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To the many who have cared,

José came to live at Only A Child while I was away. It was during the pre-COVID-19 days, when I routinely returned to Boston several times a year, to stay for 2 weeks at a time. Now, such visits occur twice yearly, and are limited to 8 days in duration, one rather modest change among the multitude of others facing the world well into the pandemic.

Given that I was not present to personally welcome José, my initial impressions of him were shaped by the observations of others. His diminutive stature was commented upon, as was an innocent nature belying his age. I was aware that José had come from a remote area, largely cut off from life beyond his community, therefore his lack of worldliness did not surprise me. One comment, however, did pique my interest. A friend, who had met José while I was still stateside, exclaimed to me by phone, "he looks 9 years old!" José, in fact, was 19 years old at the time, but upon meeting him I concurred that he gave the impression of being considerably younger than he actually was.

José had reached out to Only A Child at the urging of a neighbor and graduate of our program, Antonio. Several years earlier, José had discontinued his studies after completing 7th grade. The decision had not been his own. His father had concluded that the time had come for José to help support his family and provide for his younger siblings. At the age of thirteen, José began to assist his father working the small piece of land they farmed to sustain the family.

Although José had never questioned his father's decision, he never ceased to regret the premature end of his academic life. He had continued to hold out hope that, one day, he would resume his studies. With the help of Antonio, he contacted our psychologist, Luis Alfredo, to inquire about the program. Pleased with what he learned; he asked his parents if he might apply to become a resident of Only A Child. They consented.

There was little doubt that José came to us a motivated young man. Nevertheless, he faced several challenges, not least among them being the need to function both in and out of school without possessing the ability to converse in Spanish. Up until that time, José had almost exclusively spoken in the indigenous tongue common to Nebaj, the area from which he comes.

To my and everyone's surprise, José quickly adapted to his new life with little difficulty. He was soon well liked by both his mates and the house parents watching over them. And while José undoubtedly confronted considerable obstacles upon returning to school after such a lengthy absence, he faced them with resolve and grace, determined not to be bested by such challenges. Most impressive of all, however, José proved to be a quick study in Spanish, and steadily improved his ability to comprehend and use the language with increasing ease.

Nevertheless, José lacked self-confidence when confronting certain situations. Despite the aforementioned accomplishments, he continued to be plagued by low self-esteem, not in all ways, but in important ones which held him back from reaching his potential. But with the passing of time, José systematically completed goals he had set for himself, all the while becoming a more confident and capable person. He graduated from middle school and entered high school. At the end of his junior year, José had earned the highest grades in his class, despite the fact that classes had been conducted mostly online. José had met another challenge head on: the arrival of virtual study.

Online classes continued throughout his senior year and in October, we learned that José's graduation would also be virtual. We prepared our house for the ceremony. Coming together, José's housemates and houseparent Rigoberto worked several days, well into the night. Drawing on simple materials such as construction and crepe paper, tape, glue and glitter, they decorated our foyer, dining and living rooms in impressive fashion. All on a budget of \$25.

On graduation day José was clearly pleased and, despite the occasional battle with nerves, he beamed with pride and basked in the joy of the occasion, undoubtedly aware of all he had overcome to reach that moment. Everyone in our home shared his joy.

Shortly after graduation, José confirmed that he planned to continue his studies and wanted to be a lawyer. Caught off guard by his ambitious choice of a major, I suggested he consider all options before making up his mind. We spoke again the following week, but José had not wavered in his decision. To the contrary, further consideration of the situation had only strengthened his resolve to pursue a life practicing law, believing it would suit him and prove to be fulfilling.

This past November, José took the entrance exams at The University of San Carlos (USAC) and passed them on his first attempt, once again taking everyone by surprise. José confided to me with a smile that his 2 roommates, each of whom is very intelligent and needed more than one attempt to pass *their* entrance exams, asked him how he managed to do it in just one try.

José completed his first semester of (virtual) studies at USAC at the end of May. Overall he did well, but struggled with one class and planned to retake it between semesters. He seemed to take his setback in stride. Then unexpectedly his situation changed.

José's father contacted him and asked that he return to live with their family without delay. The high rate of inflation resulting from the pandemic and the conflict between Russia and the Ukraine had made it difficult for the family to make ends meet. The price of fertilizer has doubled in the past 12 months, causing additional hardship for farmers. The planting season is approaching and an extra pair of hands will be needed to help ensure that this season's crop will get off to a good start and have every possible chance of producing a successful harvest.

The decision was an easy one for José. He did not delay. He asked if he might speak with me in private, a request he had made countless times over the years. But something in his expression and the tone of his voice made me uneasy. I learned of his plan to return to his family on a Tuesday afternoon. He would take leave of us that coming Sunday, early-morning.

During his remaining days with us, José never once complained that his father's request had been unreasonable or that life had treated him harshly. He did not sulk or seethe with anger or wallow in self-pity. He quietly accepted what had been asked of him at this moment in time, confident that he had made the right decision. For many people in Guatemala, the well-being of the family still takes precedence over other considerations.

Several years ago, I asked each of our residents to write a brief essay, explaining their motivation for seeking to better themselves through education. I'd like to include an excerpt from José's essay, which he wrote in Spanish. He wrote: *"I find myself studying in the 9th grade. I'm also enjoying all of the benefits of the program, for which I am grateful to God and with George, the program's director. As far as my studies go, I plan to pursue a major in Science and Letters (in Guatemala, one has to select a major upon entering high school), while preparing myself in other areas such as mathematics and language, so that it will allow me to get into university. The opportunity I receive from the program is very important to me, because my education represents something new in my family. Through it we can leave the vicious cycle of lack of progress. I am using 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 town. I have to live with those sacrifices which I am willing to make for my people and my family."*

Shortly before José's departure, Luis Alfredo spoke with his father by phone. He asserted that it was not his desire for José to terminate his classes at USAC. His father only asks that José take a one semester hiatus from his studies, assuming that, with José's assistance, the family will be able to right itself economically. One can only hope that, in the end, it will prove to be true.

But even if José should ultimately not return to Only A Child, his 5 1/2 years under our care would undoubtedly be judged a success by most standards. He came to us with minimal education, unable to speak the primary language of his homeland, while possessing neither a clear vision for his future nor a concrete opportunity for betterment. He returns to his family a high school graduate and university student, confident in himself and his ability to function in the world, fluent in Spanish.

Thank you for your continued support. Your kindness and generosity have made possible not only José's success, but also the success of many other former residents of Only A Child who have gone on to secure better lives for themselves and for their families.

May God bless.

George

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