directors has elected to hold an honorary version of our annual spring celebration in its place.

Our residents have spent the last year in quarantine, not infrequently in government mandated lock down, cut off from their families and the world at-large. Our shelter is located in a (relatively) safe neighborhood where most of the residents comply with COVID protocol. In the midst of mass fear, uncertainty, disease and mortality, your support has enabled us to shield our residents from much of the resulting concern which undoubtedly would have hindered their ability to respond to the opportunities we offer, while making the most of their God given potential and ability.

I ask that you please support this year's honorary spring fundraiser as the proceeds from the event continue to provide for much of our work. 'Token' tickets, as well as general donations, can be purchased or made by using the enclosed donation card or visiting our website at www.onlyachild.org. When early on it became clear that the effects of COVID would be far reaching and longer lasting than we had imagined, I wondered if Only A Child would survive the resulting upheaval. Today, we continue to function, for despite all lingering hardship and uncertainty, you have continued to believe our work worthy of your attention and support. Thank you.

May God bless.

George

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