



Summer, 2023

To the many who have cared,

Over the years, Only A Child has housed youths who have tested my willingness to look beyond contentious behavior, in search of deeper emotions behind a meticulously crafted wall of defense. Such relationships were not uncommon during the years when we mostly worked with youths living in the street. Rudy readily comes to mind when I recall these youths.

Rudy's father abandoned him when he was a baby. His mother died unexpectedly, shortly before his second birthday, leaving Rudy with no memory of either parent. Rudy's mother had been working at a Catholic orphanage. The nuns who ran the home assumed responsibility for raising Rudy and his older brother Anulfo at the time of their mother's death. Rudy had been happy living at the orphanage, but upon the completion of his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, Anulfo left the orphanage to begin his adult life. Anulfo continued to live nearby and regularly visit with Rudy but Rudy, who was ten years old at the time of Anulfo's departure, felt lost and alone nevertheless.

In the years that followed, Rudy's situation progressively deteriorated. He became angry and disrespectful of the nuns watching over him. Little attention was given to his studies. A increasing amount of time was spent in the street, often getting into trouble. Then shortly before his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, Rudy made a clean break from the only home he had ever known, and left the orphanage once and for all.

Soon after, Rudy made his way to Guatemala City and settled among a group of homeless youths living not far from our shelter. I came to know him through the outreach program that we ran at that time. It was readily apparent that Rudy was not a long term, hardcore resident of the street. He displayed an uncommon ability to adapt as needed to a variety of situations, as well as the demands they required. Eventually, I concluded that Rudy would make a good candidate to take up residence in our program.

As had often been the case with his peers, Rudy remained on his best behavior during his first six months while living in our home. It is at that point that we often come to see who the person really is and how he will ultimately relate to his housemates, our staff and not least of all, to me. Rudy proved not to be an exception. The enthusiasm he initially showed for life within the program fell away. He completed what was asked of him, but with a minimum of effort. His grades at school were uniformly mediocre, his output at our carpentry shop much the same. Despite the positive change and opportunity his place at Only A Child afforded him, survival as a way of life seemed to still suit Rudy best.

One year into his stay with us, Rudy's attitude deteriorated further. He became uncooperative and contentious, then sullen when called to task for his inappropriate behavior. I concluded that a six month leave of absence would be in Rudy's best interest. I informed Rudy of my decision. He responded at first with surprise, then assumed an air of casual indifference, not quite pulling it off.

We agreed to stay in touch. Early on, Rudy repeatedly tested my resolve by asking if I had changed my mind regarding my decision, but I had not wavered in the least. With the passing of time, communication between us fell away until, three days before the completion of his six month leave, Rudy called to remind me that his *vacation* was nearly over. He laughed as he spoke the word vacation and asked if we might meet to discuss his future. Rudy seemed in good spirits and I agreed to see him.

Rudy had become a more serious young man during his time away. He shared with me the lessons he had learned while living on his own, and impressed me with the level of thought he had given to the situation. He expressed regret for having previously wasted both his and our time and asked if I might give him another chance. I consented, for I perceived that Rudy had ceased to doubt where he wanted to be at that stage in his life.

Not long after, Rudy entered university. He asked if we might speak, after completing his freshman year. He was troubled, for many of his classmates understood and spoke English well. It concerned Rudy that his inability to do so would place him at a disadvantage come graduation. He asked if we would enroll him in an intensive, one-year program at a nearby English Language Academy, offering to pay part of the expense from his earnings at our carpentry shop. Impressed with his initiative and level of commitment, I met his request while consenting to cover all of the expense.

From the beginning, Rudy showed enthusiasm and dedication to his classes, while displaying a somewhat unexpected capacity for foreign language. I suspected his commitment might fade with time, but it did not. To the contrary, studying English seemed to infuse his other studies and activities with a new found fervor. I asked Rudy why he thought this was so. He considered my question, then laughed before responding, "Who knows? Sometimes that's just the way things work out."

Often when pursuing a goal, the process gains spontaneous momentum and opens doors to create unforeseen opportunity. A Christian ministry with which Only A Child had developed a close relationship had need of a person to translate for the English speaking mission teams they frequently hosted. The ministry's directors asked if Rudy might fill the post. I spoke with Rudy and he was delighted at the prospect of putting his English to work.

Rudy ultimately spent two years translating for the teams, while finding meaning and a sense of purpose along the way. Rudy also found or perhaps created a place for himself in the world. With a great assist from the teams, who unreservedly embraced Rudy during their time together, Rudy ceased to identify as an outsider, observing life from a distance, never quite belonging or fitting in. Rudy had found acceptance, first from the teams, then with himself, finding by degree as well, some level of peace.

Twice a year we take leave of the city and travel to Tecpán, a picturesque area nestled in a cluster of mountains two hours west of Guatemala City. The trips take place in June and December and include partaking of a special breakfast at one of the lovely restaurants for which Tecpán is well known. The June trip was at hand and it occurred to me to invite Rudy to join us. His studies and time with the mission teams eventually led to Rudy finding work at an English language call center in Guatemala City. Five years and two promotions later, Rudy still works for the same employer. At the onset of the pandemic, the work transitioned from in office to virtual and out of the home. The work remains largely



virtual and at home and, as a result, Rudy decided to return to live where he had been born and raised - Tecpán.

Rudy had the day off and happily accepted my invitation. He joined us at the restaurant shortly after our arrival. I introduced him to our current residents, our houseparents and to our psychologist Luis Alfredo, some of whom had met or known Rudy previously. At Luis Alfredo's urging, I asked him to give a testimony of his time with Only A Child, as well as its impact on his life since leaving the program.

Rudy spoke movingly of his years living within the program, focusing on his lack of focus early on, regretting the opportunities squandered during that period. He told of how difficult and frightening it had been to take leave of our home, but also of his belief in his new found ability to find his way in life and look after himself. Rudy admitted to struggling with uncertainty on occasion after his departure, but also told of his continuing belief that, one day, he would come into his own, a point that he continually returned to. Everyone at the table remained engaged throughout the time that Rudy spoke.

We had scheduled a trip to the Mayan ruins at Iximche, also found in Tecpán. While en route, Rudy asked if we might take a brief detour along the way, as there was something he wanted to show us. Rudy had met a young woman named Estella, also from Tecpán, and over time, they have become close. Estella works at a Catholic retreat center, which also serves as a home for retired priests. Together, they have pooled their resources and are well along in the process of building a home.

The home - not far from the orphanage where Rudy grew up - is a well developed shell, with walls in place to define its rooms and give a good sense of how the house will look upon completion. Rudy led us through a tour of the house, pleased and proud to do so. After viewing the first floor, we climbed a set of rustic stairs leading to an undeveloped second floor. We stepped out onto what then served as a roof. To the north lay a field planted with corn, to the west one with cabbage. Well beyond the cabbage stood the mountains to the west of downtown Tecpán, also in view. Rudy shared of his and Estella's plans to eventually add a second floor to their home, including a patio to enjoy the surrounding views.

Later that day, back in our home, we remembered our time in Tecpán. The conversation led to a discussion regarding our visit to Rudy's home, as it had made an indelible impression on everyone present, especially our youths. It occurred to me that the visit had offered the ultimate testimony as to what is possible when our residents work in earnest to better themselves while living within our program. Rudy came to us an angry, directionless young man after having spent time living in the street. His transformation is a remarkable one and, as such, Rudy serves as one of Only A Child's biggest success stories.

The work of changing a life requires time and patience, and can ultimately prove to be a lengthy process. But as Rudy and many others have shown, it is well worth the effort. Thank you for your continued generosity and lasting commitment. Without it, such work would not be possible. May God bless.

*George*

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