

LOVE FORWARD

ROBERT J. BENSON

LOVE FORWARD

Copyright 2017 by Robert J. Benson.

All rights reserved.

Second Printing January 2018.

ISBN: 978-0-9996104-0-4.

Library of Congress Control Number 2017917260.

No portion of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—without the prior written permission of the author, except for brief quotations embodied in printed reviews.

Bible quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Interior Design and Printing by Steuben Press, Longmont, Colorado.

Published by Love Forward, a section 501(c)(3) public charity.

Cover Design by Moriah Creatives PR.

LOVE FORWARD is a trademark of Robert J. Benson.

For additional information on the Love Forward Scholarship Program, please visit www.loveforward.com.

For additional information on the Arms of Love Children's Homes, please visit www.armsoflove.com.



*After all the storms of my life,
I feel the warmth of sunshine on my heart.*

—Anzelie Bautista

To my wife, Kristen,
Who has seen the worst in me
But fights for the best in me.

To my children,
Jessica, Andrew, Danielle, and Stephanie,
The greatest treasures of my life,
Who fill my years with joy and purpose.

This book is also dedicated to the memory of those in this book
Who touched our lives, but are no longer with us.

John and Cora Benson
Robert's adoptive parents

Teresa Benson and Norman Greenbrook
Robert's birth parents

Mamerto Martinez
Pastor, Arms of Love Nicaragua

Norand "Randy" Pepito
Director, Arms of Love Philippines

Lester "Guerequano" Martinez
Juan's brother

Grace Datahan
Anzelie's sister

Pascualina Rañises Salada
Anzelie's grandmother

Concepción Salise
Myla's grandmother

John C. McClure
Pastor, VCF of Newport Beach

Monte Whitaker
Pastor, VCF of Anaheim

Greg White
Robert's friend and mentor

Linda Bagley
Steve's wife and partner in life and ministry

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	i
Introduction	1
A Broken World	
Chapter 1 Nowhere to Run (Myla)	7
Chapter 2 Survival in the Streets (Juan)	22
Chapter 3 Tears Falling Secretly (Anzelie)	32
Chapter 4 The Roots of Compassion (Robert)	45
The Search for Hope and Healing	
Chapter 5 Our Paths Converge (Robert).....	63
Chapter 6 Stepping Stones (Anzelie)	93
Chapter 7 Receiving Love (Juan)	107
Chapter 8 Winning the Battle (Myla)	126
Love Kindness	
Chapter 9 Fight for Your Purpose (Myla)	145
Chapter 10 A Change in Perspective (Robert).....	158
Chapter 11 Love Fiercely (Juan)	181
Chapter 12 Live Fearlessly (Juan & Hector).....	197
Do Justice	
Chapter 13 Dare Greatly (Volunteers & Yessica)	209
Chapter 14 Continue Our Story (Robert).....	235
Endnotes.....	258
Love Forward Scholarship Program	259

Preface

One night, I was having dinner with Juan near my home in Southern California, and we began reflecting on the 16 years since our paths first crossed. Juan remarked, “Who would have thought this possible? You, a lawyer, and me, a former drug dealer who lived on the streets of Nicaragua...who is only here because of you...sitting at a bar, sharing a beer.”

My adoptive parents never would have imagined it. When they took me home from a shelter in 1968, they set off a chain of events that extended long beyond their passing. They had no idea that 30 years later, their actions would inspire me to care for other abused and abandoned children, through an organization I started called *Arms of Love*.

The *Arms of Love* homes are now caring for a second generation of children. The first generation is approaching thirty. They overcame immense obstacles to become college graduates and working professionals. Many have children of their own. They are impacting their communities in unique ways, their lives altered by the love, care, and mentoring they received from people who had no previous connection to them.

After meeting with Juan, I reached out to several other “graduates” of the *Arms of Love* homes in Nicaragua and the Philippines—Myla, Anzelie, Yessica, and Héctor—to learn more about the paths their lives had taken. I was not prepared for the depth of the pain, courage, and resilience that I was about to encounter.

Through these conversations, we came to realize that we are part of a much larger story. A story of perseverance, hope, faith, and triumph. A story of how thousands of people connected through *Arms of Love* and responded to horrific evil with love and compassion, which profoundly changed hundreds of lives—and through them, countless others.

The time has come to tell our story. Our hope is that you will find *your* place in this story by connecting with it, and continuing it, in your own way.

Within these pages, I will share the lives of Myla, Juan, Anzelie, Yessica, and others in their own voices, expressing the stories and perspectives that are important to them. I developed this book using their own writings, supplemented by our conversations and interviews. And along the way, the writing

of this book impacted each of us—and the story continued to unfold—in new and unforeseen ways.

Despite differences in culture, geography, and generations, we discovered that we share threads of the same human experience. Each of our paths began with being discarded and devalued, only to be redirected toward healing and restoration by the love that others invested in our lives. Over many years, we asked ourselves the same questions. And, to this day, the answers to those questions continue to reveal themselves as we regain the sense of value and identity that was stolen by our broken beginnings.

“Who would have thought this possible...?” The stories of *Love Forward* do not end with us. They continue in the thousands of interconnected stories that branch from a single fifty-year narrative. All of these stories are rooted in common acts of love and compassion. Take the story of Dave and Gaye Brobeck, for example, who were inspired to start a new home for girls in Nicaragua, “Heather’s House.” The home is named for their own daughter, Heather, who passed away after spending 29 years in a coma following a childhood accident. Others who volunteered at the *Arms of Love* homes decided to pursue degrees in social work, change careers, and even relocate to new countries. Every day these and other stories are taking new shape and touching new lives.

There are two types of heroes in this book. Some of the heroes are the people who stepped into our lives and filled the gaps. They are people who valued us after others threw us away. Their acts of kindness and compassion led to the healing you will find in these pages. The other heroes are the young men and women with whom I have collaborated in writing this book. Their heroism is exhibited in how they have overcome immense challenges in their lives and in the ways they have courageously laid bare their secrets. In sacrificing their privacy and revealing their deepest struggles, these heroes make it possible for others who have suffered abuse and abandonment to find encouragement and hope. They further desire that their stories will inspire others to employ their opportunities and resources to change even more lives.

We are sharing our lives in these pages for one primary reason: to invite you to write the next chapter of our story, in your own unique way.

We each have the potential to powerfully impact our world at home, at work, in our communities, and beyond. We can value others and invest in their lives with an unwavering commitment to love them and empower them. We can also be purposeful in choosing to love those whom we do not know...people who have no expectation of our kindness and no ability to repay us. When we step out in this way, motivated solely by the value we see in others, it can change the direction of both our lives and theirs. No special skills, education, or experience is required of us—only a genuine act of love from our hearts.

A former nine-year-old drug dealer who lived on the streets of Nicaragua, visiting me in Southern California, discussing his business plans, describing his love for his new fiancé, and dreaming of his future. Sitting with me at a bar, sharing a beer. Building a friendship and celebrating a chain of love and care that has moved forward across countries, generations, and decades of time. That has value that cannot be measured.

Continue our story as you
Love Forward.



Girl living in Lomas San Judas, Managua, Nicaragua (1999).

Introduction

One act of love. Two ordinary people. A machinist and a housewife—neither of them college grads. In 1968, this couple brought an abandoned toddler home from a shelter to raise him as their own. Little did they know, that over the next fifty years, their decision would impact thousands of lives across countries, cultures, and generations.

Here are some of the unimaginable moments from just a few of the lives that would be touched by this love:

“When we reached our destination and no one was around,
My father would rape me again and again.
I was no longer his daughter—I was his sex slave.”

“At the age of nine, I became a street child,
Washing cars to feed myself during the day and
Running drugs at night.”

“He grabbed another big knife because he wanted to kill me.
My stepdad tried to find me, but I was hiding in the tall grasses.”

“Every night, we would look for a box covering to sleep beneath
And a cardboard mat upon which to sleep.”

“My oldest brother was unable to run away, due to his disabilities.
He was captured by the gang, stabbed, and left dying in the street.”

Stories like these raise powerful questions in the hearts of those who live them. I ought to know. One of the stories is mine. Here are a few of the questions that we could not avoid:

- Do I have any value, and if so, how can I discover and stay connected with my value when others abuse and abandon me?
- Is there any purpose to my life? Can anything good come out of my most painful experiences?
- With all the injustice in this world, is there anything I can do that will really make a difference? How can I have the greatest impact?

- I often feel unwanted and unloved, and I struggle with my own brokenness, darkness, and despair. How can I be effective at loving or helping anyone else?
- Having witnessed or experienced some of the worst evils in this world, how does that impact my awareness of my spirituality and my faith?

As you read these stories—our stories—we invite you to listen to our hearts and walk alongside us as we search for the answers to these questions.



As you will see, several of our stories include growing up in economic poverty and want. But poverty runs far deeper than hunger and homelessness. Mother Teresa wisely observed, “The poverty of being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for is the greatest poverty.” It was an observation based on her personal experience—while she engaged in her profound work of love and compassion for the dying and the destitute, she was tormented with feeling unwanted and unloved herself. She questioned the existence of the God she believed had called her to that work. But the poverty within her did not prevent her from loving others—it connected her with them.

I started *Arms of Love* with certain hypotheses in mind. They were things I believed long before I knew the stories of Myla, Juan, Anzelie, Yessica, and others who share their journeys on these pages. Here are some of these hypotheses:

- The greatest potential lies in those who have experienced “the greatest poverty.”
- Our most painful experiences—even our current struggles and brokenness—can be empowering rather than limiting.
- There is nothing more restorative than love that is purposeful: when our actions are motivated solely by the value we see in others, our appreciation of their uniqueness, and our commitment to advancing their interests.

The very lives of the people in these pages will provide evidence for you to consider for yourself. As you follow the sweep of our journeys, I invite you to consider these hypotheses and come to your own conclusions.



Love Forward will show you how a single action can have a ripple effect that extends across cultures, countries, and generations. Usually, we do not get a glimpse of that impact. We might see the first few dominoes fall, but the chain reaction quickly extends far beyond our vision. That is the wonder of the stories in which you are about to enter. In these pages, you will share in the experiences of the once-abandoned toddler who, now grown, has been given the privilege of witnessing the worldwide reach of the single act of love that changed his own life fifty years earlier.

Here are some excerpts from the same stories noted above. Notice how the same lives now shine with hope and purpose:

“When I reminisce about my past, I no longer see a lonely girl,
But a strong girl that came out, renewed from broken clay.”

“Use your past as an inspiration to pursue your dreams
A stepping stone to a brighter future.”

“I saw kids looking for food in the trash...
I gave them food, and I took off my shoes
And gave them to a boy who had none.”

“I saw all of the goodness in my life and...
felt faith for the first time.”

“I have found purpose in my life by helping others,
Working in my new profession with children and the elderly.”

Yes, these are our stories. Each begins disconnected from the others until, remarkably, they merge to become a single story.

None of us have “arrived.” We still struggle with feeling unwanted and unloved, and we still wrestle with our personal darkness. Healing is a lifelong journey. Along the way, our brokenness does not impede our ability to love others—it catalyzes it. It does not separate us from others—it connects us with them. It is not a divide—it is a bridge.

In each of our stories, love broke in. Once we received that love, it flowed outward again toward others. Love that is purposeful moves in only one direction: *forward*. Along the way, our faith was restored, our hope was renewed, and our lives were redeemed.

We are each deeply grateful for the love and kindness that transformed our lives. If you are reading these words, it has now come to you. Look beyond people's circumstances. See and embrace their unique identities. Listen to their stories. From the painful experiences of your past, cultivate compassion. Affirm their value through your words and actions. Empower them to pursue their hopes and dreams. It requires nothing more, and nothing less, than an act of your heart.

As you read on, we invite you to continue our story and *love forward*.

A Broken World

The darkness is so dark, and the pain is so painful.

—Mother Teresa^[1]

Chapter 1

Nowhere to Run

(Myla)

Sometimes even to live is an act of courage.

—Lucius Annaeus Seneca

My life is an unending story, and healing a lifelong journey. Every day, I turn a new page, and the narrative of my life continues. I do not know how the rest of my story will unfold. But the part of my story that I can share with you now is how I overcame the darkness that once enveloped me.

When I look back on my life, I do not see any light or happiness there. Memories from my past haunt me like a nightmare from which I cannot awake, a shadow that I cannot shake. They tell me that I am defeated, worthless, and alone, that I deserved what happened to me. There is no hope in my past.

But hope is not built on the past—it arises from the decision not to stay in the past, to believe in a brighter future, and to take intentional steps toward that future. It arises from the choice I make, every day, not to allow the hurtful experiences of my past to hinder me in reaching my dreams. It arises from my faith in God, who brought light into my darkness. Everything good about my life is here in the present, and I embrace every day for the precious gift that it is.

To understand how much I cherish the present, you must first understand my past. Only then can you experience the hope, light, and purpose that fills my life anew every day. I invite you to walk alongside me as I fight the battles of my life, which continue even today. Here is my story.



I was born in the City of Tanauan, in the province of Batangas, Philippines, on November 1, 1989. There were five children in the family and I was the third. I have one sister named Wilma and three brothers named Wildado Jr., Joseph, and Cruz. My father, Wildado Sr., was a soldier by profession and my mother was a plain housewife. Because of my father's profession, we moved frequently from one place to another until we finally settled in



Earliest known photo of Myla, attending preschool in Bukidnon.

the 52nd Engineering Brigade, a military base in Manolo Fortich, Bukidnon. At this base, we lived in a village with other families of officers in the Philippine Army.

During the earliest years of my childhood, we experienced a simple and normal way of life. My parents provided our basic needs, including three meals a day, a place to live, clothes to wear, and toys to play with. My siblings and I were allowed to play with our neighbor's children, and most importantly, we were allowed to attend school. I started the first grade when I was seven years old and began attending Manolo Fortich Elementary School with my two older siblings.

Our lives during those early years seemed relatively normal, like those of other families in our community. Our father supported us financially and cared for our basic needs. Even though he was busy at work, he always found time to spend with us. I remember on one occasion he brought us to a mall in Oro Rama in Cagayan de Oro City. He also brought us to his friend's house when he needed to visit them, even though their home was many miles from our place.

These early years, however, were also marred by violence in our home. My father was an impatient man, and when my siblings and I misbehaved, he exhibited a temper that terrified us. On varying occasions, our father beat us with his leather belt, wooden sticks, and broomsticks, sometimes stoning us with combat shoes or anything he could find. Alternatively, he would have us crawl around the table multiple times, as if we were training for the army, until he was satisfied. He considered it a military form of discipline, but we often ended up with bruises or numbed muscles. Our Mama, on at least some occasions, did her best to defend and protect us, but she could not prevent our father from hurting us.

My life took an abrupt turn when I was six years old. It was then that I began to experience the greatest and deepest pain of my life. I was disgraced by my own father.



One day in December 1995, there was an early Christmas celebration within our camp, which included a banquet that was attended by all of the soldiers' families, including mine. During the banquet, they distributed toys to the children, and I remember receiving a couple of plastic rackets during the gathering. As a kid, I loved to play, and on that particular day, I was busy playing with some of my friends when I noticed that my Mama was no longer in my sight. Feeling insecure because I didn't know where she was, I stopped playing and started to look for her. I wasn't able to find her in the common areas of the camp, so I decided to return to our house, thinking that I might find her there.

When I arrived home, I called for my mother, but no one answered. Instead, my father heard my voice and walked out to meet me. I asked him if he had seen my Mama, but he said that he hadn't seen her. Upon hearing his answer, and seeing no one else at the house, I turned around and started walking back to the gathering. But I had only taken a few steps when my father stopped me, wrapped his strong arms around me, and lifted me off the ground. He then carried me back to the house, into a bedroom, and placed me on the bed. And it was there that he forced himself on me and raped the innocent me.

I can't remember if I told my Mama the first time it happened, but my father did his best to prevent her from knowing. He continued molesting me, but only when my Mama was not around. On some occasions, he asked my Mama if he could take me with him when he was visiting a friend or relatives in another community, such as San Miguel or Lingating in the neighboring city of Bukidnon in Mindanao. When we reached our destination, whether it was daytime or nighttime, when no one was around, he would rape me again and again. Even if I objected and tried not to go with him, he would convince my mother to allow us to leave together.

It was not easy for me to cope with this growing abuse. In his eyes, I was no longer his daughter—I was his sex slave. If he genuinely thought of me as his child, he would not have done such cruel things to me. But somehow, I found the will to survive and keep going. Sometimes, it felt like there was a

voice whispering to me that I must go on and not surrender, that I should not throw my life away just because of what was happening.

I have been told that other girls who experience such shameful acts later begin selling themselves, because their shame is so great they feel that they can no longer live a normal life. Some cannot bear the rumors being spread about them within the community. Instead of being compassionate and understanding, people in the community judge the girls instead. That is why most victims—like me—prefer to stay silent about our abuse rather than reporting it to someone we may not be able to trust. Some even commit suicide because they can no longer bear the pain and depression.

I fully understand their shame and their pain—it was degrading, and it made me want to hide from others because I didn't want them to know what I was going through. I preferred to be alone as much as possible, and the constant abuse resulted in me becoming an introverted person. I distanced myself from others, keeping the abuse secret because I felt it was my only way to survive in this dirty world. I had to fight, I had to go on, no matter what. Though I suffered from depression and felt judged by others, I refused to be



Myla's family in December 1994. This photo was taken in her father's family home in Mohon, Bohol, where Myla later lived. *Left to right:* Myla's father, Wildado Sr.; siblings Joseph, Wilma, Myla, and Wildado Jr.; and Myla's mother, Manuela.

defeated. I didn't want to waste my life. There was a light ahead of me, and I was determined to escape this dark prison that I was in.

I thought that things could not get much worse, but they did. When I was in the second grade and eight years old, my siblings and I learned that our father had been sent to prison after being sentenced for stealing a rifle, called an Armalite. While my father was in prison, my mother began to work in the neighborhood but was unable to earn enough income for us to have enough food to eat. We had a supply of gasoline from the camp for cooking, but we had no food to cook. So in addition to our abuse, we often went hungry.

While my father was in prison, I remember that my siblings and I were scheduled to stay with our father in the prison for a night. The prison where he was detained was inside the camp where we lived. It was like a small police precinct and there were no other prisoners there other than my father.

When it was my turn to visit my father, he touched me inappropriately—even inside the prison. He had no fear because he was so evil. He deserved to be in that prison, not for stealing the gun, but because of what he had done to me. If only I had my voice back then—if I had the courage to fight against him—I would not have suffered as much as I did. But what can a child do in that situation?

Weeks turned into months, and we began turning to our neighbors for help. One day, we stayed in the house of a neighbor family and watched television from morning until afternoon. They noticed that we stayed in their house for the entire day, and out of pity, they gave us some food to eat. In return, we helped their children do their household chores, as a way of repaying the family for their kindness and generosity.

After several months, my father was released from prison, but he was discharged from the military as a result of his conviction and he was unable to return to work. Once he was out of the service, my father returned to his hometown in Bohol, while my mother and my siblings and I stayed in Bukidnon. A month later, we followed my father back to Bohol, with the Philippine Army providing our transportation. And so in 1997, when I was eight years old, I started a new chapter of my life, living with my father in Bohol.



My father's family had lived in Bohol for many generations, in a very remote and mountainous region called Mohon or Puti, about 2½ kilometers from the highway in Anas, Valencia. There were only three houses in the area, my grandmother's house and the homes of two neighbors, who lived a short distance away. My grandmother's property was surrounded by many coconut trees, banana plants, rice fields, root crops, and fruit trees including star apple, mango, guava, and native macopa. The neighboring town in Valencia was named Garcia-Hernandez.

My family stayed in our grandmother's house, a large two-story home made of concrete materials on the first floor and wood on the second floor. My father began working on the farm, planting root crops and coconut trees. My Mama was the one who looked after us, and it was during this time that my Mama began teaching me basic life skills, such as how to cook rice in a pot over an open fire, how to do laundry, how to fold the clean clothes, and how to clean the house.

While we were living in my grandmother's house, however, my father continued abusing me. One day, I finally summoned the courage to tell my Mama about it, but she did not believe me. I was devastated. Perhaps she didn't want to believe it. Perhaps she didn't care. Or perhaps she was too preoccupied with her own abuse and supporting our family. Regardless of the reason, her refusal to believe me had the practical effect of forcing me to try and protect myself. There was no one else that I could confide in, as we were new to the area. And if my own Mama didn't believe me, despite knowing of my father's abusive behavior, I had no reason to expect that any of my father's relatives would believe me. This situation left me feeling more neglected and alone than ever before. The most painful part of this time—even more than the abuse—was that no one dared to believe me when I shared my pain.

One day, my parents decided to move to a new house in the same Barangay, but away from my grandmother. We lived in a house owned by my father's cousin, Auntie Zenaida, which was a long distance from our grandmother's house. The house was made of bamboo but its rooftop was made of aluminum. Although small in size, it managed to house the seven of us. There

were two rooms in the house, one where my parents and youngest brother slept, and another where I slept with my three other siblings.

My two older siblings and I continued to attend school when we arrived in Bohol, and I was in the second grade by that time. Gratefully, my father was seldom at home due to frequent trips to Bukidnon for court appearances arising from his recent conviction and parole, which gave me a short respite from my father's abuse. During this time, my Mama started a small business—a “sari-sari” store with mixed food and merchandise—and for a while, she started taking good care of us. Sometimes, she even made purchases of vitamins or clothes on credit, to be sure that our needs were met. But it didn't last.

As soon as my mother became more self-sufficient as a result of her convenience store business, my father became increasingly abusive. One night, when my father came home drunk, we heard him shouting outside the house and breaking bottles, as if he were in a fight. Frightened, we locked the door to the house to keep him outside, and my Mama and my siblings huddled with me inside. I was resting on a wall made of bamboo, or “sàsà,” when suddenly, my sister pulled me away from the wall. A split second later, we saw the sword of my father slash through the wall where I had just been resting. If it were not for my sister's instincts in pulling me away at that moment, I surely would have been killed. We stayed up all night and didn't sleep until morning came.

Another night when my father came home drunk, he began to violently hurt and batter my Mama. In the middle of the night, I jumped out of the window, along with my Mama and my other siblings, and our entire family fled from our father's rampage. We ran to the house of our barangay captain, who was responsible for maintaining peace and order. The captain of our barangay was our own uncle, Zenon Salise, a relative of my father who sometimes gave my Mama counsel and advice. Before the morning came, we were accompanied home by another uncle of my father, Tatay Lando, and when we arrived, our father was asleep.

Over the ensuing days, my Mama and father continued to have violent arguments, during which my father physically abused my Mama. Then one day, while my father was staying at my grandmother's house, my Mama

prepared a special and delicious meal for me and my siblings. There was no special occasion to celebrate, so we asked our Mama why she made such a special meal for us. She just said that she wanted to. The night fell, and each of us fell asleep early except for my sister.

When I woke up the next morning, I looked for my Mama throughout the house, but I couldn't find her. I ran out into the street calling her name, crying loudly. But no one answered.

After a while, I decided to return home, where I found Nanay Elaria, the mother of my Auntie Zenaida, talking with my siblings. I quickly moved closer and began overhearing their conversation. My sister remembered coming home around midnight and seeing a large suitcase near the stairs, but didn't pay too much attention as she was already very tired. Then I heard from Nanay Elana that our Mama had left town and taken a boat to Cebu, a neighboring island.

It was 1998 when my mother abandoned us. My siblings and I were left alone in the care of my father, who continued to abuse us physically, emotionally, and psychologically.



Myla with her siblings, in the house of her Aunt Femia in Valencia, Bohol, after their mother abandoned them in 1998. *Left to right:* Wilma, Joseph, Cruz, Myla, Wildado Jr.

Some weeks later, we received a single letter from my Mama, the contents of which I can no longer recall. Later in the year, we were surprised to receive early Christmas gifts from her, bringing a glimmer of hope that she still cared about us and might return. But that hope soon faded, as after that, our Mama stopped communicating with us entirely. I was nine years old and attending the third grade when my Mama abandoned us, and to this day, she has never offered any explanation as to why she decided not to bring any of us with her when she fled our abusive father.



After our Mama abandoned us, our family quickly disintegrated. My older sister left home in search of our mother and didn't return for many years. My older brother left us as well, because my father always abused him physically. He became an independent man at a young age, working in a bakery and sometimes selling bread on the streets at dawn. Once they were gone, I was the oldest of the three remaining siblings, who remained in the care of my father.

I soon quit school to care for my two younger brothers, as one of them was only three years old and there was no one at home to look after them. During the daytime, my father gave me tasks on the farm such as cleaning the sides of the rice fields, planting the corn, cleaning the surface of the growing rice, and digging holes for coconut seeds. If I was unable to finish my assigned tasks, he beat me mercilessly. I have no idea how I summoned the strength and courage to continue my life at that time, but something kept pressing me forward.

In 1999, I resumed attending the third grade, but three months before the end of the school year, I was forced to stop studying. The next year, I returned to the third grade and tried exceptionally hard to excel, because I had heard that if I failed to complete the grade for the third time, I would be unable to advance to fourth grade. I finished as a First Honor student in the third grade that year, but by this time, I was already 11 years old.

After I advanced to the fourth grade, I tried to become a working student. My teacher, Ma'am Roselle Salise Baleta—the daughter of Uncle Zenon, the barangay captain—invited me to work in her home, and in return, she

supported my studies in school. But when my father returned to Bohol and learned that I was working in another house, he picked me up there and beat me harshly for not staying at home while he was away. I thought to myself, *maybe he wants to protect himself because he is afraid that I will tell the new family what he did to me.* But I didn't want them to know. I didn't want to be judged or become the talk of the town. I was already swallowed up in fear and shame.

During my end-of-the year commencement ceremony, my father wasn't present to pin the ribbon on my school uniform. Our barangay captain, Zenon Salise—the same one who had advised our mother to leave our family and go to Cebu—pinned the ribbon on my uniform in my father's stead. When my father learned that Uncle Zenon pinned the ribbon for me, he threw my ribbon away.

On some occasions, our father left us at home alone when he travelled to Bukidnon for court appearances. During one of those trips, he stayed in Cagayan De Oro for a couple of weeks, but only left us with food sufficient for 2-3 days. After spending a couple of days trying to dig up root crops to eat, my younger brothers and I decided to leave home in search of food within our community.

When our father's extended trips became more frequent, we began to steal food and money from our neighbor's house as a means of survival. As a result, my younger brothers and I developed a reputation as thieves in our hometown in Anas. We didn't steal food from them every day, only when our father went to Cagayan to attend court hearings and we were left without any food at home or in our yard. Sadly, they were unwilling to give us any food voluntarily, even though they were our relatives and knew of our situation. My father's sisters were known for being rich within our community and they were ashamed of our father and the disgrace that he had brought to our family. None of them offered us help, and they even refused to let us stay in their house. My siblings and I developed grudges against our relatives because they treated us like strangers rather than loving us.



Sometimes, when my father left us alone for several weeks, my siblings and I ran away from our town of Valencia and travelled to other towns in search for food. On one occasion, when we arrived at the next town, Garcia-Hernandez, a family there showed mercy to us while we went door-to-door begging for food. A woman we didn't recognize answered her door.

"Where are you from?" she asked. We told her that we came from Valencia, after which she asked, "What is your family name?" and we answered "Salise." She then named our Aunts and grandparents, and we confirmed that Lola Concep Salise is our grandmother. Unbeknownst to us, she was Auntie Grace, a relative in our family. She welcomed us into her home and gave us meals and fresh clothes. But when we overheard her telling someone that she had informed our grandmother that we were staying with her, we ran away as fast as we could, so our grandmother would not be unable to find us. We were deeply afraid that our father and grandmother would hurt us because we brought shame to the family by begging for food.

After running away from Auntie Grace's house, we walked from morning until night. After many hours, we reached the next town, Jagna. We didn't know any relatives there, had no food to eat, no place to sleep, and no clean clothes to wear. We arrived after the town's curfew at 10:00 p.m., by which time all of the stores were closed, and we knew that if the police saw us wandering alone after curfew, we would be placed in prison. It was very cold and dark, so we hid ourselves in a porter's cart, fitting ourselves inside as much as we could so the authorities would not find us. We used cardboard as a mat to sleep on and lacked any blankets to keep warm.

The next day, we stole some garments and slippers from a store, simply because we had no extra clothes or blankets and nothing to cover our feet. We used the clothes as blankets during the night, and put the slippers on our feet during the day because we were barefoot and the pavement was very hot. We woke up early each morning, so the porter and the public wouldn't discover where we were sleeping. Then during the daytime, we begged for food at every house we passed by. Every day, our thoughts were completely consumed with a single objective: survival.

Even for a short time, it is very difficult for children to survive when they are living by themselves on the streets. Each day, when we were begging for food, there was never any assurance that we would get enough food to satisfy our hunger. This was especially true with there being three of us. We never asked for food in public, for example, approaching a person and then asking for money or food (or snatching their food). We just went from house to house, asking for food to eat. Some families welcomed us inside and invited us into their homes for a meal, while others yelled at us to go away. Even a small amount of food, such as cold rice, was a welcome sight and we were extremely grateful for anything we would be given. We would then help around the house, such as by washing the dishes, to give something back to our kind hosts.

It is not safe living and sleeping on the streets, especially in the public areas where there is very little security and many risks and dangers. Children living on the streets can become sick easily if they don't take good care of themselves. We knew of some children who had been poisoned by people who tampered with the food that they gave to the children. Young girls are known to be molested frequently, captured and sold into slavery, or even killed. There is simply no place to go where you can be safe and secure.

One afternoon, while we were playing near the sea port, I saw our father's figure coming toward us, and I learned that he had just arrived back from Bukidnon. I quickly considered various ways to possibly escape, but there was nowhere to run. I even thought about jumping into the sea, but the idea of being found and eaten by a shark prevented me from doing so. The three of us were caught and brought back to Valencia, where we were beaten in the house of Iya Nalia, our relatives in Tonggon. After receiving a severe punishment, we returned home, and there, we started living a miserable life again.



Back at home, at the age of 11, I began to be given manual labor typically reserved for full-grown men. There was a construction site in the mountains near our home, and small amounts of money were paid to those who could haul water and materials up into the mountains. For carrying a single container of about five gallons of water uphill for one kilometer, I would be paid

50 Philippine pesos, the equivalent of one U.S. dollar. I also carried hollow blocks, two or three pieces at a time, up the same mountain. When it was payroll day, my father would collect all of my earnings, buy only a small amount of rice and food for us, and use the rest of the money to purchase liquor and other vices for himself and his friends. Meanwhile, the intense physical labor of carrying heavy weights up the mountain caused me to develop hemorrhoids. For me, it is yet another scar that will never be erased, forever reminding me of my bitter past.

Despite the frequent labor, I somehow managed to attend classes frequently enough to complete the fourth grade, again as a First Honor student. At the outset of fifth grade, I was turning 13 years old and my eldest brother was one of my classmates. But my life never changed materially from before, as I still needed to find ways to work in order to support myself and to pay for my expenses at school.

During the fifth grade, I worked for my Home Economics teacher, Ms. Benigna Palac in Cutcutan Valencia, a neighboring barangay. I took advantage of the times when my father traveled to his court hearings, working in my teacher's house to earn income and support my education rather than running away again. When my father returned, he would go to my teacher's house and order me to return home. The teacher had to allow it, because he was my father. But I continued to attend school and work for my teacher at every opportunity.

I knew that in the long run, an education would provide me with a possible path out of the impoverished and abusive life that I was leading. Moreover, learning was my favorite hobby and I really loved to learn. From a young age, I was able to easily memorize my notes and learn the materials in each of my subjects. It just came naturally for me. So I became competitive



The telecommunications towers in the above photo are located at the peak of the mountain where Myla did construction work at the age of 11. Her house was located at the base of the mountain in Valencia, Bohol.

in school, always striving my best to excel academically despite the difficult circumstances of my life.

Yet living with my father's abuse wasn't easy either. In the middle of the fifth grade, when my father returned to Bukidnon to attend another hearing, I ran away again with my two younger brothers. We reached Jagna and, as before, we began begging for food, going door to door in the neighborhoods. We roamed through the city for weeks. Then one day, a certain family gave us food for lunch, and we learned that they owned a lot of chickens. When evening came, my two younger brothers and I agreed to steal a chicken so we could have food that night for dinner and again the next day.

Unfortunately, we were caught. The owner of the chicken learned what we had done and informed the authorities. That night, the police caught us and placed us in prison. We returned the chicken to the owner, but we remained in prison because the authorities will not allow children to roam around the streets at night. The government agencies have no other accommodations for street children, so they place them in jail for their own security.

One of the police in Jagna was a relative of our family and he soon learned of our identities. He then contacted our family in Valencia and informed them that we were in custody. When our father arrived back from Bukidnon,



Portrait of Myla's family, on her father's side, taken in 1999.
Myla is in the front row on the far left.

he went to Jagna and took us out of jail. When we arrived back home, he beat us and hurt us violently. When I returned to school the next day with a black eye, my father said that if anyone asked me about it, I needed to say that I had fallen down the stairs. Despite everything, I continued to attend school, and I eventually succeeded in getting my grades back up and finished the fifth grade as a First Honor student.

June 2003 came and I started attending the sixth grade, what would be my final year in primary school. My older brother and I began to have different teachers that year. My father continued to rape me, as he had done continuously since I was six years old, and threatened to hurt me and my siblings if I ever told anyone or if I reported his abuse to the authorities. I was deeply afraid, because my father had tried to kill me once before, and I knew that he was capable of killing me anytime he wanted to.

And that is why I kept silent until the age of 13. It was then that my life took another turn, when on account of my father's abuse, I received some unexpected news.

I was pregnant.

Chapter 2

Survival in the Streets

(Juan)

To live without Hope is to Cease to live.

—Fyodor Dostoyevsky

One day in early 1999, I was walking to my grandma's house after a typical day working in the streets: washing cars and delivering drugs to different neighborhoods. I was 10 years old, and I had gradually adapted to surviving on the streets. This had been a particularly successful morning, as I had some money in my pocket that I could give to my grandma to buy food for our family. But something unexpected was about to happen, which would leave scars on my face and in my heart for the rest of my life.

My mom abandoned me shortly after I was born. As with many of her pregnancies, I was conceived during a one-night casual encounter, and I never met my dad. After I was abandoned, my grandma did her best to care for me, as well as four siblings that my mother also abandoned. Yet my grandma's only income came from making and selling corn tortillas out of her home in the early mornings. As a result, she had no means by which to care for my siblings and me, and as I grew older, I had to find ways to survive on my own.

My grandma's house was a very humble two-room home, and it so old and deteriorated that most of the house was collapsing. We had draped plastic sheets over the top of the house to try and protect us from the rain. It was located in a neighborhood called Andres Castro, the most dangerous neighborhood in Managua because of the high incidence of drug traffic and murders.

As I approached the house that morning, I could see my older sister, Carolina, helping our grandma cook tortillas in the front yard. But on this particular day, there was another woman that I did not recognize also sitting by the fire. Carolina asked me, "Juan, do you know who that is?" I stared back at her blankly. Carolina continued, "She is our mother."

I could not recall meeting my mother previously, and I was unprepared for this surprise meeting. I had never felt a hug from my mother, never a kind

word, no care or protection. I knew that somewhere, I had a mom, but sadly, I didn't know where she was and never had any communication with her.

My mother did not introduce herself, but was engaged in some sort of argument with my grandma about money. I heard my grandma saying that my mom wasn't helping with anything and the family's situation was desperate. I took the money that I had in my pocket and gave it to my grandma, as was our custom, and a mix of emotions began to well up inside of me. Bitterness, built up over 10 years without a mother to care for me. Anger, because this stranger in my grandma's house was making my grandma nervous, and perhaps a bit scared, as their argument became more heated. Confusion, as to why—now—this person was entering my life for the first time.

I gazed at my mother in a way that must have communicated all those feelings, yet I said nothing. My mother turned to me and said, "What?! Don't you know who I am? I am your mother."

My silence continued. Carolina jumped in, "Juan, aren't you going to say 'hi' or something?"

Bitterness and anger rose up inside me. She was not here to support my family, she was creating chaos and demanding things from my grandma, the only person who had done anything for me. I looked into my mom's eyes for a few more seconds and said, "You are not my mother. I do not have a mother."

I saw my mom reach for a piece of wood, sitting next to the open fire. I heard her words, calling me a miserable child and many other offensive things. I felt the impact of the wood, as she hit me hard across my face. I never once flinched or tried to avoid either her words or the wood, as that was the attitude I had developed to survive on the streets: never give ground, never show fear.

Later that day, I woke up in a strange bed in a room I failed to recognize. I could see that it was night outside, and when I looked down, I saw dried blood on my hands. My face and head were in terrible pain. I soon deduced that I was in the hospital, and I would stay there for the next five days, until the stitches were ready to be removed from the front of my face. The event left a permanent scar on my face, and another scar deep within me.



Violence and instability had deep roots in my family. In 1963, my grandma took her five children and moved to a rural area of the country in order to escape her husband, who was violent and aggressive toward her and the kids. The youngest, Alejandra, was my mother. In the 1970's, rural life became more difficult, and my grandma decided to move to Managua, the capital of Nicaragua, to find a better way to live.

On November 17, 1988, Alejandra went into labor while she was hanging out with some of her friends, who then helped deliver me. I was named Juan because the church was celebrating San Juan Week at the time of my birth. My grandma came to visit my mom and me on a daily basis, and after just a few days, she could see that my mom wasn't taking care of me and was failing to feed me properly. So grandma took me back to her house and began caring for me. My mom was fine with that, as it relieved her of the responsibility. For a while, my mom came to my grandma's house a few times a week to help feed me, but after about six months, she stopped coming to visit me altogether.

My mom had six kids total, most of them with a different father. She never had a formal relationship with any of the fathers. One of her children, Ever, was given to a friend before my mom even left the hospital, and I didn't even know he existed until I was grown. Other than Ever, I had an older brother, Lester, a younger brother, Eduardo, and two older sisters, Veronica and Carolina.



Juan walking through his old neighborhood of Andres Castro, Managua, in 2011.

I grew up in the barrio Andres Castro, growing, learning, and finding the best way to survive, knowing that drug dealing, fights, and killings were frequent occurrences in our neighborhood. My grandma never had the means to provide us with three square meals a day, as far back as I can remember. We never went to school, we didn't learn to read or write, and we never had any medical care. So over the years, I began spending my days on the streets, searching for ways to earn a little money and get enough to eat.

By the time I was nine years old, I often began sleeping on the streets as well, rather than returning to Grandma's house at night, because things were often out of control there. For example, I remember that Danilo, my sister Veronica's dad, physically abused my siblings and me and on many occasions, and sometimes my grandma as well. One night, to show his friends that he had control over me, he hit me with his open hand and knocked me to the ground. Other nights, I returned to Grandma's house only to find one of my older siblings drunk and acting violently. As I became increasingly accustomed to life on the streets, and as life at my grandma's house became increasingly chaotic, I rarely came home to her house at all.



A typical day living on the street went like this.

After I spent a night sleeping on the street, I started my day by purchasing some bread for breakfast and eating it while walking to one of the central government buildings. In the parking lot, as employees arrived to work, at least two kids surrounded each car, offering to wash the car or just to guard it while the owners were at work. I always had my own bucket and cleaning liquids with me, but usually the owner of the car would provide his own supplies. Because I was one of the youngest workers, I was usually only hired to watch the car or just wash the outside or the tires (which paid the least amount of money), but I had the same five to seven clients each day. I had to stay until 5:30 pm to wait for my clients to leave work and provide my payment. Most days, I only made enough money to buy breakfast or lunch the next day and save a little for my grandma.

In the evening, I began my second job: delivering drugs. I would wait on a street corner, not far from my grandma's house, for people to show up and

begin the delivering process. I was one of many such delivery boys, but I also had a privileged status because of the respect that my older brother Lester had on the streets, who was nicknamed “Guerequano.” Lester was born with a few disabilities, which included a lack of function in his right arm and his left leg. This made it more difficult for him to fight effectively, but he was still greatly respected in the neighborhood. If someone tried to hurt me or steal from me, I would have the protection of my cousins and my brother, and this made me the safest delivery boy, in addition to being the fastest. People sought me out when a special package needed delivery, and I often did four or more deliveries in the same night.

The process of delivering the drugs was very simple: the person sending a package would already know the address to which the package was being delivered, so my job was simply to complete the delivery. After I returned, I would immediately receive my payment and get ready for the next delivery.

The police often showed up in our neighborhood, and sometimes they took the other guys in for questioning. Fortunately, they never arrested me or took me to jail because I was so young. Some nights I went to my grandma’s house and gave her part of the money, but I always lied about where I got it, saying that I found it or that I earned it running errands for someone.

Almost a year after I started delivering drugs, I came up with the idea of using some of my friends to help me with the deliveries. I asked a few of the kids if they would like to make some extra money, and they said, “Yes! Of course!” After that, when Lester would give me directions about where to find delivery work, I would send my friends to different locations and used them to make the deliveries, keeping a small commission for myself. Not only was this system more profitable, but it also reduced the risks and dangers of me being harmed by older kids or adults when making deliveries.

During the three years that I worked these jobs on the streets, survival was a daily challenge, yet it actually kept me out of more serious trouble. On many occasions, street fights would break out in our neighborhood, often consisting of groups of 12-15 guys throwing rocks at each other. On other occasions, there were shootings or stabbings using knives or machetes. I was fortunate that I was not in the neighborhood when most these fights occurred.

I cannot recount all of the times that I was attacked or injured while living on the streets, but a few incidents stand out in my memory. One of the worst occasions was when someone was cleaning the street and burning the trash, and my friends and I decided to play with the fire. One of my friends had a piece of wood in his hands, and on the wood was some plastic that was burning. When he started swinging the wood, a piece of flaming plastic landed in my left eye, burning my eye and the area around it. I started crying like crazy, and a few people nearby immediately took me to the hospital. The next few days were very painful, and when I returned my grandma's house, I had to listen to my family saying that it was a good thing that this happened to me, to keep me out of trouble. I was called the "pirate" for some time thereafter, on account of the patch I had to wear over my eye. I still have a small scar on my nose from the incident, but I was very fortunate that I healed quickly and didn't suffer a more serious injury.

I also remember getting hurt because I rarely wore shoes on the streets. I was frequently injuring my feet or ankles, and one day a nail went clear through my foot. I ran back to my grandma's house crying, and I recall my grandma lighting a candle and using it to clean my wound. For several days, I was unable to run or even walk normally, but even these crazy incidents never kept me off the streets.



One of the most difficult aspects of living on the streets was the abuse that I witnessed and tried hard to avoid. Young girls were often sexually abused on the streets, and it was common to see them accepting money for sex. I would often see older men holding hands with young teenage girls (12-16 years old), and I knew that money was invariably involved. But it wasn't purely for sex—most of the girls also preferred to have someone protecting them and keeping them safe from other predators in the neighborhood. As a result, teenage girls in my neighborhood were often pregnant and would have one child after another. At some point, the same girls typically became addicted to drugs or alcohol, and as soon as their own daughters were old enough, they would use them to make money as well. Men would have several kids with

different women, the kids would grow up in the streets, and the cycle would start all over again.

There was also a lot of sexual abuse of young boys, especially in the area where I was growing up. Many adults would offer boys money in exchange for sex, drugs, or alcohol. I always avoided direct contact with people that were dispensing drugs or alcohol, and my friends and I stayed away from the areas where abuse was more frequent. I also did my best to be surrounded by my friends. As a result, my younger brother Eduardo and I somehow avoided being sexually abused growing up, which was exceptionally rare for kids living on the streets.

I am also appreciative of my grandma for doing her best to raise me well. Unfortunately, the constant chaos in her house made it very difficult for my grandma to create a family environment for us. Sometimes she brought us to church or to catechism class, but it had very little effect on our lifestyle, as the demands of survival always took priority. My grandma also tried to send me to school a few times, but not only was I the worst student, I felt ashamed being the “giant” student in the classroom. Invariably, I would end up in the director’s office on the same day that I started, and then I would run away from school during recess. Given the problems I created, neither my grandma nor the school tried very hard to keep me attending, and my grandma could do very little about it since I was not even sleeping at home most nights and she was trying to care for my other siblings as well.



Living on the streets left me feeling very alone and incapable of moving forward in my life. I was jealous watching other kids as they walked with their parents and lived a normal life. It made me feel very sad, depressed, and confused about my situation and the purpose of living. I was also mad at myself for being poor and abandoned. No one ever celebrated my birthday, and I never received a present from anyone in my family. Nor was there any opportunity to celebrate Christmas, or any other holiday, because all of my focus was on survival.

My awareness of these issues increased, and my emotions deepened, as I grew older and understood more about my life. Washing cars and dealing

drugs was fun in the beginning, because it provided me with spending money. But as I grew older, I realized that I needed to do these things just to survive, and I felt trapped in my lifestyle because I had no other choice.

By the time I turned 11 years old, I was beginning to think more about my life—and I felt both sad and scared. I realized that by learning how to survive on the streets, I was becoming a person without any values, and my sadness was growing deeper. I remember crying when holidays or celebrations came around, because I felt empty inside. I was worried that my circumstances would never change. I struggled with the feeling that I had been rejected by my parents and my family, and I was consumed with increasingly deeper emotions, including anger, emptiness, pain, and loneliness. Sometimes, all my circumstances and feelings would converge and attack me at once, causing me to feel a deep hatred towards my family. Anger and hunger began to dominate my daily life, and the risks of being abused by older people were increasing daily.

After several years of living on the streets, I was behaving more like a 25-year-old man than an 11-year-old boy, because I had learned to look and act like an older boy and to create fear in others. This was a very important quality for survival, because it was critical to win the respect and admiration of others according to the social culture in the streets. As a result, fights became more frequent, as I tried to establish my reputation. On one occasion, I spent two weeks in the hospital after being hit by a rock on the backside of my head.

Life on the streets was also territorial, and as I grew older, I learned the increasing importance of being surrounded by friends. You were never welcome in a different neighborhood or territory, and if you needed to pass through an unfamiliar area, it was very important to be accompanied by others. Groups of 10 to 15 kids were called “Pandillas” and they were typically armed with machetes, knives, glass bottles, and guns. Pandillas from other neighborhoods would enter our neighborhood, sometimes for the specific purpose of invading and damaging a particular person’s house, and on other occasions, to kill or hurt someone. Incidents like this resulted in people calling the police immediately, but by the time the police arrived, it was usually too late.

My last year on the streets was the worst. My behavior was getting increasingly worse and I was beginning to have a deeper understanding of the predicament of my life and the lack of a future. My anger, loneliness, and sadness were all getting stronger. People were no longer welcoming me into their homes, and families were starting to prohibit their kids from hanging out with me. I was increasingly rejected by my own community, as I was growing physically bigger while my behavior was getting worse. It was a vicious cycle—the more I gained a bad reputation, the better my chances of survival on the streets, but the more I was rejected by my community. Society and the fight for survival were turning me into the type of person that others perceived as dangerous—someone who would kill, steal, and abuse others without caring. I never felt love, appreciation, care, or anything else that made me feel valued as a person. As the level of rejection increased, it deepened my pain, hurt, and anger.

There were times when I tried to figure out my life and my future, but I didn't know how to escape the cycle of survival that dominated my daily existence. Moreover, while fighting for survival, it was very complicated



Juan does not have any photos of himself or his family during the first 11 years of his life.

to understand the difference between good and evil. Such distinctions were mostly irrelevant to my daily life of trying to protect myself, earn a little money, and get something to eat. Morality has very little relevance to a person who is just trying to survive from day-to-day.



In March of 2000, when I was 11 years old and living full-time on the streets, a social worker named Eyra Zequeira contacted my grandma and told her about a place that I should be living, along with my younger brother, Eduardo, and my older sister, Carolina. My grandma began looking for me, so she could bring me back to her house whenever Eyra was coming to visit. Occasionally, she was successful, and Eyra told me amazing things about a home—a place with food, clothing, and toys—where I could live with other children, have a new family, and go to school.

Of course, hearing about having food, my own bed, new shoes, and things like that was of some interest to me. Eyra was very kind whenever she spoke with me, and my grandma did her best to persuade me to live at this new place. Grandma told us that she would come to visit us every weekend, and it sounded increasingly attractive to me.

At some point, my grandma made an agreement with Eyra, and one Sunday, Eyra came to my grandma's house to pick us up. Grandma searched the neighborhoods and was able to find me and bring me back to her house. I remember that we walked for nearly an hour to arrive at the new property, and when we eventually arrived, and a new chapter of my life began.

Chapter 3

Tears Falling Secretly

(Anzelie)

Lord, why are you silent?

—Shūsaku Endō

Hi! This is Anzelie Salada Bautista, 27 years old. After receiving my college degree, I moved to the campus of a children's home on the island of Bohol, in the Philippines, called *Arms of Love*. I became part of the staff, while also working as a preschool teacher in a nearby private school. It is a blessing that I am able to live here and fulfill my dream of being a teacher. But my life was not always so blessed.

I was in the womb of my mother when she was only 17 years old. My father had many vices, including drinking liquor excessively, smoking, and gambling, so my grandmother encouraged my mother to separate from him. Then on September 24, 1989, in our house at Kauswagan, Cagayan De Oro City (part of Mindanao), a healthy baby girl was born, named Anzelie...me!

When I was a year old, my mother needed to go back to work so she could sustain my daily needs. She went to work in Manila as a maid, but after three months, she returned to Kauswagan, because her boss in Manila was overly demanding. After returning home, my grandmother encouraged her to start a small business at the port selling banana cue (a popular snack food sold on the street in the Philippines). After a while, my mother met a man named Nestor Datahan, who worked as a porter on one of the piers. Days passed, and after some time, Nestor began courting my mother and they became girlfriend and boyfriend.

After a few months, my grandma noticed that my mother kept getting home very late at night. When she asked my mother where she had been, my mother refused to answer, so my grandma began asking around. Upon hearing rumors that my mother was staying at a boy's house, my grandma went to Nestor's house and found them in bed together. From that moment on, my mother decided not to return to my grandma's house, and my grandma started taking care of me herself.

Once she assumed care of me, my grandma needed to find work so she could provide for my needs. She went to work at a restaurant as a cook, and from time to time, she brought me to the restaurant to feed me. The food there was delicious! Every morning, when I woke up, my lunch and snacks were already prepared and ready for me to take to school. Every evening, before I went to sleep, grandma told me a story or sung a lullaby. And on some nights, she would comb my hair as I slowly drifted off to sleep, listening to her telling me how much she loved me. When I was sick my grandma was always by my side 24 hours a day. My life during those years was filled with love, care, and happiness, because my grandma was always there for me.

Sometimes, my grandma asked me what I wanted to do when I grew up. I always answered enthusiastically, "I want to become a teacher, Grandma!" And she told me that she would do everything she could to help me attend college and become a teacher someday, because being a teacher had also been her ambition in life. But unfortunately, her parents were unable to support her going to college, and my grandma was never able to fulfill her dream.

When I was seven, after I had been living with my grandma for five years, my mother came to visit because my grandma had become sick. She asked my grandma for forgiveness for various things she had done, and because my grandma had a very soft heart, she forgave my mother. At that moment, my mother asked her a favor: that she be allowed to start caring for me, at least until grandma got better. My grandma agreed, and she kindly told me that I needed to stay with my mother for a while because she was sick. She assured me that I would come back once she was healthy again. So my clothes were packed, and with tears falling on the floor, I left the home of my grandma to stay with my mom and stepfather.



My mother and stepfather lived in front of the pier in Cagayan De Oro City, Mindanao. At first, my stepfather was very good to me, caring for me and providing for my basic needs. My mother enrolled me in the first grade, and everything that I needed in school was provided by my stepfather. Over time, however, his attitude changed. Every evening, he started to come home drunk, without any money, and he began fighting with my mother. That's

when I started going to my neighbor's house, coming home only after the fighting had ended and my stepfather had fallen asleep.

During this time, I especially loved a movie entitled, *Chabelita*. One night, I asked my mother if I could watch *Chabelita* at our neighbor's house, and I was excited when she gave me permission. Later that night, while I was at the neighbor's, my stepfather came home drunk and began calling for me. Sadly, I did not hear him because of the volume of the television, so my mother came over to the neighbor's house and instructed me to go home.

After I arrived home, I tried to run to my room, but my drunk stepfather intervened and instructed me to sit down in front of him. He asked me where I had been, and I told him that I was watching a movie at our neighbor's house. "Why didn't you answer me?" he asked angrily, "I was calling for you!" I explained that I was unable to hear him, but my explanation was not satisfactory. In a rage, he picked up his plate of food and threw it into my face. Instinctively, I raised my legs up into the air to protect myself and the plate broke onto my foot, causing a deep gash. I have a large scar on that foot to this day.

That was not the only time my stepfather physically abused me. On another occasion, when I accidentally broke his bottle of cologne, he put me inside a rice sack and closed it tightly. I was inside the sack for almost eight hours, and I became very scared because I started to have trouble breathing. I thought it might be my last day on earth, but then I started to bite and chew on the inside of the sack. Eventually, I was able to make a hole large enough to allow me to breathe, and after a few more hours, I made the hole large enough to get out and I escaped.

Early one morning, my mother received a call from my grandma, who said she wanted to come and visit me. My mother made me promise not to tell Grandma about the things that my stepfather had done to me, and eager to see my grandma again, I readily agreed. I was so excited that Grandma was coming, I was willing to say or do anything! I barely slept at all that night, thinking of seeing Grandma again.

The next day, Grandma arrived, and I ran to her, hugging her very tight and kissing her. While I sat beside her, Grandma noticed the scar on my foot, and she asked me what had happened. My mother then told a lie, saying that

I accidentally broke a plate on my foot when she was not around. But later on, I told my grandma the truth of what had happened and how my stepfather always came home drunk at night. When my mother arrived back home, my grandma became very angry and scolded her, saying, “You know who I really love? My granddaughter! And I am not going to allow you or anyone else hurt her!” I was so happy when I heard those words, and immediately, Grandma told me to pack my things and come back home with her.

After a year went by, my grandma received a call that my mother had delivered another baby girl. My stepsister was named Grace, and she was born healthy. But when Grace was a year old, my mother noticed that she was becoming thinner and took her to the doctor. The doctor informed her that Grace had a disease called polio, and that she would never have the ability to talk or walk.

Soon after that, my mother became pregnant again. After nine months, my second stepsister, Evelyn, was born, but she died about a year later. It is my understanding that her death was attributed to my stepfather allowing Evelyn to drink hard coffee (an alcoholic beverage) on a daily basis. After Evelyn’s death, my mom and stepfather moved to Tambongan, Candijay, Bohol.

For about three years, during the time that Grace and Evelyn were born, I continued to live with my grandma. But when I was 10 years old, my grandma became sick again and went to the hospital because she had a fever and was vomiting blood. One morning, while visiting my grandma in the hospital, she received a letter from my mother which said that my mother wanted to start caring for me again. When my grandma told me that, at first I was excited because I really wanted to see my mom again, but at the same time, I felt scared that my grandma might leave me with my mom and stepfather. Grandma assured me that I would only go for a visit.

In May 1999, after my grandma was released from the hospital, we travelled to Bohol to visit my mom. When my mom saw me, she came running up to me and threw her arms around me, hugging me tight while crying. Later on, I saw a man that looked familiar to me, standing with a child. At first, I thought they might be neighbors, but then my mother introduced them as my stepfather and stepsister, Jonavie. Upon arriving back at the



Anzelie has no photos of herself before she came to the *Arms of Love* home at the age of 15.

house, I saw another girl lying on the floor, and my mom introduced her to me as my other stepsister, Grace.

For about a month, my grandma and I lived together with my mom and her family. Then on June 5, 1999, in the evening, I saw my grandma packing her things, but noticed that she was not packing my things. So I asked her, “Grandma, why are you not including my things in your suitcase?” And Grandma replied, “You are going to stay here in Bohol for a while. I am going to go back to Cagayan, and then I will visit you again on your birthday in September.”

After she finished packing her things, I went to bed, and as was her custom, Grandma knelt at the bed beside me. While I was falling asleep, she hugged me and kissed me, and said, “Granddaughter, if you ever have problems in life, don’t get easily discouraged! Pursue your dreams in life. God will always help you.” And I whispered, “Yes, Grandma! I will do that.” And then I drifted off to sleep.

Early the next morning, on June 6, 1999, my mom asked me to go the store because we needed to purchase school supplies. June 7 was the first day of class, so I excitedly bought my new schoolbag, notebooks, pencils, crayons, ballpoint pens, and other supplies. The next day, I started the fourth grade and was thrilled to be in a new environment making new friends. Later that day, I cried when my mom told me that Grandma had already left to go back to Cagayan, but she comforted me with the reminder that Grandma would be back to visit me on my birthday.

The next month, early in the morning, our neighbor called my mother over to her house. I didn’t know what they were talking about, but I soon heard my mother shouting and crying, and I couldn’t understand what she

was saying. A little while later, she called me over and gave me the news that my grandma had died, as a result of pneumonia and fatigue. When I heard that news, I almost killed myself. I didn't know what to do...I loved my grandma so much, she was the source of my dreams. I asked my mom if we could go to her burial, but sadly, we lacked the money for the boat fare, and I became severely depressed. I just wanted to die and be in heaven with my grandma.

After the burial of my grandmother, the treatment that I received from my mother and stepfather changed. The chaotic life began.



In our ceiling, my stepfather stored various materials, including guava wood, rope, bamboo stick, and wire. But these were not tools of his trade, nor were they supplies for fixing things around our house. These items were kept in our ceiling for one purpose only: to beat me with.

My stepfather drank every day and spanked me whenever I made a small mistake. Every day, I was filled with fear. One day, he told me to cook a fried egg, but I am sad to say that it was not perfect, because I put too much salt on it. My stepfather then beat me with a piece of wood, until I got a lot of bruises on my body. He would do the same thing if I didn't wash the dirty clothes properly or made some other mistake doing the household chores. My mom and stepfather never made me feel like I was their daughter or a princess—they treated me like I was their maid.

Unfortunately, my stepfather was not satisfied with just spanking me every day. Beginning in October 1999, every time my mother was not around, my stepfather would touch the private parts of my body. Later on, he began doing it at night also. After my mom had fallen asleep, my stepfather would come into our bedroom and touch my private parts. This happened every night, but I was scared to tell my mom or anyone else, because he said that if I told anyone, he would kill me. And I had every reason to believe him.

Many questions arose in my mind, such as, "Why is he doing these things to me?" But I had no answers. And while I wanted to share my problems with my mother, I thought that telling her would be useless because I never felt any



This is the home that Anzelie lived in with her mother and stepfather, after her grandma passed away in 1999.

love from her either, and I had no reason to think that she would believe me. So I kept my problems to myself.

One morning, my mother asked me to cook breakfast, but because there was no firewood, my stepfather became angry and punched me in the head. I cried very hard and asked my mother to help me, but she just cursed at me instead. My mom directed me to get firewood, so I went into the forest with a rice sack to gather it for her. While coming back home, I saw my friends playing and picking flowers in the garden at our school, and so I began playing with them also. I then picked a rose flower and finished going home, with the sack full of firewood. But I was late getting back, so my mother was very angry, and she sliced the petals of the rose and made me eat it with my rice. It was times like these when my heart felt the heaviest, and I felt that no one really loved me. Not only did my mother fail to provide for my basic needs, she abused me physically and emotionally. I longed for love and care, for arms that would hug me and lips that would kiss me when I was sad, or a hand that would help me up when I was tired. But it felt like an impossible dream.

I did not know anything about God at this time in my life, but my grandma had taught me that I could call on God anytime and anywhere

through prayer. So every time I was sad and hurt, I prayed that my stepfather would die or that my mother would separate from him, so I would no longer experience such hurt and abuse. But it never happened, so I never felt that my prayers were heard.

Throughout these years, attending school was a constant struggle. For some periods of time, either my mother or stepfather would prohibit me from going to school, so I could help with chores around the house or care for my younger siblings. Most of the time, I was told that they had no money to purchase my books or my school supplies. As a result, I often felt dejected, thinking there was no good future ahead for me. But I clung to my dream of someday being a teacher, and through sheer grit and determination, I usually found some way to attend school and pass my classes, though it was often a battle. For example, in June 2000, when I started the fifth grade, I entered my classroom with nothing more than one old notebook and one ballpoint pen. My classmates laughed at me as I entered the room, but I ignored them. Later in the day, because it was the first day of school, we were each asked to share our ambition in life, and when it was my turn, I said that I wanted to become a teacher. All of my classmates laughed at me, and one of them, Stephen, teased me saying that it was impossible for me to become a teacher because I was poor, my stepfather didn't love me, and no one could support me. I felt deeply ashamed.

In September 2000, my mother told me to stop going to school because she was four months pregnant, and she wanted me to take care of my stepsisters Jonavie (two years old) and Grace (four years old). But I never quit. Even while my classmates were passing my house on the way to school, I worked hard to finish my chores—like fixing our blankets, sweeping the floor, washing dishes, cooking breakfast, scrubbing the floor using a coconut husk, and sweeping our backyard—so I could go to school also. My mother would never give me money for snacks or buy me paper for school, but nothing stopped me—I just knew I had to get to school and finish. I learned how to borrow paper and other supplies from my classmates, even though they murmured about it. My projects were always late. But somehow, I always got my work done.

By December 2000, my mother was increasing her demands that I stop my schooling, because in February she would be delivering her new baby boy and she had no one who could assist in caring for my stepsisters. But again, I refused. Three times a week, I still managed to get to school. And when my mother refused to give me any money to pay for my school supplies, I found ways to make a little money, like collecting snails from our neighbor's rice field (as snails are pests that eat the grains). The neighbor would give me money for collecting the snails, and if I could successfully hide the money from my mother, I could pay my contribution at school. And on one occasion, my teacher told me that the neighbor had paid my required contribution for me.

One evening, when my stepfather arrived at home drunk, he opened the rice pot and noticed that there was no rice cooked for dinner. He began shouting at me, and when I explained that there was no rice to cook, he punched my head many times and then slammed it against the cement. My mother cried for almost two hours because I was unconscious and I would not wake up. When I finally regained consciousness, I asked my mother, "Why are you crying? Don't cry... if I die, you will be happy. You don't care about me or love me anyway." She was silent and said nothing.

Later, in the middle of the night, I couldn't sleep because of what had happened to me. I asked myself, "Why did God give me a mother that doesn't care about me?" I really felt, at that moment, that there was no one in the world who cared about me. And I wondered, *does God even exist?*



There was another reason that I did my best to go to school every day. Early one morning, when I woke up, I noticed that my mother was not around because she had gone to the neighbor's house to borrow rice grains for breakfast. The house of our neighbor was some distance away, and my heart began beating fast because I knew what was going to happen. When my stepfather noticed that my mother was not around, he let Jonavie go to our neighbor's to play with her friends, and sent my other stepsister, Grace, downstairs to eat. Then he dragged me to his bedroom, kissing me and touching all the private parts of my body. I tried to tell him, "Papa, please stop doing this! I'm just a kid!" But he persisted, threatening that if I ever told

anyone, he would either kill me or we would both be sent to jail. He even said that if my mother died in childbirth, he would make me his wife. I cried secretly, and kept it to myself.

This happened time and again. Any time my mother was not around, and I was home during the day, he would tell me to go to the bedroom. If I refused, he would physically carry me there. It happened many times. Every time my stepfather touched my private parts, I wanted to kill him. But because he was so strong, he was able to do whatever he wanted. And I told God, "You are not a true God, because if you were, you would never allow these things to happen to me."

When it was over, I would hug Grace and cry silently, to release my hurts. Grace would watch as my stepfather spanked me, punched me, and touched my private parts. But she could not speak, due to her polio. That's why, when I was hurt, I would talk to her saying, "Grace, if you could talk, maybe you would be able to help my agony in this house." That's one of the reasons Grace was so important to me. I felt like she understood me, she knew what I was going through, and she felt my pain. And whenever I was hurt, I could hug her. I couldn't hug my mother or anyone else when I felt hurt. Grace later died at the age of 13.

One night, my stepfather told me to let Jonavie watch a movie at our neighbor's house. As soon as I heard that, tears were falling already inside of me. Jonavie was very happy and ran to the house of our neighbor. I then noticed that my stepfather had a pail of water. I asked him why he had water in the pail, since we didn't have a bathroom. He answered that he wanted me to take a bath. I yelled, "No!" but he insisted. He pulled my hands away and took off my dress. Again, my tears were falling secretly. I wanted to kill him. In past months, he just touched my private parts, but this time, after my bath, he did to me the things that only married couples do.

Finally, one night before going to sleep, I suddenly told my mom about everything my stepfather had done to me. It was the first time I told her about the abuse. My mother cried when she heard it, and I was hopeful that my mother would then separate from my stepfather. But instead, she just tried to stay at home during the day, or take me with her when going to the neighbors.

In February 2001, a cute baby boy was born, named Vinesse James. My mom and stepfather were so happy—but not me. I knew that another sibling would add to my burdens in life and make it even more challenging for me to achieve my ambition of finishing school. Already, it was so difficult for me to take good care of my disabled sister, Grace. Every time, when her waste came out, I needed to watch her, otherwise she would eat it. I would bathe her and sometimes carry her outside, so she could see the beauty in the world.

Within me, every time I showed Grace the beauty of our world, I increased my resolve to finish school and achieve my dream of becoming a teacher. I earnestly wanted to prove to my parents that no amount of poverty, problems, and discrimination could prevent my success. The root of my inspiration was the encouragement of my grandma to pursue my ambitions and never give up on my dreams.

One day in April 2001, there was a pastor, Badoy Virador, who invited to me to join his children's ministry. He told me stories about Jesus and how powerful he is, but I refused to believe any of it. I sometimes went back, but only because there were snacks after the sessions. The first Bible verse the pastor asked me to memorize was Ephesians 6:1, "Children, obey your parents, for this is right." All I could think about was every moment of abuse and molestation, every sick instruction that I had received from my stepfather. Nothing the pastor said made any sense in the context of my life.

In May 2001, I was so excited because I was starting my last year of elementary school. Like many times before, my mother didn't buy me any school supplies or give me any money to pay for school, but I went to school anyway (without permission) and enrolled myself. When I returned home, I was expecting my mom to be angry with me, but this time she reacted differently. I asked her, "Mom, why are you not angry that I went to school and enrolled myself?"

And she answered, through her tears, "I am sorry that I did not protect you from your stepfather." Because I have a very soft heart, I hugged my mother and told her, "It's okay, Mom," with tears in my eyes also. At that moment, my mother told me that she would do her best to support my needs in school; I was so happy to hear those words from my mother. The next day, she gave me a new pencil, pen, paper, and notebook, and she told me to not

let my stepfather know because he would be angry if he knew that I was going to school again.

I made it to school consistently for the next couple of months, but it didn't last. One morning in August, my mom tried to force me to stay home from school and take care of my siblings, but I snuck away and went to school without her noticing. Later in the day, when my mother looked for me and I was not at home, she went to my school, grabbed me out of class, and dragged me back home. I felt ashamed because all of my classmates saw what happened to me. Then my stepfather and mother cut all my hair off, so I was nearly bald, to keep me from going back to school. Still I persisted, and when I went to class, I wore a hat so no one would see my lack of hair. But my classmates teased and bullied me anyway, and eventually, I stopped going to school.

Every day, as I watched my classmates walk by our house on the way to school, I asked questions that had no answers. Why was I born into a family where no one loved me, which would not even support my basic needs? I could not feel any love from God or anyone else, because of the terrible things that had happened to me. Every day, my work was to take care of my siblings, wash the dirty clothes, cook the meals, and clean the house. Meanwhile, my stepfather and mother would go to their neighbor's house to participate in gambling, like mahjong and playing cards.

The fact that my mother showed love to my siblings just enhanced my pain. Any time Jonavie made a mistake, neither of my parents would spank her. They would give her new dresses and a lot of food, even while I had nothing to wear or eat. Every day, I heard my mother tell Jonavie, "I love you," but she never said it to me. I longingly watched as my mother gently combed the hair of my stepsister, but I never experienced that from the hands of my mother. Every day I dreamed that I would hear the words, "I love you," from the mouth of my mother, but it never happened. In the midst of this pain, however, I could still remember the happiness I felt from the love of my grandmother, when she would hug me, kiss me, and sing to me. Those memories made me think it was still possible to have a good future, and because of that, I never stopped dreaming, despite my agony.

My neighbors sometimes told me to run away and escape from my home, but I never knew where to go. They told me to ask for help from the DSWD [Department of Social Welfare and Development], but because I was so young, I was scared to escape and try to go there. I didn't even know where the DSWD was, and my neighbors wouldn't help me get there because they were scared that my father would hurt them also.

One evening, in October 2002, my drunk stepfather sent me to the store to buy kerosene for our lamp. When I was nearly back home, I tripped on a large stone, and I accidentally broke the bottle that held the kerosene. That's when my stepfather got a huge knife and said that he was going to kill me, because I had spilled the kerosene.

When my mother noticed that he had grabbed a knife, she dragged me out of the house and told me to run. I could hear my mother telling my stepfather that he had no right to kill me, just because I'm not his daughter. My stepfather came outside looking for me, but I was hiding in grass that was much taller than me, and luckily, he could not find me. My mother ran away also, carrying my stepbrother, and when she found me, we escaped together to a neighboring town named Abihilan, Candijay, Bohol, and there, we found a place to sleep.

When I woke up, I could not find my mother anywhere, and the place was unfamiliar to me. I asked the owner of the house, "Where is my mother?" And she answered, "Your mom is not here. She went back to your house, to stay with your stepfather." And I cried and cried, because she had chosen my stepfather over me.

I asked the owner of the house, "Can you help me? I don't want to go back to my house." And unlike my neighbors of so many years, she answered, "Sure!" I felt so happy hearing those words.

The owner of the house gave me twenty pesos for a bus fare and sent me to a nearby town called Poblacion. She gave me directions on what to do—that I was to ride a jeepney into town and then go to the DSWD office. When I arrived in the town, I followed the instructions of the owner of that house, and I found the office of the DSWD.

She was the only person who ever made any effort to help me escape from the hands of my stepfather.

Chapter 4

The Roots of Compassion

(Robert)

*If we conceal our wounds out of fear and shame,
Our inner darkness can neither be illuminated nor become a light for others.*^[2]

—Brennan Manning

Some scars are visible...most are not. A childhood of abandonment, abuse, and neglect has had lingering effects throughout my life. It has shown up in a variety of ways, including depression and anxiety, attachment and relationship difficulties, and symptoms of complex PTSD. The place of pain is a familiar one, and it is far easier to remain there than to engage in the hard work and discipline that is needed to sustain the belief that anyone values me or cares about me.

The abuse that Anzelie, Juan, and Myla shared in the past few chapters is far more horrific than anything I can imagine. A part of me is reluctant to share my personal story at all, as I feel nothing but privilege and blessing by comparison. But therein lies the trap: “by comparison.” We have a constant tendency to compare ourselves with others, whether it be our challenges or our successes, our weaknesses or our strengths...our cultures, ideals, philosophies, wealth, talents, careers, ethnicities, heritage. All of these things comprise our unique identities. And yet there comes a point where *we need to stop comparing and start relating*. No matter what our outward differences, there are similarities in our inward journeys. We are part of a shared human experience.

I have learned that the painful experiences of my life are not to be avoided, neither are they to be celebrated. They are simply part of who I am. They serve a purpose when I remain connected to them, without being limited by them. When I am able to strike that balance, they give rise to empathy and compassion for others. A commitment to value those who have been abused. A heart drawn toward loving those who are hurting. A passion to accomplish justice on behalf of those who have been mistreated. Utilized in this way, my struggles and challenges are empowering, rather than limiting.

We should always pursue healing and growth in our lives. We were created for a fullness of life that springs from our connectedness with each other, with God, and with the beauty of the world that we live in. We should pursue a life filled with joy, awe, wonder, and gratitude. But healing does not mean forgetting, nor does it immunize us from ongoing struggles or further injury and pain. Our wounds may heal, and the scars may fade, but they remain a part of who we are.

We only realize our full potential when we engage the fullness of our identity with the lives that we live. Healing brings strength, but we can find purpose in our pain.



Teresa Benson eloped on October 21, 1965, the day after her 18th birthday. A diary entry from her sister, Pat, recounted the events of that day:

Well, now my sister's done it. She eloped with Norman Bruce Greenbrook today. His parents knew the church where they were getting married, but refused to tell us... The only clothes she had were the ones she had on her back (she was dressed to go to college—guess she never made it) and her new, \$20 outfit she received for her birthday yesterday...

Yesterday, she got the engagement ring right in front of my mother, and now she is gone. Mom was making such beautiful plans for the wedding, so she feels awful now... But in a way, I'm glad for Teresa, because she got what she always wanted for Norman and her. I hope they are safe and sound.

Teresa's parents, John and Cora, would later hold a "consecration ceremony" for their daughter's marriage to Norman, on November 21, 1965, at the Lutheran Church of Our Savior in San Jose, California.

The marriage would be short-lived. Teresa and Norman separated six months later and Teresa filed a Complaint for Divorce on May 26, 1966,



Teresa pregnant with Robert in 1966, touring Norman's workplace with his parents.

based on allegations of mistreatment. An interlocutory divorce decree was entered on July 8, 1966, awarding Teresa full custody of the child that she was carrying. I was delivered on August 13, 1966—Robert John Greenbrook.

Teresa lived with John and Cora for the next 10 months, but then moved out on her own in June 1967 and began supporting herself through a combination of odd jobs and welfare. It was during that

period of time that severe neglect nearly took my life on multiple occasions. On one occasion, I was hospitalized for severe malnutrition, and on another, for severe pneumonia. A scar that I still have today evidences an emergency surgery that was performed during this time. Some days, Teresa left me in the care of neighbors or strangers without adequate food or clothing, requiring that a baby sitter or relative subsequently track down my whereabouts. Then one day, Teresa said she was leaving for work—but she never returned.

I don't have any direct recollection of these early years, which I've learned secondhand through court documents, correspondence, and conversations with others. But such events, especially in the first couple of years of life, can have a significant impact on a person physically and psychologically, throughout childhood and even into adulthood. According to studies, the ramifications of early childhood neglect and abuse can extend long into adulthood, with a wide range of adverse consequences on a person's physical and psychological health.

After abandoning me in early 1968, Teresa moved to Berkeley and began working for a weekly underground newspaper called *The Berkeley Barb*. Founded in 1965, it was one of the most influential countercultural newspapers of the late 1960's, focusing to a great extent on



Teresa with her son, Robert, in 1966.

opposition to the Vietnam War, the Free Speech Movement, and activist political events at UC Berkeley. Teresa subsequently moved to Norwalk, near Los Angeles, where she worked as a waitress for a nightclub.

Not long thereafter, Teresa's life took another turn when she became part of a counter-countercultural movement, often referred to as the "Jesus Movement." Influenced by this new movement, Teresa moved to Hollywood on September 18, 1970, which she conveyed in a letter to her parents: "I'm quitting my job in two weeks, and will be moving to L.A. to work with 'His Place' for the Lord. I've got a few people backing me, but will probably have to work one or two days a week..." The founder of "His Place," Arthur Blessitt, described it as a "Jesus nightclub or coffee house" on Sunset Strip. Blessitt would later become famous for walking a wheeled cross around the U.S. and then the world.

During this time, Teresa sold all of her possessions and began living in community with others, spending most of her time preaching on the streets. For brief periods of time, Teresa wrote to Cora and John frequently, handwritten letters that I found years later. Her letters read like a stream of consciousness, sharing her religious experiences and describing some of her daily activities, while emphasizing that the end is near and the importance of being filled with the Holy Ghost. Her religious fervor comes through her writings, including a letter postmarked on Christmas Eve, 1970, that described a four-hour street meeting earlier in the day. Her letter concluded, "We don't make a big fuss about Christmas, Santa Claus, and exchanging gifts. I'll be preaching Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Thank you Jesus."

After spending four months at "His Place" on the Sunset Strip, Teresa followed the Jesus Movement to New York City, where she continued to evangelize on the streets and live in religious communities. Teresa remarried in New York and two years later, she moved with her new husband to Seattle, where they became part of a loosely-connected association of communal houses known as the Jesus People Army. The JPA was known at the time for extensive training programs designed to raise up an end-days "army" of disciplined, young evangelists. The JPA later became associated with the Children of God, a fringe group that was later dogged by allegations of child sexual

abuse. Teresa seemed continually drawn to whatever seemed the most raw, real, and radical.

I never found any records explaining her next transition, but by the end of the 1970's, Teresa renounced her Christian faith and joined a branch of Islam known as Sufism. Teresa joined a Sufi group in Santa Cruz where she lived with a man of the same sect, following her two failed marriages. I came across an undated document years later, signed by two witnesses, in which she formally embraced Sufism and adopted a new name:

I, Teresa Christine Benson, daughter of John August Benson of Burbank, California, do hereby of my own clear will and wish consciously enter the religion of Islam. Teresa Christine Benson, formerly Christian...She is given the Islamic name Nafisa Firdaus Al-Chishti.

At the time of her death at the age of 34, Teresa was living in her only possession, a van that had been converted into her living quarters.

I often wonder where I would be today, and how my life would have turned out, had I remained with Teresa throughout those years. From that perspective, my abandonment sometimes strikes me as a blessing, an event that resulted in my life moving in a more positive direction. Yet my life could have gone in many different directions, depending on what happened next ... and the trajectory would be set by the couple who would take me in and later adopt me.



I have no recollection of the first few years of my life. My earliest memory is of a near-drowning incident at a friend's house when I was about five years old. A friend of mine when I was in kindergarten, Greg Enos, had a birthday party at his house that I was allowed to attend. I had already received some swimming lessons, so I had no fear of the water but was not yet proficient at swimming. During the party, while others were inside the house, I went into the backyard by myself and jumped into the pool. My next memory is that of the water covering my head, struggling to get my head above water, gasping for air, flailing about, and Greg's mother running out of the house and jumping into the pool with her clothes on to rescue me.

Over the following years, I grew up in Santa Clara, California, in the home of Cora and John Benson. I've never fully accounted for the time between December 1967 and July 1968. Documents place my date of abandonment sometime between December 1967 and March 1968. According to some accounts, I was staying with John and Cora during part of that time. But growing up, they told me that I had spent a few months living at a local children's shelter, prior to their decision to take me into their home and care for me on a full-time basis. Regardless, John and Cora were awarded full custody of me as legal guardians on July 17, 1968.

I knew growing up that Cora and John were my biological grandparents, that their daughter Teresa was my mother, and that she had abandoned me as a toddler. I never knew the identity of my biological father, and I never heard Cora or John say anything positive about Teresa or my father's side of the family.

When I was in the fourth grade and about nine years old, in late 1974, Norman made a surprise appearance in front of our house, confronted John, and demanded custody of me. John refused, but that made John and Cora nervous that Norman would initiate legal proceedings to regain custody. So they decided to commence legal adoption proceedings instead.



Robert graduating from kindergarten and then celebrating his sixth birthday in 1972.

The day of my adoption is one of the clearest memories that I have from my childhood. On October 27, 1975, I went into Judge McNery's office, at the Superior Court in San Jose, and saw the judge sitting behind his desk surrounded by bookcases. I sat across the desk from him with my parents, John and Cora, sitting on either side of me. I had been told in advance that he would ask me some questions about whether I wanted to be adopted and whether I wanted them to be my parents, so I was prepared for the questions asked. I confirmed to the judge that I was happy to be in their care and wanted to be adopted by them. But the day did not seem so significant to me at the time, as it merely formalized the only family situation that I had ever known.

Unfortunately, I was never taught that my adoption was something to be appreciated, valued, or celebrated. It was, instead, the most closely guarded secret of our family. I was strictly instructed not to tell anyone that I was adopted and was told that I would be severely punished if I did. Cora, in particular, wanted to be sure that all of the other children at my school and their families perceived her to be my "real" mother. She seemed to believe that people would think less of her if they knew she was actually my grandmother.

Only once did this carefully constructed illusion almost fracture. I was in the fifth grade, attending Sunnyvale Christian School at its temporary campus on Lime Avenue in Sunnyvale, California. Cora dropped me off and picked me up each day from school. My best friend at the time was Jim Jameson, and while I no longer recall the context, one day after school Mrs. Jameson had a conversation with Cora in which she made reference to Cora being my grandmother.

When I attempted to get into the car that afternoon, Cora was beyond furious. "How could you tell your friend that I am not your real mother?!" Cora screamed at me. "I told you to never tell anyone! You have ruined me! There is no way that I am driving you home from school today. You can walk home."

And walk home I did. Cora refused to let me get into her car, and ordered me to start walking. For the next few hours, that's what I did. I was old enough to know the way home, which was perhaps five or six miles. So, with my school books in my backpack, I walked through Sunnyvale and then Santa Clara to get home that day. Cora, for her part, followed me in her car

all the way home, always staying about a block behind me. In fact, I had never said anything to Jim or his mother about being adopted—I can only suppose that she had guessed based on Cora’s age. But no matter, I was taught the strictest lesson: *Never let anyone know you are adopted.*

In hindsight, this was one of the most unfortunate aspects of my childhood. Cora seemed to tie her value and identity to being perceived as my “real” mother, and felt ashamed should anyone know otherwise. Moreover, Cora told me countless times how fortunate I was that she adopted me after I was abandoned by Teresa. Cora talked about the many terrible things that could have happened to me if she had not taken me into her home, so I needed to be grateful that I had food to eat, clothes to wear, and a good school to attend.

What I never heard growing up was that Cora and John adopted me because I was special to them, or because they loved me. In fact, Cora never told me that she loved me, nor did she show me any physical affection. Never a hug or a word of love was ever expressed or spoken. When I asked her about it as a child, she simply responded that she was German, she grew up in a strict German home, and German families do not show or express love to their children. From my perspective, Cora never filled the role of a mother in my life, but instead, set herself up as a rescuer to whom I was forever indebted.

Cora also taught me that my value depended upon my performance and success, particularly in school. Cora often recounted to me a parable in the Bible in which a master gives his servants different sums of money (called “talents”) and then departs on a long journey. When he returns, the master is pleased with the servants that invested their talents and doubled their money, but is angry with a servant who simply buried his talent in the ground and kept it safe without investing it. And so it was, Cora taught me, that God had given me many talents, and if I worked hard and put my talents to good use, God would be pleased with me. But if I squandered my talents and was not proportionately successful in life, God would someday say to me what he said to that servant: “You wicked, lazy servant... Throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” The picture she painted of God was that of a stern and demanding banker—not unlike my mother—who had loaned me some talents, and I had

better prove myself worthy of that “generosity” by getting him an adequate return on his investment.

With that as my basic framework, I literally spent all of my time growing up working hard to get good grades in school. My value as a person—and any hope of winning my mom’s affection—depended on my performance. At that age, achievement consisted of getting good grades and winning school contests, such as the annual Science Fair and Speech Meet. Motivated in this way, I achieved straight A’s most of my years growing up; achieved a perfect 4.0 in high school and graduated as class valedictorian at the age of 16; and then graduated first in my departmental class at San Jose State University, in the School of Engineering. In law school, I would graduate in the top 10 percent of my class at UC Berkeley. Ultimately, nothing I did won my mom’s affection or affirmation, but my feelings of self-worth and value remained tightly linked to achievement. The die had been cast.

Such a strong work ethic, of course, did pay significant dividends. My academic performance in college led to my admission to a top law school, and my performance in law school opened the door to being recruited by elite law firms. Nearly 30 years later, I am still practicing law as a partner in a leading global law firm, Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe LLP, representing clients in intellectual property litigation and leading the firm’s Taiwan practice. On the other hand, tying my personal value to performance and achievement contributed to chronic depression and anxiety. When I encountered failures and challenges during my adult life—the loss of a job, career setbacks, failures in marriage and relationships, and crises in ministry—I found myself questioning whether I had any real value at all, to God or to anyone else. It nearly destroyed my life.

Emotional abuse and social isolation were the last ingredients of a childhood that set the stage for challenges later in life. Any time I was disobedient, or when Cora became upset for some other reason, she didn’t merely become upset—she went into a screaming rage. After a great deal of yelling, one of the frequent outcomes was Cora going into her bedroom, closing the door, and propping a chair up against the door (under the doorknob) so that no one, including John, would be able to enter. Sometimes this lasted for a few hours, sometimes days. The expectation was that either John or I (or both)

would come to the outside of the door, apologize, and plead for her forgiveness. Only after Cora was sufficiently satisfied with our acts of contrition and words of atonement would she unbarricade the door and re-emerge from her bedroom.

As I grew older, I rationalized Cora's behavior as being the result of a hormonal imbalance or some other type of mental or emotional instability. In fact, she received some type of hormone shots on a regular basis, and when she was diagnosed with cancer when I was in the third grade and had a hysterectomy, the cancer was attributed to those shots. After her operation, she no longer received the treatment that she was given previously, and as I got older, her instability worsened.

I also wasn't allowed to socialize with other kids growing up. All my attention was directed to attending school and studying. I recall having one birthday party growing up where other kids were invited—it was a pirate-themed party when I was in the third grade—but beyond that, birthdays and other holidays were strictly a family celebration involving the three of us. I never spent the night at another friend's house, never had a friend over to my own house, was never allowed to participate in after-school sports, and was not allowed to participate in any activities outside of school (except for events like the county science fair).

Despite these deficiencies in my home environment, there was much that I was deeply thankful for. I grew up in a good, middle class neighborhood in Santa Clara, California, and spent many summer afternoons riding my bicycle around the city. My physical needs were taken care of and I received a good education at Sunnyvale Christian School from caring teachers who took a genuine interest in my well-being. And every summer, Cora, John and I took a week-long vacation in Yosemite, staying in a private cabin at The Redwoods, a community of rental homes just outside of Wawona. For those few August days every year, I had the freedom to hike, play, and swim in the river relatively unsupervised, connecting with myself and with nature. It was on account of those days that Yosemite and the High Sierras became my spiritual home.

But the greatest blessing that I had growing up was my relationship with John, my adoptive dad. John worked as a machinist, and



Robert feeding a deer in Wawona, Yosemite, in 1973.

eventually, a manufacturing engineer at Lockheed Missiles and Space Company in Sunnyvale, California. Although he never earned a college degree, he began working at Lockheed in 1938 as a tool and die maker and worked his way up to being an engineer, as a result of his experience. John became the second employee at Lockheed to hit the 45 year mark, and those 45 years of company dedication were an inspiration to me as a boy. Growing up on aircraft, missiles, and spacecraft led directly to my enrollment in the Department of Aeronautics when I began attending San Jose State University.

What I valued most in my dad was his gentleness and kindness. Although I never witnessed any affection between my adoptive parents, John was my sole source of love and affection growing up. I remember fondly the Saturday mornings we snuggled on the couch watching cartoons on television and occasionally worked on a science fair project together. Through every storm in our household, even when Cora was most upset, I always knew that I could turn to John as a place of refuge and safety.



During my freshmen year at San Jose State, John began experiencing pain near his stomach, and he visited the doctor frequently. Because



Robert with his adoptive father, John, taking his first steps in 1967 and at Christmas 1973.

John had a history of ulcers, the doctors attributed his pain to a recurrence of those problems and treated him accordingly. When the symptoms did not subside, additional tests were performed, and it was only then that the doctors diagnosed the true source of his symptoms: pancreatic cancer.

I remember the day my parents came home after hearing the diagnosis. I was standing in the living room when they entered through the front door, and John walked quickly past me, his face more pale than usual. Later that evening, my parents sat me down at the kitchen table and broke the news that John had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. He had been given, at most, six months to live.

John immediately began receiving hospice care in our home. Although he was given several months to live, months soon became weeks, and weeks became days. John said that he did not want to be a burden to his family and friends and that he was anxious to be relieved of his pain and to be with Jesus. In less than two weeks, my dad slipped into a coma in his bedroom.

Every night growing up, my dad knelt my bedside and prayed with me, always ending with the Lord's Prayer. One night, while John laid in a coma, I slipped into his room in the dark, knelt at his bedside, and prayed for him as he had so often done for me, closing with the Lord's Prayer. I paused ... whispered that I loved him ... thanked him for all of his sacrifices and love

for me ... and then quietly left the room, leaving his bedroom door ajar, as well as my own.

I woke up a few hours later to an unusual sound, and I quickly correlated it to a noise that the hospice nurse had called “the death rattle.” A few minutes later, I slipped in my dad’s bedroom, and knelt by his side as he breathed his last breath. I then got up, found Cora, woke her up, and let her know that John had passed away.

In the week that followed, I wrote a poem about his passing that I titled, “In Loving Hands.” Although I am now unable to find a copy, I recall the final lines: “You taught me how to live, you showed me how to die, in loving hands.”

I said my final goodbye to my dad a week later at his memorial service in April of 1984. I said goodbye in the only way I knew how, playing my guitar and singing his favorite hymn:

*I will cherish the old rugged cross, 'till my burdens at last I lay down.
I will cherish the old rugged cross, and exchange it some day for a crown.*

I had lost the only person from whom I had known love or affection.



The next three years, I continued to live at home with Cora while completing my undergraduate degree at San Jose State. Her grief over John’s passing, combined with her pre-existing instability, made for a very difficult period of my life. Cora became more controlling than ever, monitoring the mileage on my car and effectively preventing me from dating or having any other social life. But I was completely supporting myself through college, working up to 30 hours per week while maintaining a full load pursuing an engineering degree. Paying rent was something I thought I could not afford. My educational goals were more important to me than relationships. So I endured the difficulties at home to achieve my objective of finishing college at my earliest opportunity.

I still found ways, perhaps not so subtle, to express where I was at in my life. I was on the board of elders at First Immanuel Lutheran Church, near the San Jose State campus, and I volunteered during the summer at

their Community Outreach Ministry Endeavor, which provided groceries for low-income families in the area. One of my “escapes” was writing my own songs, often challenging conventional thinking or behavior, and then performing them in church, accompanying myself on the guitar.

One such song got particular attention—the last two lines of the chorus were, “It never hurts to say, ‘I love you,’ but nothing hurts more than to never hear it said.” I can no longer recall the lyrics to the verses, except that they caused one church member to think that I was about to commit suicide and she called me on the phone to express her concerns. I assured her that suicide was not on my mind, and she pursued it no further.

I may have had no intention to commit suicide directly, but by the time I moved away from home and started law school, I was in a pretty dark place. I remained socially isolated and engaged in a pattern of reckless behavior that, in hindsight, seemed designed to challenge fate. In the summer of 1988, I criss-crossed the Southwest in a beat-up Pinto, taking marathon weekend drives that often resulted in me falling asleep at the wheel. One time, I woke up with my car lodged in the side of a hill next to the highway. Another night, I spun out of control at about 80 miles per hour, coming to rest in the midst of oncoming highway traffic. On yet another occasion, I fell asleep on a freeway north of San Francisco, only to wake up several miles later without any recollection of how I got there. Thankfully, neither I—nor anyone else—was ever injured.

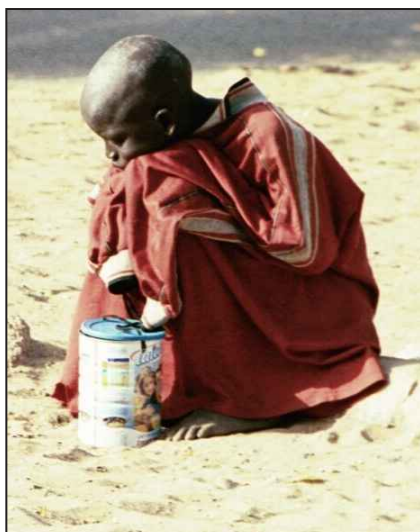
My marathon nighttime drives were a fitting metaphor for how I was living my life at the time: I was driving full-speed into the darkness, without any particular direction or purpose other than to go as far as possible, as fast as possible. And I was shaking my fist at the heavens, daring God to end this life that seemed to offer more in the way of pain than anything else.

My last ride in the Pinto was the day I was going to sell it. I had placed an ad in the newspaper, and a local buyer was coming to see the car and potentially purchase it. I drove it down the street to a local gas station, where I was going to get a smog check before the buyer arrived. Apparently, the fuel line caught on fire, and by the time I noticed the smoke pouring out from underneath the vehicle, the brake pedal went straight to the floor. Nothing happened. I opened the driver’s door and jumped. That was the end of the

car, which slowly rolled to a stop and burned to a crisp (though without exploding)...and yet again, I was uninjured.

Through it all, I began to wonder if there was a purpose to my life that I had not yet considered or realized.

The Search for Hope and Healing



Clockwise: A homeless girl at a port in Cebu, Philippines (2000);
 A boy living in the La Chureca garbage dump in Managua, Nicaragua (1999);
 A talibe begging on the streets of Dakar, Senegal (2001).

*Every child that I saw hungry, without clothing, addicted,
 homeless, or being taken to prison,
 A single thought dominated my mind:
 that child could have been me.*

—Robert Benson

Chapter 5

Our Paths Converge

(Robert)

*A single act of kindness throws out roots in all directions,
And the roots spring up and make new trees.*

—Amelia Earhart

After I graduated from law school in 1990, I began my legal career at Irell & Manella, a prestigious law firm in Southern California. In many respects, life could not have been better. I had an office in an area called Fashion Island, Newport Beach, with a beautiful view of the Pacific Ocean. I was living in Irvine with my wife, Kristen, who I married in law school, and we dreamed of having children and building a family together. I saw a bright future ahead of me.

People often ask why I entered the practice of law. Candidly, there was nothing altruistic about it at the time. Growing up, I had been taught that my value as a person—and any hope that I might have of being loved, wanted, and valued by others—depended on personal success and achievement. Working at a top law firm provided a new opportunity to excel, a fresh venue to prove to myself and others that I had value. I was looking for little else.

In early 1996, I moved back to the Bay Area where I had grown up, and I joined a leading law firm in Silicon Valley, Cooley Godward. About two years later, I would make partner at my new firm, an unusually accelerated timetable for a lateral associate. But despite my early success in “Big Law,” something within me was still searching for purpose. I had a constant, nagging feeling that I had a calling that went beyond career and family, yet I was unable to ascertain what it might be.

In late 1998, I was immersed in a global battle between two giants in the telecommunications industry, Qualcomm and Ericsson. Part of that battle was being played out in multiple patent infringement lawsuits pending in federal courts in Texas. As a result of that litigation, I was flying to Texas multiple times every month for meetings and court appearances, and on August 14, 1998, I was in Dallas for a day-long strategy meeting.

As the meeting wore on, I became deeply engaged in the technical and legal discussions of our patent cases and was taking copious notes on my laptop computer. Suddenly, my mind went completely blank and a single thought entered my mind: “Start homes for orphaned and abandoned children.” It was as if, for a moment in time, nothing else clouded my thinking. Never had I experienced a moment of such clarity. Something about the idea resonated deeply within me—it was as if all of the different strands of my life, past and present, suddenly intersected with one another and wrapped around a common purpose. It also surprised me, given that the topic was so dramatically divorced from the context of my meeting. And then, as quickly as it happened, the moment left and I was drawn back into discussions of CDMA technology.

To the extent that God speaks to human hearts, I have never experienced anything closer, either before or since.

Looking back, I can see how the events of the preceding years had led up to that moment. Prior to 1998, I had been developing a desire to care for other children at risk. I had also developed an interest in cross-cultural relationships and a heart for working in less developed countries. Here is what set the stage.



After we got married in August 1989, Kristen and I decided to pursue volunteer work in areas of interest to us. One of the things that touched our hearts was reading about people whose religious freedom was restricted in other parts of the world. So in 1993, we spent about a month traveling in Asia, supporting and encouraging house churches that we had connections with.

In the years that followed, we pursued short-term volunteer opportunities through our local church. In the early 1990's, Kristen and I attended the Vineyard Christian Fellowship of Newport Beach, California, and Kristen volunteered for some of the church's programs that helped local families in need. Then in 1995, I was invited to join our senior pastor, John McClure, on a trip to San Jose, Costa Rica. On this trip, John led a teaching and ministry conference at a church in Costa Rica pastored by Carlos Chacon and

Otto Kladensky. It was my first trip to Central America and one that began opening my eyes to needs in the developing world. John would later accompany me to Senegal, Africa, in May 2001, where we visited small villages in the sub-Saharan desert and experienced poverty on an entirely different level.

In 1996, Kristen and I moved back to the San Francisco Bay Area and began attending the Vineyard Christian Fellowship of San Jose. Not long thereafter, I spoke with the pastor, Steve Fuller, about whether the church had any involvement in international projects. Steve said that they did not, but that he would be interested in initiating something. So, in 1997, Steve and I joined an existing trip that had been planned by a nearby church in San Mateo, and I returned to Costa Rica to engage in construction work and support local programs. During that trip, I further developed my relationship with Carlos and Otto. The following year, Steve and I planned the first trip from our own church, which was also to Costa Rica, and we scheduled our trip for the last week of December 1998.

During these short-term trips, I learned some important principles that would impact my future thinking. One is the importance of developing local relationships, working along relational lines, and partnering with local residents, churches, and organizations. The impact of any work performed by short-term volunteers can quickly dissipate and be quickly forgotten. But if it is done together with a local organization, church, or other community of people, and if it is designed to catalyze programs and projects that are led by nationals, then the time and resources invested by a short-term team can be leveraged to accomplish long-term and lasting benefits in the community.

Perhaps most importantly, short-term trips can impact the global perspectives of the people who participate and inspire them to actions that they otherwise might not have considered. I know of numerous individuals who are engaged in part- or full-time endeavors helping others—either in the U.S. or abroad—who were initially inspired by short-term trips. I am one of them. My trips to less developed countries gave me a personal experience and awareness of significant needs in other parts of the world, and it motivated me to become engaged on a long-term basis.

During the 1990s, a second interest that I developed was the desire to help other orphaned, abandoned, or abused children. All my life, I had

an acute awareness of my abusive past. When I began traveling to Central America, seeing children living on the streets struck a deep, personal chord within me. Every time I saw a child living on the street, I thought to myself: *that could have been me*. I wanted to be engaged in helping such children, but didn't know where to start.

Finally, the trips that I took to other parts of the world catalyzed an interest in getting to know people in other countries and experiencing other cultures. It started in August 1991, when Kristen and I took a two-week trip to the Soviet Union and stayed with a local family. Our visit coincided with a historically momentous time—immediately prior to our arrival, the 1991 Soviet coup d'état attempt, also known as the “August Coup,” had just occurred and a historical shift in power was taking place. President Gorbachev had been whisked out of Moscow; the Russian President, Boris Yeltsin, was barricaded within the “Russian White House”; and students had recently been killed in clashes with the Soviet military. In the weeks that ensued, the Soviet Union effectively dissolved. Statues of Lenin were pulled to the ground, and while we were in Leningrad, the name of the city was changed back to the historic title of “St. Petersburg.” In the midst of this momentous time, Kristen and I became friends with our host family, Ksenia and Yura and their two children.

During the following winter, when we heard and read about shortages of food and staples, I made a second trip to Moscow and brought suitcases full of various foods and other items for our new Russian friends to enjoy and to brighten their winter. For several nights, we danced to traditional Russian folk music, drank vodka, and celebrated our friendship.

This was my first experience developing a relationship with a family in another country, and it furthered my interest in developing relationships with people cross-culturally in other parts of the world. In the years following my journey to the Soviet Union, most of my trips and vacations were to other countries and involved some form of volunteering on a short-term basis.

My law practice would also evolve to focus on representing companies based in Asia—particularly companies in Taiwan, China, and Japan. There was something about working crossculturally that I found interesting, enriching, and rewarding. Whether as an attorney or as a volunteer, the more

I built friendships across cultures, the more I began to appreciate commonalities in the human experience that transcended differences of geography, culture, and ethnicity. Moreover, I invariably learned a great deal from working with people in other countries, as there was always something about the way they approached life, their experience of life, their priorities, and their perspectives on the world from which I learned a great deal. And in 2011, following the devastating Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, I didn't hesitate to travel to the region and volunteer my time to help rebuild some of the homes and businesses there.



Robert helping to rebuild a home in Ishinomaki, Japan, following the tsunami in 2011.

By 1998, these three separate but related strands of my life had yet to come together: my commitment to volunteering and partnering with organizations and people in other countries to meet local needs, the compassion I felt for abused and abandoned children, and my personal interest in developing cross-cultural relationships. I felt that there was something in all of this that related to a core purpose or mission in my life, but I found myself unable to bring it into focus. After all, I was an attorney in a global law firm practicing patent litigation. It was hard for me to imagine any activity further removed from corporate litigation than helping children at risk in other parts of the world.

In a split second, in a conference room in Dallas, Texas, everything changed.



In the months that followed the meeting in Dallas, I scoured the Internet, purchased books, and absorbed any material that I could find regarding street children and/or other children in lesser-developed countries who were abused or abandoned. I also researched various types and models of programs that had been developed to meet their needs. Among other things, I learned that most “street children” are still connected with one or both parents and don’t necessarily live on the streets full time. Similarly, a large number of children who live in orphanages retain family connections—they live in an orphanage due to economic or other reasons that separated them from their parents. In the midst of all of this, however, there are some children who have been permanently separated from their parents due to death, abandonment, or abuse. And, in many countries, the government lacks sufficient resources or programs to care for them, whether it’s through residential facilities, foster care programs, adoptive families, or otherwise.

After a few months of thought, reflection, and research, I decided that my focus should be partnering with local people, churches, and organizations in lesser-developed countries, to support them in caring for children in a family environment. My heart was to care for children who had been permanently separated from their families (due to reasons listed above), and particularly, older children coming from the most challenging backgrounds, who would have very little chance of being adopted. I envisioned that local couples would care for groups of children in single family residences, serving as substitute parents, while having the assistance of professionals (such as teachers and social workers), as well as non-professional workers (such as cooks and drivers). In such a model, the emphasis would be on creating an environment in which the children felt truly loved and cared for. Rather than just having their physical needs met, the children would be immersed in a network of relationships and an atmosphere of love that would facilitate a deep healing from their past abuse and circumstances. I wanted to empower the children to achieve their dreams and realize a future unhindered by their pasts; one in which their abandonment and abuse would not recur in future generations. In this type of program, the focus would be on relationships and the quality of care, not the number of children cared for.

On October 30th, 1998, tragedy struck Honduras and Nicaragua. Hurricane Mitch devastated both countries, leaving more than 5,000 people dead in its wake. Reading about this tragedy in the news, I felt prompted to write to Carlos and Otto, the pastors in San Jose, Costa Rica, with whom I had already developed a close, working relationship. I had previously asked Otto if he and his church had any connections in Nicaragua or Honduras with whom we might partner, and unfortunately, the answer had been, “No.” Nevertheless, in the wake of Hurricane Mitch, I felt prompted to write Otto and share with him the ideas that had been developing in my mind over the past several months.

Nicaragua

On November 20, 1998, I wrote an e-mail to Carlos and Otto and shared what was on my heart. I explained that over the preceding months, I had developed a vision for starting a children’s home in Honduras or Nicaragua for orphaned or abandoned children. I also shared that I envisioned the project being connected with a school and a church planting effort. “I am waiting to connect with someone who has the same vision, who we could partner with,” I concluded, expressing confidence that the project would move forward whenever the timing was right.



Robert with children from the community of Loma San Judas, Managua, 1999.

Unbeknownst to me, while I was writing to Carlos and Otto, they were visiting with Elias Rocha, a pastor who had returned to his native Nicaragua a year earlier with a vision for starting a church, a school, and homes for orphaned and abandoned children. The government had already promised him a large parcel of land for the project, but he lacked the financial resources needed to proceed. In his meetings with Carlos and Otto, Elias asked if they knew anyone with a similar vision with whom he could partner.

Otto replied to my e-mail on November 27, 1998, writing in part,

"Pastor Rocha in Managua, Nicaragua, is starting to plant two churches under the supervision of Carlos... He has a vision for a children's shelter. He is starting a school. All he had were sheds (now damaged by the wind of the hurricane). He is desiring to open a home for 50 orphans...

"In other words, if I may recommend something that is slowly starting and already exists in Nicaragua YOU ARE HITTING ON THE NOSE...If God is leading you to raise funds for an orphanage, turning those sheds into buildings would be my first suggestion or step to be taken. Pastor Rocha talked to us about that—meaning asking for teams to help finance and fix the sheds. In other words, this is a felt need...

"More power to you, my brother. *Chills run down my spine as I write this and think about how God makes connections between needs and willing people like you.*"

This series of correspondence led to my first visit to Nicaragua in January 1999. The plot of land that had been set aside for Pastor Rocha's community project was in an exceptionally poor barrios called Lomas San Judas. When the Sandinista Army went through a process of demobilization, beginning in 1990 after a cease-fire with the Contras and the holding of national elections, the government set aside properties for the families of the demobilized soldiers. These properties turned into squatter communities, one

of which was Lomas San Judas. I visited this community accompanied by Elias Rocha and another pastor, Mamerto Martinez—walking past one-room shacks with dirt floors, walls made from scrap metal or wood, and property boundaries marked with barbed wire.

Eventually, we came upon a large parcel of land, which had been set aside for projects to benefit the community. Rocha's non-profit organization, CECRISDEFA, had been allocated the property for development. Other than a large tree on the center of the property, there was nothing other than a crudely constructed shed along the edge of the property, which was being used as a classroom for about 100 children.



*Left: the original shed at Lomas San Judas that was used as a school for the community.
Right: Elias Rocha and the school constructed by Arms of Love in 2000.*

After visiting the property site, we drove to other sections of Managua. In some parts of the city, I observed young boys who lived on the streets, sitting on sidewalk curbs or leaning against buildings, periodically holding plastic bags over their noses. In the bags was a type of glue that the kids became addicted to sniffing—it temporarily relieved their hunger pains, but it had a devastating impact on their health. At one point, we had to speed away when a young man started hurling rocks—and a knife—at our vehicle.

Soon thereafter, I saw two buses filled with youth driving into a walled facility. Upon inquiring, I learned that these were juvenile offenders that were in government custody. Most were street children who had been picked up for a variety of crimes, many related to their fight for survival. Some of these adolescents would end up incarcerated in prison, together with adult

offenders. The government simply had no residential facilities in which to care for such kids, whether they were abused, homeless, or criminal offenders.

My first day in Managua ended with a visit to La Chureca, the largest garbage dump and landfill in Central America. Established after a major earthquake destroyed much of Managua in the 1970's, impoverished families continue to come to the site every day to see what scraps, valuables, or food they can scavenge from the tons of garbage that are dumped there on a daily basis. More than a thousand people live at the dump, about half of which are children. My heart broke as I watched young children living in the garbage and sorting through the newly dumped waste with large, pointed rods, looking for food and anything else of value.



A boy searches through garbage in La Chureca.

Wherever we went, every child that I saw hungry, without clothing, addicted to glue, homeless, or being taken to prison, a single thought dominated my mind: *that child could have been me.*

After I returned home, I spent the next few months corresponding with Elias and Otto: developing plans to build a school with a half-dozen classrooms, a multi-purpose facility, and a complex of four homes that could each accommodate a houseparent couple and 8-12 children. I donated substantial funds toward the construction, and I partnered with Menlo Park Presbyterian Church—through Christ for the Cities International—for the balance of funds required. Otto connected me with Arlin Torbett, the chairman of the Latin American task force at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, and Arlin was instrumental in developing this partnership.

Looking ahead, I realized that we would soon need to fund a monthly operating budget, in order to cover the salaries of full-time staff, utilities, food, clothing, school tuition, and so on. With this in mind, in the fall of 1999, I incorporated *Arms of Love International*, a section 501(c)(3) public charity, to facilitate raising ongoing support from others in my church,

friends, and co-workers. As the financial needs of the organization grew, I continued to grow our network of support—first with other local churches and individuals, and then beyond. In the following years, I found myself traveling up and down California, then the greater U.S., and by 2002, I was even travelling to other countries, speaking at churches and raising all of the financial support needed for the growing organization, all while continuing my career as a lawyer.

By March 2000, the first complex of homes in Nicaragua had been completed, and Elias Rocha sent me background information on the first five children that he proposed we receive into the homes. I would visit them not long thereafter.

Among the first five children that moved into the homes was an 11 year old boy who had been living on the streets and was completely illiterate, having never attended school consistently. Like me, he had been abandoned by his mother as a toddler—and also like me, he had temporarily landed in the care of his grandmother.



A short-term team from VCF San Jose working on the construction of the first *Arms of Love* homes in Managua in August 1999.



The first five children who moved into the *Arms of Love* home in Nicaragua in March 2000. Juan is the second from left.

He captured my attention the first time that I visited the children in the home. He was the oldest boy in the home and was clearly a leader that the other kids looked up to. He didn't talk to me much—he knew very little English, and I did not know any Spanish—but he clearly had a forceful personality. His eyes betrayed what was inside a tough exterior: someone who didn't fully trust others, but who wanted to; a boy who was angry, but wanted peace; a heart that was hurt, but longed for love.

His name was Juan.

The Philippines

In September 1999, while construction of the children's home in Nicaragua was ongoing, I was engaged in a significant amount of research concerning similar projects, in an effort to learn from others and apply this information to the project in Nicaragua. During the course of this research, I found a website called "Island Impact," which described a church-planting ministry in the Philippines started by John and Juli Mory. In the text of their site, there was a single reference to a vision for starting an orphanage on the island of Bohol. Wanting to learn more about what they were doing, I felt prompted to write.

On September 21, 1999, I wrote my first e-mail to John and Juli Mory, inquiring about the nature of their vision. "I have been reading your web page, and I am interested in your plans for building an orphanage for street children..." I mentioned that I was helping to start a children's home in Nicaragua, but conveyed no other details at the time. I explained that we had no intention to expand our work to other countries, but I was interested in learning more about their plans and vision, and I suggested that we might benefit from exchanging ideas.

On October 1, 1999, John responded to my e-mail, and shared a brief summary of his and Juli's heart for a "children's home...small enough to feel like a family," of their heart for the poor and the outcast, their desire to connect the children's home with local church planting, their plan for hiring and training a Filipino staff, and the agricultural operations they had already started that could help support the home. Everything John wrote about reflected the precise heart and vision that I had for *Arms of Love*, and as I read and re-read his correspondence, I wondered if this was the beginning of something new.

In subsequent correspondence, I shared with John the various details of our vision, and after speaking with some people who had known the Morys for many years, I told John that we would partner with him and his family in January 2000 (when I would receive my year-end compensation) to build a complex of children's homes on Bohol. John replied on October 9, 1999:

"I must say that my family and I are speechless! I sat in front of the computer at the internet station with tears in my eyes—tears of joy, of course.... Thank you so much for standing with us for the children here. We believe this is the beginning of many changed lives...

"It will be interesting to watch, wait, and see what God does, but for the meantime, let's just say that we've been 'blown away' at your mentioning all that you have, and so specifically, at that. We have very close friends and even family that don't even know

in such detail all the things that God has given us vision for.

"Reading your letters feels like you would have had to have been a 'fly upon the wall' to be saying, so exactly, not just 'what' God has burdened our hearts to do, but also, 'how' these things were to be done! Isn't He awesome?"

And with that, our second partnership was born.

Construction on the *Arms of Love* Children's Home in Bohol, Philippines, started in March 2000, and a transition home for street children was started soon thereafter in Tagbilaran City ("Charlie's House"). The first group of children moved into the Bohol home in January 2001. Within the first five years, by January 2006, the children's home had experienced rapid growth and had about 20 full-time local staff, including four houseparent couples, and about 40 children were cared for within its walls.



Construction begins on the *Arms of Love* Children's Home in Bohol in March 2000.



The first five children who moved into Charlie's House in January 2001.

In late 2004, John asked if we should receive a girl from the Bohol Crisis Intervention Center (BCIC), who came from a particularly difficult background. We often received girls from the BCIC, who had been separated from their families due to sexual abuse, as we had a particular compassion and desire to help them. This girl had been seriously abused by her mother and stepfather, who had also forced her to quit school so she could care for her younger siblings. She had finally managed to escape by running away in late 2002. There was no doubt in my mind that she should become a part of *Arms of Love*. Anzelie moved into "Charlie's House," the transition home, a few days later.

At the beginning of 2006, another girl moved into the *Arms of Love* home in the Philippines. Her story broke my heart, but her drive and potential were readily apparent. Just a few years before, at the age of 13, Myla had been raped by her father, became pregnant, and had since given birth and placed the child for adoption. I felt that story was only the tip of the iceberg, and that stretching below the surface, her past must have been unimaginably difficult and painful. A question was raised of whether we should receive her into the home, given that she was already 16 years old, but in my heart, there was never a hesitation.

Only months after arriving at *Arms of Love*, Myla blew us away. Despite never attending high school, she took a promotional exam that allowed her to enroll directly in university. We then developed an “Independent Living Program” (ILP) that would scholarship her through college. Myla became one of the first three *Arms of Love* “graduates” to attend a four-year university.

Many years later, *Arms of Love* was blessed to have Norand “Randy” Pepito lead the children’s home in the Philippines. Randy spent more than 25 years engaged in development work throughout the Philippines, managing a wide range of programs that cared for lepers, the disabled, children-at-risk, and others in need. Every Father’s Day, it was an absolute pleasure to read the dozens of greetings coming from children at the home, who related to Randy as the father who loved and cared for them.

During early 2017, I was talking with Randy about starting a new college scholarship program that would give hundreds of abused and abandoned youth in the Philippines an opportunity to achieve a higher education, not just the children graduating from *Arms of Love*. Randy was pouring himself into the effort, developing networks of non-governmental organizations (“NGOs”) across the country that could refer candidates to the new program. But unexpectedly, on July 2, 2017, Randy passed away. One of his final postings on Facebook could not have been more appropriate—it read, simply, “Unending Love, Amazing Grace.”



*Left to right: Steve Bagley, Randy Pepito, and Robert Benson
at Robert’s home in November 2016.*

Global Reach

Between 2000 and 2003, *Arms of Love* partnered with local persons, churches, and organizations to start three additional projects in Morelia, Mexico; Dakar, Senegal; and Castanhal, Brazil.

The ministry in Mexico was known as the “Victory Center.” Started by Sue Leak, a missionary with Latin American Mission, the Victory Center provided care for 8 to 15 year-old street girls who had experienced different forms of abuse, particularly sexual abuse and prostitution. Sue had already started the ministry, but we had the opportunity to come alongside of her and fund the construction of a two-story center that would serve as the residence for the girls and staff. The first girls moved into the new facility in September 2002, and the Victory Center continued to care for 5-10 street girls at any given time for many years. Sue later developed health issues that led to a sabbatical, and when she returned, she decided to operate community-based programs out of the same facility. Currently, the Victory Center operates an after-school program that provides children from low-income families in the community a secure place to study and to obtain tutoring in their classes.

In Senegal, a series of connections began with an email that I received on April 6, 2000, from Walter Horner, who had started a Bible college in Senegal a few years before. A couple of years later, we facilitated sending several graduates of his school to the *Arms of Love* project in the Philippines, where they received training in caring for at-risk children. I subsequently partnered with Raymond and Sylvia Njoku, who were members of that team, to begin operating a children’s home in Dakar in late 2003.

In Senegal, our children’s home responded to a unique human rights issue. A recent article published by Al Jazeera^[3] confirmed the ongoing nature of this crisis, estimating that more than 50,000 talibé street children in Senegal live as child beggars who are more like “modern-day slaves.” Sent by their families to local Quranic teachers, known as “marabouts,” to receive religious instruction at “daaras” (traditional Quranic boarding schools), the talibés carry empty cans on the streets and encourage passers-by to practice giving alms by donating money to their marabouts. Unfortunately, the practical reality for most of the talibés in Senegal is far removed from these religious



A talibe begging for alms in Dakar, Senegal.

purposes—a majority of the children live in inhumane conditions and are exploited and abused. But the intertwined nature of the political and religious systems in Senegal make these human rights issues difficult to resolve, and thus, “...the phenomenon of child beggars is complex and has remained a bone of contention between the government, the Islamic community, and UNICEF”^[3].

It is not permitted to provide full-time care for the talibé street children, who are the legal responsibility of their marabouts.

However, by developing relationships with several impoverished villages not far from Dakar (and with their marabouts) we found an opportunity to receive referrals of orphaned children who had no one to care for them on a long-term basis (who had not yet become talibés). Using this approach, we soon received about 15 children into our home in Dakar.

In 2003, we began construction of a fifth project in the Amazon region of Brazil. Led by Scott and Becky Joellenbeck from the Vineyard church in Grove City, Ohio, our vision was to establish a complex of homes in Castanhal that would receive abused and abandoned children from the surrounding region. Scott and Becky moved to Castanhal in May 2005, after some of the initial facilities had been completed, to serve as directors of the new children’s home. However, in late 2008, while the facilities continued to be built, the local government decided to close all residential facilities in the city that were caring for children-at-risk, with the goal of returning all of the children to relatives or private foster care. As a result, our authorization to open the homes was revoked. However, the facilities were converted to host an after-school program that continues to provide healthy snacks and

supplemental education for children from the lowest-income families. The computer lab teaches vocational skills to both adults and children in the community, and the program is self-funded by revenues generated by renting the property for weekend retreats.



One of the most tragic events happened during the early years of *Arms of Love*, shortly after we started our home in Senegal and began working in Brazil. I had the privilege of meeting many people with deeply compassionate hearts, who impacted my path and my journey. One of those was Monte Whittaker, who helped lead the benevolence ministry of the Vineyard Church of Anaheim. Monte once said, “We need the poor a lot more than the poor need us. We need the poor in order to learn to become ‘otherly.’”

Monte was also involved in compassion ministry to poor communities in El Salvador, and we met several times to discuss the possibility of a partnership with *Arms of Love*. After our last lunch together, Monte took a team to El Salvador to conduct ministry there and to explore the possibilities of starting an *Arms of Love* Children’s Home in that country. Tragically, Monte drowned when he was pulled out to sea by a riptide while swimming at the beach. The news hit me particularly hard, as my birth mother, Teresa, had died in the same manner. I would never travel to El Salvador, but his memory and example live on in my heart.



The complete history of *Arms of Love*, from 1999 to the present, is beyond the scope of this book. In later years, the Victory Center and the children’s home in Senegal became independent of *Arms of Love* and continued their operations, supported by independent sources. *Arms of Love* continues to care for about 100 children and young adults in Nicaragua and the Philippines, with about 40 full-time staff, on a beautiful 20-acre campus in Jinotepe, Nicaragua, which was purchased and developed with the help and support of Doug and Julie Effinger and Andy Salisbury, and the original five-acre campus on Bohol in the Philippines. Eight family-based homes provide residential care for about 60-70 abandoned and abused children, and *Arms of Love* supports about 30 “graduates” of the homes while they pursue a higher

education at universities and other educational institutions. From 1999 to 2017, we raised nearly \$10 million to build the facilities and operate the programs, nearly all of it coming from individuals, churches, and a few partner organizations, with very little coming from grants and no funding coming from government entities.

What brings me particular joy, however, is the reputation that *Arms of Love* developed in both countries. It was difficult, in the early years, to establish our reputation with the relevant government agencies, Ministerio de La Familia (“Mifamilia”) in Nicaragua and the Department of Social Welfare



Top: All of the children living in the *Arms of Love* Children’s Home in Nicaragua at Christmas 2001. *Bottom:* All of the children living in the *Arms of Love* Children’s Home in Nicaragua at Christmas 2007.

and Development (“DSWD”) in the Philippines. In particular, it was challenging to help the agencies understand that *Arms of Love* was different from other “orphanages” because of the surrogate family environment we provide, staff and leadership comprised entirely of nationals, the high standard of care, and our commitment to collaborating with the agencies and serving the local communities. Nothing makes me happier than the fact that after nearly 20 years, Mifamilia and the DSWD view *Arms of Love* as having one of the exemplary residential programs in their respective countries, which implements one of the highest standards of care.



Heather's House – one of the homes at the *Arms of Love* campus in Jinotepe (2015).



Casa Grande, a multi-purpose facility and team center on the *Arms of Love* campus in Jinotepe (2015).



All of the children living in the *Arms of Love* Children's Home in the Philippines in January 2004.



A side view of the *Arms of Love* Children's Home in the Philippines (2015).



All of the children living in the *Arms of Love* children's home in the Philippines in November 2008.



Arms of Love helped build facilities in Castanhal, Brazil, that are now operated by *Instituto de Paz* to provide supplemental education for children of low-income families in the community (February 2010).



Sue Leak and her staff, Mandy, with the girls living at the *Victory Center* in Morelia, Mexico, in May 2004.



All of the children living at the *Arms of Love Children's Home* in Dakar, Senegal, in July 2006.



There are three final aspects of *Arms of Love* that I would like to relate in this book, which dominate my memories of leading the ministry for more than 15 years.

When we were preparing to open our first home in Senegal, after many months of building relationships with several villages, Raymond and Sylvia (*Arms of Love* in Senegal) sent me a list of more than 50 children who needed a home, together with their background information. At that time, we only had space in our program for about 12 children. The enormity of the choice weighed on my heart. I felt like I was being asked to choose which children would move into a good home, be loved, go to school, and have a bright future...and which ones would be left in their current situation, without a family or any means of care, destined to live an impoverished life and perhaps experience a premature death. I asked Raymond and Sylvia to receive those children who were in the most desperate of circumstances, and deferred to their judgment.

That situation underscored the most difficult aspect of leading the *Arms of Love* ministry: for every child we cared for, there were thousands of others just like them. I was constantly faced with the challenge of a limited budget, limited organizational resources, and needs that were infinitely greater. Should I step out in faith and receive a new child, even though I did not yet have the funding to care for her? I often did. Should we stretch the budget and provide a lower standard of care so we could bring in more children? That was not a road I would take. I was committed to care for the children, by local standards, in a way that was comparable to how I loved and cared for my own children.

If I want my own children to receive the highest level of care and I try to meet their physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual needs, then I felt that we should provide the same type of care to the children living at *Arms of Love*. If I send my own children to a local private school, give them individual tutoring when needed, and provide a university education, then I would determine the local equivalent within each country and provide the same things for the kids at *Arms of Love*. If my kids go on field trips, then the *Arms of Love* kids should be able to take outings, too. And so on. If I did anything less, I

felt that I would be valuing the children less than my own, when they had already suffered from being devalued by families that had neglected, abused, and abandoned them. Our entire purpose was to bring healing into their lives by loving them and valuing them as their own families should have done.

The primary question, I decided, should not be, “How many children can we feed, clothe, house, or send to school on a given budget?” but rather, “How many children can we truly love?” Because that is our calling: to love. To bring *justice* into their lives, making whole any part of their lives that is broken or incomplete. To give them *hope* for a future that is different from their past. To bring the *healing* into their lives necessary for them to realize that hope and hold onto that future. To break the cycle of abuse and poverty, so it doesn’t repeat in the next generation. If we only had the funds to love 10 children as our own—and to bring hope, healing, and justice into their lives—then we would care for those 10 children. And we would work hard to develop the resources to similarly care for more.

The second tension was a more personal one: since there were always more needs to be met, I felt constantly compelled to do as much as I possibly could. As a result, a few years into the ministry, I found myself stretched way too thin. I was leading a global organization while working as a partner in a leading law firm, and at home, I had a family with several young children. Every day, I was encountering endless needs, but I had limited time, finances, and other resources. I was engaged in a constant struggle—I enjoyed a relatively high standard of living in the U.S., but I was continually aware that with a modest increase in monthly funding, *Arms of Love* could care for a few more children. Children who were still living on the streets or in abusive environments. Children who had faces and names that were always in my mind. I was functioning somewhere in a no-man’s-land between “First World” living and some of the most extreme poverty in the world. No matter how I allocated my resources, I was haunted by the thought, “You are not doing enough,” and, “You can do more.”

Living in this tension, I was always pushing the envelope. For the first eight years of *Arms of Love*, I didn’t have a single paid employee in the U.S. I did all of the administrative work, fundraising, and project management myself, together with the assistance of other volunteers, in an effort to stretch

our funds as much as possible. When *Arms of Love* had financial shortfalls, I often covered it myself. Time, money, and other resources were always insufficient to meet all of the competing demands, and I continued to stretch and stretch...until everything snapped.

Kristen felt like I had abandoned her and our children to care for the children of *Arms of Love*. Our marriage and family nearly disintegrated as Kristen saw me trying to save the world while neglecting the needs of our family. I struggled with how to prioritize the needs of my family and the needs of the ministry, especially when the needs of the *Arms of Love* kids—and those still on the street—appeared more urgent and greater in magnitude. While I was focused on the broader vision, Kristen became angry as she experienced me neglecting the emotional and financial needs of our own family. After living for many years in this tension, Kristen got to the point where she said she hated me. Kristen's anger and hatred over my involvement with *Arms of Love* and the neglect she felt lasted for years.

Over time, however, I began to get a glimpse of the pain that I had caused Kristen and our kids – the same pain of neglect that I was trying to alleviate elsewhere in the world – and the irony of what had happened ripped me apart. I had become farsighted. I had focused on what appeared to be greater needs further away, but in the process, I missed significant needs right in my midst, among those whom I loved the most and had the greatest responsibility towards. But in the midst of all of this, Kristen extended to me the one thing I had never really experienced before: unconditional love. Beneath all of my faults and shortcomings, Kristen still saw a man that she loved. A person worth fighting for. She fought for me then, and she still fights for me today. Because love never gives up. It took many years for us to rebuild our marriage, but we did it. And in August 2017, we celebrated our 28th anniversary.

Over time, I learned of ways to more effectively operate *Arms of Love*, rebalance my life, and reallocate my personal resources to better align with my responsibilities as a husband and a father, without abdicating my responsibilities to the global family that I had developed. In 2007, I hired a full-time CEO, Kim Fisher, to assume the daily operations of the organization. Others were hired to support her, but we still maintained a very lean organization where most of our funding was used to operate the homes. In hindsight, I

should have developed this supporting infrastructure much earlier in time. Then in 2014, I transitioned out of *Arms of Love* altogether and took some years off. At that juncture, I transitioned leadership to a new team that included Dr. Steve Bagley and Jess Burge (whose stories are related later in this book), and Ted and Kelly Rodgers, who moved to Nicaragua and are part of Juan's story.

During these challenging times, I learned an important truth:

*If we want to bring hope, healing, and justice to a broken world,
We must start with our immediate family.
Then we should draw the circle of our "family" a little larger, and a little larger,
So that we are increasingly extending our love to others, both near and far,
But never at the cost of those closest to us.*

Kristen and I have tried to implement these principles in different ways over the years. In 2001, we brought our family to Nicaragua to spend Christmas with the children at *Arms of Love*. In 2011, our family volunteered in Haiti following the devastating earthquake the year before. And for the past ten years, we have hosted a house church that meets in our home each Sunday.

A final story that I would like to share arose from one of many trips to small villages in the middle of the sub-Saharan deserts of Senegal. To build relationships and trust with certain villages, from which orphaned children would be referred, Raymond and Sylvia spent a great deal of time in the villages. During one of my visits, we traveled to a remote village, and to help build bridges with the community and reinforce those relationships, we purchased a large quantity of rice and some other staples and presented it to the marabout of the village.

After some amount of conversation, translated through Sylvia, the marabout looked deep into my eyes and said that he would give me a new name. The marabout had never met me, had never heard of me before, and was unaware that I had started a charity called *Arms of Love*. The name he gave me in the local Wolof language has since been lost to my memory, but I will never forget the translation. When Sylvia turned to me and translated the meaning of the name, it was branded into my heart and mind forever: "One who comes with open arms."



The Benson children volunteering in Haiti in July 2011.

Whatever the rest of my life brings, and whatever new roads I travel, I hope that I will always be remembered in the words of the marabout:

One who comes with open arms.



The original entrance to the *Arms of Love* Children's Home in the Philippines.

Chapter 6

Stepping Stones

(Anzelie)

What does love look like?
It has the hands to help others.
It has the feet to hasten to the poor and needy.
It has eyes to see misery and want.
It has the ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of men.

—Augustine

I stood patiently at the door, knocking. My heart was pounding with fear and uncertainty. Only days before, my stepdad had tried to kill me with a huge knife, and I hid nearby, fearing for my life. We escaped to a nearby town. The next morning, I was shocked when I woke up and discovered that my mother had abandoned me and gone back to my stepdad. I could not fathom why she would choose him over me, but I knew that I could not return with her. If I went back, I would be risking my life, not to mention returning to the abuse that I had endured for so many years. I needed to start a new life. Alone.

I heard footsteps within, and a woman answered the door. “Good morning...may I come in?” I asked softly. Lolit, a social worker at the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), invited me inside. I stepped into the office and sat down in a chair across from one of the desks. Lolit walked around, took a seat herself, and began asking me for my name, age, and address. After I provided my personal information, a look of recognition came across her face.

“I know your case, little girl,” she said. “Your mother told us about you, and said that you might be coming here. She asked us to find you, but since you are here already, I can help you. You will be safe here.” My heart was happy the moment I heard those words.

Lolit brought me to her house, and I slept there for the next five days. I ate the most delicious food, and she even gave me a nice dress to wear. I felt

so happy and blessed that she was caring for me—and for the first time in many years, I felt safe.

After five days, Lolit brought me to Tagbilaran City, where we met Marlene Nocete, the manager of a government facility called the Bohol Crisis Intervention Center (BCIC), which only cares for girls. Unfortunately, Marlene told us that the new facility for the BCIC was not yet finished, so I would need to stay with her, in her home, on a temporary basis.

In early 2003, I finally moved into the new BCIC facility, where I met Mama Arsinia Comiso, one of the housemothers. She often shared her Christian faith with me and told me that God loved me, but I laughed—I laughed very hard. Because for me, God was so unfair, it was as if he didn't exist. But Mama Arisinia never stopped praying for me and for the other girls living in the center.

Not long after I moved into the BCIC, I went to the office and spoke with the social worker, Eva Rodriguez, about my desire to go to school, and in particular, to be a working student. However, Eva told me that in the BCIC, the girls were not allowed to leave the facility and attend school, for reasons of their safety. The goals of the center were to provide for all of the basic needs of the girls, such as food, shelter, love, care, and security...but not attending school. Eva said she would talk with others, but as far as she was aware, going to school was not an option while I was living there.

I was devastated. For the past several years, while I was being abused by my mother and stepdad, I still managed to find some way to attend school. Despite their opposition and so many obstacles, I was able to progress through most of elementary school. Becoming a teacher was my lifelong dream, since I was a little girl being held in the loving arms of my grandma. Now, for the first time since my grandmother passed away, I was finally in a place where I was safe and secure...but going to school was not an option.

One day, I shared the desire of my heart to Mama Arsinia. I told her that all of my life, I wanted to become a teacher, but in order to realize that dream, I needed to go to school and continue my education. Unable to give me that opportunity herself, Mama Arsinia told me to pray and entrust God with my desire to go to school and my dream of becoming a teacher. Then she showed me a verse in the Bible, Jeremiah 29:11, which reads, “For I know the plans

I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you, not to harm you; plans to give you hope and a future.'"

I reflected on my situation. I did not, at that point in time, have the opportunity to attend school. However, I had often prayed that God would deliver me from my abusive situation, and now I was in a safe place with people who cared about me. Perhaps, there was a God, and maybe there were plans for my life. So starting in August 2003, I began to pray that I would have the opportunity to go back to school and a path to realize my ambition of becoming a teacher.

A year went by, and it seemed that God was either not there or at least not answering my prayers. During that year, I tried to escape from the BCIC three times, but every time, the police caught up with me and brought me back. Eventually, I stopped trying to run away, but I continued praying that somehow, I would have an opportunity to continue my education.



During the last week of August 2004, early in the morning, I was sweeping the floors and cleaning the common areas according to my usual chores. I was sharing with Mama Arsinia how an entire year had passed, and still, I lacked the opportunity to go back to school. Before she could respond, our conversation was interrupted, and I was told to go to the social worker's office.

When I arrived in Ma'am Eva Rodriguez's office, she told me to sit down, because she had some exciting news. "You are about to be transferred," Ma'am Eva explained. "We have been talking with another organization, the *Arms of Love* Children's Home, and they have agreed to take you into their care on September 2. There you will have new houseparents, both a mama and a papa, and you will be able to start going to school again." I could hardly believe it! When I heard the news, my heart was very happy—the happiest it had been in many years. I ran to Mama Arsinia, and told her the wonderful news. "Mama, God is so good! He answered my prayers!" And she just smiled, opened her arms, and held me close.

On September 1, 2004, while I was packing my belongings, Ma'am Eva called me back to her office. She told me that the September 2 move-in date had been postponed, because the *Arms of Love* staff and children had an

outing that day. My heart was sad, but I knew the postponement was only temporary. On September 10, 2004, the social worker from *Arms of Love*, Noemih Baladjay, met with Ma'am Eve at the BCIC, and then invited me to become part of the *Arms of Love* family.

As we drove away from the BCIC, Noemih explained that I would not be moving to the children's home right away, but instead, I would be staying in a transition home for the first six months. The transition home, called "Charlie's House," was adjacent to the Vineyard Christian Fellowship, a church in Tagbilaran City that was affiliated with the children's home.

During my stay at "Charlie's House," I had chores to perform in the morning, and afterward, I was tutored in various subjects, including mathematics, science, and English. During that time, I was not yet attending school, but I was receiving individual tutoring and preparing to go back to school as soon as I moved to the children's home.

Every Saturday afternoon, around 4:00 pm, I heard music from the church next door, because the worship team held a practice every Saturday before having church the next morning. I observed the worship team and what they were doing, and I listened to the songs they were singing. After the music team went home, I continued singing the songs, even though they were not very familiar to me. There was something about the music and the songs that put me at peace, so throughout the week, I would sing the songs to myself every now and then. And my dream of being a teacher someday continued to stir within me.

On Sunday afternoons, I began attending youth fellowship meetings at the neighboring church. One day I asked Pastor Bonifacio Colarte, "Why did God allow those things to happen in my life? Did God see me when I cried? Did He hear me when I prayed?" And Pastor Bonie reiterated what Mama Arsinia had shared with me before at the BCIC—that despite the evil in this world and the injustice that was done to me, God had plans for me... "plans to prosper you, not to harm you; plans to give you hope and a future." The difficulties that I experienced were not from God, but God had sustained me and had given me strength to make it through those times. And as terrible as those events were, I was now in a place where God's love and care for me were being expressed through the staff at *Arms of Love*.

For the first time, I felt a conviction that throughout my life—from the time I was in the arms of my grandma until now—God had never left me. He had answered my prayers. Perhaps not in the way that I asked—my stepdad was still alive, for example, and was still married to my mother—but I was no longer in that abusive situation. I was living in a new place, and God had brought people into my life who loved me. People I could trust. And people who would lead me toward the future He had planned for me.



In March 2005, I moved to the *Arms of Love* Children's Home, and I was ecstatic. Inside the house, I had a complete family again—a mother and a father who loved me, and new siblings who also cared for me and welcomed me into my new home. But the best part was that I would soon be able to attend a regular school again, as all the children at *Arms of Love* attended one of several schools near the property.

As happy as I was to get back to school, the transition was very difficult. By this time, I was 15 years old, but I still had not completed the sixth grade. Being so much older, many of my classmates bullied me, but I persisted in my studies and received good grades. I finally graduated from elementary school in March 2006.

A few months later, I was excited to begin attending a private high school. But during the ninth grade, I faced a new challenge. I had shared my personal story with one of the girls that lived with me at the *Arms of Love* home. One day at school, in front of the quadrangle after the flag ceremony, she started to bully me and yelled that I had been “raped by stepdad.” It was cruel, and I felt ashamed. In a single moment, the most private and shameful event of my life had been publicly revealed to all of my classmates.

In the days that followed, many of my classmates asked me about it. At first, I just kept silent and refused to respond. I was hurt so deeply. I had trusted my friend, as my sister, to keep my confidence, and she had broken my heart.



This is the earliest known photo of Anzelie, taken after she arrived at *Arms of Love* in 2005.

I'm not sure how much time passed, and I never figured out what changed within me. But one day, I suddenly had the courage to face the questions being asked by my classmates and I began to tell my story to them without hesitation.

My classmates were amazed that I was able to persevere through such difficult times. Some of them asked me how I was able to forgive my stepdad, and I explained that actually, I had not yet forgiven him because he had never apologized for what he had done. And then one of my classmates said, "If I was in your situation, I would have wanted to kill him!"

Hearing those words, I was taken back to the times when I felt and thought exactly the same thing. I had hated my stepdad, and time and again, I wanted to kill him—and I would have, if it had been possible. But I suddenly realized, as soon as my classmate said that, something had changed within me—the hatred was gone. I no longer wanted to kill him; instead, I thought of my stepsisters and brother, who still received and needed his care. Something had changed. I only felt concern for my siblings, rather than wishing harm to my stepdad. My classmates told me that I had a very big and golden heart, but I said no, it was something else—my recent experience of *being loved* was changing my heart toward others.

One night at *Arms of Love*, I was talking with the director, Ate Ivy Petallar, and I shared how my feelings had been changing. I told her that I no longer hated my mother or stepdad, but the wounds and pain of my past were still there. I wanted my healing to go a level deeper. Ate Ivy told me to close my eyes, and while she was praying for me, I began praying as well. And I felt God speaking to my heart, "My child, don't dwell on the pain of your past. Your past is a stepping stone to your future, and you will be a blessing to others. Don't worry, just ask what you want for your future, and I will give it to you."

After the prayer, I knew that I would be able to face my mother and stepdad again someday, because I began to see my past in a different light. Through those times, I had developed the strength, courage, and perseverance that had brought me this far. I had never let go of my dreams. When I released my hatred toward my stepdad, it did not excuse his conduct, but I became a stronger and more positive person. And rather than dwelling on



Anzelie's first visit with her family after arriving at the BCIC and *Arms of Love* in 2009.
From left: Vinesse James, Jonavie, Ivy Jean, Anzelie, Jenaica, and their mother.

the painful experiences of my past, I was able to see those times as part of the longer path that had brought me to *Arms of Love* and a place where my ambitions in life could be realized.

As I began to mature, I faced additional challenges. During my high school years, I remember falling in love with one of the boys that lived at *Arms of Love*, which was against one of the rules of the home. With the help of my housemother, Ines Valles, I was able to work through my feelings and walk away from the relationship, because I realized that it had the potential to lead me away from my dreams in life. Looking back, I can see that he was my first love, but not my future. Today he is happily married to another woman, and I know that it was the right decision to not pursue that relationship.

At the time of my high school graduation, I was 20 years old. It was March 2010, and a few weeks before the ceremony, one of the *Arms of Love* social workers, Ate Marissa Josol, told me that they had located my mother and that she would be coming to my graduation. I was so excited! I had not seen my mother for about eight years, and when I saw her again, I cried very

hard. I ran to her, threw my arms around her, and hugged her and kissed her. Despite all of the hard times, all of my bitterness had disappeared. I don't know why—I can't explain my feelings of that day. But after so many years of being loved and valued by my new family at *Arms of Love*, I had no more bitterness toward the mother who had left me with my stepdad eight years before. Only love.

I was also filled with joy that Ate Kimberly Fisher was at my high school graduation. Ate Kim was the president of *Arms of Love*, and while she lived in the U.S., she was always there for me. Even though we lived far apart, she always contacted me, asking, "How are you, my beautiful daughter?" I felt that Ate Kim Fisher valued me because any time I had a problem, she was willing to lend her ears and listen to me.

After the graduation ceremony, we went back to the *Arms of Love* Children's Home, and I felt pity for my little stepbrother, Vinesse James. He ate the food so fast, it reminded me that he didn't enjoy such delicious food at his own home. I had been very blessed over the past five years, sharing my life with people who loved, valued, and cared for me on so many levels. Along the way, my own bitterness toward others had faded, and it enabled my heart to focus solely on the future that was ahead, rather than the pain that I had left behind.



Anzelie at her high school graduation (far right) in 2010, together with her *Arms of Love* houseparents, Papa Gino and Mama Ines.



About a month after my graduation, I decided to visit my mother and stepdad in Tambongan, Candijay, Bohol. Before getting onto the bus to Tambongan, I first went to the mall and bought groceries and clothes for both my mother and my stepdad. While living at *Arms of Love*, they had given me a regular allowance, and I had saved that money for a long time. While riding the bus from Tagbilaran City to Tambongan, I simply prayed continuously that I would have the strength to face my stepdad and for the wisdom of what to say to him.

When I arrived at our house, my stepdad answered the door. His reaction was one of complete surprise, because neither he nor my mother knew that I would be visiting them. What happened next surprised him even more—I showed him respect, blessed his hand, and called him ‘papa’ again. Not because he deserved it. But because, by doing so of my own free choice, I took my power back. He could no longer keep me in pain or in shame, degrade me, beat me down, or keep me down. I was free, not only of his abuse, but of my hatred toward him.

As I stood there in the house where I once lived—where my stepdad had so often beaten me, molested me, and even raped me—my mind went back to the home where I had spent the past several years. At *Arms of Love*, I had felt the genuine love of a mother in Mama Ines Valles. Mama Ines took good care of me when I was sick and nursed me back to health. She encouraged me when I felt depressed and built me up when I was down. Similarly, I felt the love of a true father in her husband, Papa Gino. He respected and valued me so much, he could not even go to sleep until he knew that all of us girls were home safe in our rooms.

What a difference love made. Here, in my prior home, in the middle of the night, my stepdad would come into my room and molest me. At *Arms of Love*, in the middle of the night, Papa Gino would check my room and make sure that the blanket was still covering me, so I wouldn’t be bitten by the mosquitos.

Now here I was, standing in my old house, facing my stepdad, feeling not hatred, but compassion. It was no longer *my* hurt that I felt. I hurt for him.

On account of love, I was no longer looking back. I was moving forward. Letting go of my past, I could reach for my future.



In May 2010, I began my college years, with the financial support and guidance of the *Arms of Love* Independent Living Program (ILP). Ate Marissa Josol, the social worker for the girls, asked me what course of study I wanted to pursue. I told her that my first choice was to become a social worker, and that my second choice was to become a teacher. I wanted to become a social worker because I wanted to help abused children and street children. Likewise, I wanted to become a teacher so that I could help children receive a good education and achieve a bright future, teaching them how to write and to read. In both cases, my desire was rooted in my own experience—I wanted to help kids that were in my same situation.

*Your past is a stepping stone to your future,
And you will be a blessing to others.*

Those words came back to my mind, and it made more sense to me now. Stepping stones are not a place where you stay. In fact, when those stones are placed in the middle of a raging river, you may run across as quickly as you can. My past was not a place to stay or to dwell. Those past events were stepping stones to something better, a place of safety on the other side of the river. And having arrived, I was committed to helping others move forward out of similar circumstances, helping them find their way safely across the same dangerous currents.

When I took the entrance exam for the social worker program, I failed. Then I took the entrance exam for the teacher program, and I passed. At first, I felt angry and frustrated by this result, because my preference was to become a social worker. But then I reminisced about my more distant past, when I cried out to God for many years to help me become a teacher someday. I suddenly realized that being a teacher was my deeper passion and calling. *I know the plans I have for you ...*

During my college years, I had many fears and anxieties, such as making reports, lesson plans, visual aids, and instructional materials for the students. But I promised myself that I wanted my parents at *Arms of Love*, Mama Ines

and Papa Gino, to be proud of me. By studying hard and not failing my classes, I felt that I could show my appreciation for everything that they had done for me. So I poured my heart and my mind into my classes and strove for my dream of becoming a teacher, clinging to the promise of Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.”

During my practice teaching, I always encouraged my students to study very hard, and sometimes I even shared with them my life experiences. I wanted them to know that no matter what their circumstances, with hard work, dedication, and faith, they could reach for a different future and realize their ambitions in life, just as I had done.

I graduated from college in March 2015. I cried aloud that day. Despite the chaos of my prior life, I had a beautiful future. I thanked my Mama Ines and Papa Gino for their love and care for me. I had never before felt the love



Anzelie's college graduation,
March 27, 2015.

of a mother and father, but they were the ones through whom I felt the true essence of love for the first time. After all the storms of my life, I felt the warmth of the sunshine on my heart. And I knew that God had never forsaken me, even though I had cursed Him in my darkest times.

In September 2015, I was preparing to take the licensure exam for becoming a teacher. The new president of *Arms of Love*, Kuya Steve Bagley, visited me in the Philippines while I was studying for the exam, and I told him, “Kuya Steve, I am sorry if I don’t pass. All of the questions in my review book are very difficult, and I am afraid I will fail.” But Kuya Steve told me not to be afraid, but to trust in God’s plans for me.

On September 27, 2015, I took the licensure exam and on November 30, 2015, the results were released. It was the happiest day of my life when I saw my name on the list of those that passed! It was not only my dream that came true that day, but that of my grandmother, whose love sustained me in my early years and through my darkest days. My grandma never had the opportunity to become a teacher herself because she never had the chance to

go to college. But my path took me from the arms of my grandma to a place called *Arms of Love*, and with their help through high school and college, my dream had come true.

After graduating from college, I initially worked in a shopping mall as a supervisor while studying to pass the licensure exam. As soon I was licensed to be a teacher, I began sending my resume and application to many different private schools. Much to my excitement, a school called Cebu Sacred Heart interviewed and then hired me! So in June 2016, I began working as a preschool teacher at Cebu Sacred Heart, and I am continuing to work there today.

My current degree in Elementary Education, with a major in General Content, enables me to teach children from 7-12 years old, but I would like to teach smaller kids as well. Thus, in parallel with my current teaching job, I am now studying for a second degree, a Bachelor of Education with a major in Early Childhood Development. In private schools, you can teach preschoolers without the focused degree, but in government schools, you need to have the special major to teach preschool.



Kuya Randy, Ate Lovely, Kuya Roger, and the rest of the staff: I am so thankful for you, because you have done your best for children like me to know they are loved and to have a successful future.

Kuya Robert Benson, your life has been a blessing to so many. Your name, Kuya Robert, is very special to me. You are one of the inspirations of my life. Your life inspired me, because even though you were abandoned,



Anzelie with her preschool students at Cebu Sacred Heart in 2017.



In September 2017, Anzelie met all of her stepbrothers and stepsisters for the first time.

Back row: Anzelie, Reeze Jailexine, Anzelie's mother, and Vinesse James.

Front row: Ivy Jane, Jay Michael, Jonavie, and Jenaica.

you never stopped dreaming of a better future, and when you arrived at that future, you had a heart to help others. Thank you for all the sacrifices you've made to help others. I am one of the fruit of your sacrifices, and you have a special place in my heart.

To those girls or women who have experienced abuse—I know that it is not easy to forget the pain of your past. But do not be discouraged. You are not limited or defined by your past. Use your past as a stepping stone to a brighter future. Make your past an inspiration to pursue your dreams in life. Show your abusers that they did not defeat you. Show them what real strength consists of. Putting another down, abusing them, or degrading them is not a reflection of strength, but of fear and inadequacy. Strength is when we are put down, abused, or degraded, and we rise above it. We persevere through it. We take our power back. We cling to the hope of a better future, and when we get there, we extend our hand to another and pull her to the same place of safety. And remember that there is a God who values you, loves you, and has better plans for your life—even when your current circumstances suggest otherwise.

Lastly, to anyone reading my story who is aware of another person being abused: don't hesitate to report it to the government or to law enforcement. And in every circumstance, love the people around you and value them as the unique and precious people that they are—they may not be getting that from anyone else. When a person knows her value, it increases her strength to move out of a difficult situation and sharpens her vision for a brighter future. Share your blessings and abundance with others, whether it be food or clothing, a safe place to stay, or just a word of encouragement.

Finally, remember this: you are not her rescuer. Just meet her wherever she is, stand with her, and empower her to change her circumstances.

The worst thing you can do is to do nothing.



Anzelie with current children at the *Arms of Love* Children's Home in Bohol in April 2017.

Chapter 7

Receiving Love

(Juan)

*True love is both loving and letting oneself be loved.
It is harder to let ourselves be loved than it is to love.*

—Pope Francis

Carolina, Eduardo and I arrived at our new home in March 2000. The property was in Lomas San Judas, a barrio in Managua. There were several buildings on the property; the one at the far end had four living units and a covered area in the middle. As we approached it, we could see that no one was living there yet—we were the very first arrivals. The people there received us with joy and love. We ate together, and then we started playing with balls and other toys. We were told that our new home was called *Brazos de Amor* (*Arms of Love*).

The promise of several meals every day, my own bed, new shoes and clothing, and toys was very appealing. However, the notion of having a new place to live—without the option of going home to grandma—scared me deeply. So when I saw our grandma leaving us, I was devastated. I had never cried so hard before. Even though I had been spending most of my time living and sleeping on the streets, I always knew I could go home to Grandma's house, chaotic though it was. I wasn't about to give that up. So, my first night at *Arms of Love*, I rebelled in every way I could: my vocabulary was nasty, my conduct was aggressive and vulgar, and it was very difficult for anyone to control me. I was determined to reject everything about this new place.

The next day, I pursued what felt like my only logical option: I ran away and navigated back to my grandma's. She was happy to see me, but equally upset that I had left *Arms of Love*. She knew that it was not going to be easy for me to stay there, but she hadn't expected me to come back so soon.

The next day, the same lady that brought me to *Arms of Love* the first time, Eyra, showed up again at Grandma's house and discussed with her the possibility of bringing me back. For the next several days, she returned to Grandma's house to talk with her and try to get me to return to *Arms of Love*.



This is the first known photo of Juan, taken at Arms of Love in early 2000.

After a few days, I finally agreed to accompany Eyra back to the *Arms of Love* home—and this time she was driving a car! I almost never had the opportunity to ride in a car. The trip went much faster this time, and when we arrived at *Arms of Love*, my new adventure began.

I didn't understand why the people at *Arms of Love* cared about me. Why were they feeding me? Why were they interested in me? I was excited to have food, a bed, and many things that I had never had before. It was very special to me and made me feel comfortable. But the fact that these people seemed to care for me took a while to get used to. They acted like I had value to them, and they said they were interested in my potential. My potential? I was 11 years old, and I couldn't even read or write. This was a struggle for me to understand...I had no idea how to respond or react. I had never been valued in this way before, and these people didn't even know me.

After living the past several years on the streets, I had grown accustomed to the freedom and lack of structure that came with living on my own. I had no clue what it was like to be loved, what it meant, what to expect, or how to respond. My life had been centered on nothing more than caring for myself and surviving. Yet here I was, in a place where—for the next eight years—I would be loved unconditionally. But it would take many years for me to begin to receive this sort of love.

The *Arms of Love* property in Lomas San Judas was not in a safe area, but it was much safer than the neighborhood where my grandma lived. The property was protected by a guard, day and night, and there was a tall fence around the perimeter of the property. There was also a small public school on the property, which was called “Escuela la Vina” (Vineyard School). It had only four classrooms, functioned as a primary school, and was soon-to-be the place where I would spend much of my time.

Over the next few days, we began to have meetings about attending school, cleaning, our daily schedule, and devotionals. It was completely new

to me—I was only expecting games, toys, shoes, clothing, and food. I had no idea that I would have these new responsibilities! Now I had to clean my room, wash my dishes, get up early for chores, and read my Bible at night.

“Forget this,” I thought. “*Arms of Love* is giving me the hardest time in my life! I never had to do these things before: follow a schedule, listen obediently...” I was no longer happy about it. So I ran away again.

And again.

And again.

Sometimes I ran away by myself. Other times, I brought my younger brother Eduardo with me. We would take a few of our items with us, wait for the security guard to be in another part of the property, jump over the fence, and then start walking back to our grandma’s house. It became easy for us to find our way back, as we had traveled that route so many times by this point. Our grandma would ask us why we left, and we told her we didn’t want to be there because it was boring and they made us do a lot of cleaning and hard labor. But the truth was that we just weren’t obedient, and eventually, Grandma would find out the truth from talking with the *Arms of Love* psychologist or houseparents. Then Grandma would bring us back, telling us that it was a better home for us and we needed what they had to offer.

One of the staff at *Arms of Love* was an older man named Mamerto Martinez. His hair was white, and his face wrinkled and leathery. But his eyes were always filled with the deepest kindness. One of the times we ran away, instead of Eyra coming to Grandma’s house to pick us up, Mamerto showed up on his motorcycle. He brought some drinks and bread for us, and told us that we were risking our lives by running away.

“This is not the future your grandma wants for you,” Mamerto explained. “She really wants you to have a better life, and that is what I want for you also.”

I returned to *Arms of Love* with Mamerto that day, because I had never before experienced the sort of kindness that I received from Mamerto. He was very humble and easy to talk with. I felt like he completely understood my situation and that he believed in me. He treated me in a way that made me feel important to him and I was always comfortable sharing my feelings with him. When I asked him for money, he would give me a little. At the same

time, he would encourage me to improve my behavior. Yet one was never conditioned on the other.

Over time, I would exchange hugs with Mamerto or go on weekend outings with him. It felt like someone actually enjoyed playing with me, teaching me, and caring for me. I never knew what that was like before. And that made me willing to invest more of my time in being with Mamerto. Not because it felt good—I still wasn't ready, at this point, to receive or trust in the love I was being offered—but because it was challenging my sense of identity.

The years I had spent living on the streets had stripped me of my identity. I knew that I had a family, but it felt like I didn't. Every day was filled with misery, as I tried to make money to buy food. The only thing that mattered was to survive another day. But at *Arms of Love*, I felt valued for the first time, and that compelled me to revisit questions like “Who am I?” and “Who is my family?” It started me on a new search for my identity, and over the course of many years, it changed how I thought about myself. When I was able to receive the love that I was being offered, it began to aggregate within me, filling me up, a little bit at a time. The more love I collected from other people, the more I wanted to share it with others. And I began to realize that no matter what my past, I had the potential to change the present and build a future.



The day finally came when I had to wake up early and go to school. I was very scared and nervous about it. I was nearly 12 years old and I had no idea how to even hold a pencil. I was the biggest kid in the class, the oldest, the quietest, the most unsocial, and the worst at everything. Except running. I had the best score in my sports class.

I will never forget my first day at school. My teacher, Jeronimo, was nice to me, as was every other teacher there. They knew of my situation, and they never said or did anything to make me feel any less than the other students. To the contrary, they were always mentioning that they were happy to have me in their class. Every day, they found ways to support me and make me feel equal to the other students.

Despite the support of my teachers, every day was a struggle for me. In the classroom, every time a kid was called to the front to read or write, I

was the only one who never participated, and it tapped into my feeling that I was useless in life. But the most painful moments were when I saw family members picking up the other kids from school, or when other kids asked me about my family—I had no idea what to say or how to explain my situation.

It was exceptionally difficult for me to learn how to read and write at the age of 12. I practiced every night, spending time alone with my book and pencil, and frequently cried from the effort. Finally, I learned how to write my name: Juan. That was the first word that I completely memorized. And with immense effort, by my second year in school, I was able to read and write.

Arms of Love started to receive more kids by early 2001, but I always was the oldest, the fighter, and the bad example for the other kids. By my second year at *Arms of Love*, my biggest challenge was no longer reading and writing,



Juan and Alex celebrating their first Valentine's Day at the *Arms of Love* Children's Home in February 2001.

but my behavior. My privileges, such as watching television or going out to play, were soon dependent upon my good behavior. At the same time, I was growing as a young man and experiencing other changes in my life, such as feeling ashamed when I was asked to do something in class in front of the girls. My life was changing: physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Meanwhile, Mamerto was also focused on teaching us about God's love. Every evening and Sunday morning, Mamerto led our devotionals. I read and memorized Bible verses, but only for the immediate benefit of the moment—a piece of candy. I became quite good at learning Christian songs for the same benefit. So, while I was learning songs and verses about living a better life, the sugar was probably not helping me improve my behavior.

When I finally completed primary school and was ready to start secondary school (grades 7-11), I was 14 years old. With the positive pressure and encouragement of the teachers and the staff at *Arms of Love*, I had accomplished first through sixth grade in just two school years—completing the equivalent of a full year of school every three months. When I combine this with the enormous cultural adjustment, I would consider my first two years at *Arms of Love* to be the most challenging of my life.

By this time, I had become more obedient and responsible, and I was also beginning to experience genuine love and friendship. So, it was a setback when my houseparents decided to leave *Arms of Love* after serving for several years in the program. I felt that they genuinely loved me. When I was sick, for example, they would always prepare something different for me to eat and check in on me several times during the day. They also bought ice cream for me, out of their own money, and spent time with me on the weekends. Not only did they care about me, but they were always very welcoming of my grandma when she visited me. I knew that they truly valued me as a person, and they did not take care of me just because they were receiving a salary. Moreover, after several years, they were among the few people who knew who I was before and who I had now become. I told them I was sorry for all of the times I had made things difficult for them and that I would miss them, and they encouraged me to keep moving forward.

Things were less stable for a while after that. *Arms of Love* was receiving more children, and there were now nine children in each of three homes, with

boys and girls living in separate units. I had grown enough to see how crazy the new kids were and how different I was by comparison. And over the next year or two, I had several different sets of houseparents. Some said it was just too much work for them, others said they just didn't like the job. That was a difficult time for me, because every time, I did my best to connect with my new houseparents, only to have them leave again. I was unable to trust or open myself up to the new houseparents when they arrived, because my years living on the streets taught me not to trust anyone that I had just met.

During this time, I began to rely more on Mamerto and our psychologist, Maria Luisa Gomez. Aside from Mamerto, Maria Luisa was the only other staff person that stayed at *Arms of Love* the entire 15 years that I was in the program, including the seven years that I lived at the children's home. Maria Luisa was like a mother to me. I will always remember our time together, because I spent so much time in her office. I would run to her every day to share my life with her and to say goodbye before heading off to school. She was always nice to me and was continually teaching me how to be kind and respectful to others.

In 2003, Emilio Padilla and his wife Gladys started as the directors of *Arms of Love* in Nicaragua. Emilio was one of the bodyguards for President Somoza in the 1970's, and because of this military background, his character and methods of discipline were very strict. Soon after he arrived, he moved the girls to a new house in the Las Palmas area of Managua, a very nice middle-class community, where they began attending one of the best Christian schools in Nicaragua.

Back at Lomas San Judas, where the boys continued to live, we had to start working on the property, planting and growing some of the food for the program, a portion of which would be sent to the girls' house. I began to grow angry and resentful, as it felt like Emilio gave the girls favored treatment and greater privileges, such as going out on birthdays and going shopping. I often had to listen to Emilio talking about their better behavior and fantastic lifestyle, while he told us boys that our bad behavior would not be tolerated and would present grounds for us to be expelled from the program.

One day, we met a new couple, Doug and Julie Effinger, missionaries who had just moved into the home with Emilio and the girls. They came to visit



Juan at Las Palmas in May 2006,
at the age of 16.

us frequently, and after a while, they moved us to a beautiful house just one block away from the girls' home in Las Palmas. This greatly changed our lifestyle, as now we had a nicer house to live in and we got to hang out at a spacious park in front of our house on the weekends. We also had new house-parents, Luis and Scarlet Lopez, who were both very kind to us.

I was 16 years old and in my third year of secondary school when I moved to the new house in Las Palmas. I was especially excited to have the opportunity to attend a better school. But my misbehavior often

put me at odds with Emilio, until one day he told me that I shouldn't be in the program. I became so angry that I told him, "If you want me to leave, just tell me, and I'll leave!" He became very upset with me and said, "Get all of your stuff ready because you are leaving tomorrow." So I cried, gathered my belongings, put my stuff in a plastic bag, and began to say goodbye to my brothers in the home. I was so angry inside, even feeling hatred toward Emilio. They called my grandma and the next day, she arrived to pick me up.

In the interim, however, my houseparent, Luis, allowed me to call Spencer Manners and explain the situation. Spencer was a businessman who lived in Managua and had been involved in supporting the program from the very beginning. At this time, Spencer was the president of the board for *Arms of Love* in Nicaragua, and he was one of my sponsors in the program. With the encouragement of Luis, I explained to Spencer some of the problems I had been experiencing with Emilio and my impending departure from the program.

My grandma arrived to pick me up, and Emilio and Gladys came over to meet with us. In the middle of the meeting, Emilio received a call, and I sensed that it was Spencer. After a while, Emilio came back into the room, and he said, "Spencer is coming to talk with you, and then he will decide

whether you will stay in the program.” My grandma and I were both so happy about it, and relieved by the feeling that I might be able to stay.

A couple of days later, Spencer arrived and asked me how things were going. I found it easy to talk with him and to share what was happening in my life. I could tell that he was genuinely concerned about me and the other kids in the program. From that point on, I knew that Spencer was keeping me in the program, as Emilio never again threatened to send me away. Instead, Spencer would visit me regularly, listen to how I was doing, and then encourage me to continue studying hard and to keep in touch.

After I turned 17 years old, *Arms of Love* started a new project in Jinotepe, Carazo, a lovely city with fine weather and beautiful green areas, about an hour away from Managua. The project was funded by a foundation that Doug and Julie were connected with, which was run by a U.S. businessman, Andy Salisbury. Like Doug and Julie, I always felt that Andy believed in me. The property he purchased and developed, under Doug and Julie’s direction, was a gorgeous, 20-acre property that included tropical rain forest. I soon found out that I would be living on this amazing property.

While our new home was under construction, the other boys and I continued to live with our new houseparents, Luis and Scarlett. We had a special connection by then, as I knew that they valued us and that they were caring for us because they loved us. For example, as soon as we moved to Jinotepe, Luis was always driving around, trying to find the best school in town to secure the best education for us. Luis was always making connections on our behalf. I could feel that his actions were acts of love.

I started a new chapter with Luis and Scarlett, and a new life after moving to Jinotepe. We had the option of calling them by name or calling them “Mom” and “Dad.” At first, due to my jadedness, I only called them by name. Too many houseparents had come and gone before them. But after about a year, I started calling them “Mom” and “Dad” as a way of showing my love and respect for them. Luis was also taking care of the property at *Arms of Love*, together with Doug Effinger, and he worked hard to ensure we had everything we needed.

On the weekends, all of the older boys, including me, worked on the new property, building our future home. I greatly enjoyed participating in the



Juan with Angie and Scarleth, two of the girls at *Arms of Love*,
at the new campus in Jinotepe in May 2008.

construction, and we also began growing fruits and vegetables on the property, cultivating part of our daily meals. I even had extra fruit to share with my grandma when she visited me twice a month.

Time was flying by, and soon I was in my final year of secondary school and beginning to think about what to do after graduating. I was going to be the first boy finishing secondary school at *Arms of Love*, but I did not expect that I would attend college. So I decided to attend a technical school while finishing secondary school, to learn construction and working with computers. I was also learning other life skills, such as doing laundry and my own ironing, and on Sundays, we started to go to a small Baptist church in Jinotepe.

Having the opportunity to work on the construction was a great experience for me. *Arms of Love* paid me for my work on the weekends, so for the first time, I was earning some of my own money. I saved most of it and would give it to my grandma when she came to visit. That would pay for her transportation back to Managua and also give her some additional funds to provide to others in my family. It was a great feeling for me, being able to start providing for my own family.

There was something else going on my life during this time. I began visiting nearby communities and other homes that cared for children, bringing them donations of food that we had grown on our property, especially oranges, mandarins, coffee, and corn. I also visited La Chureca, a large garbage dump in Managua where all of the trash from Managua was taken. There, I saw countless kids looking for food in the trash, without any shoes, feeling hungry, crying, and sad. It was a completely different life—the kids ate garbage and were never clean. I saw them living in so much pain. I felt very sad for them, and I cried several times in the days after our first visit. I wanted to delete the pictures in my mind, but I couldn't. And yet, we had the opportunity to come and serve them. That really impacted my life, as I became more generous and thankful for the things that I had. Not only were we able to give food to the children, but during one of my visits to La Chureca, I took off my own shoes and gave them to one of the boys who had none.

After moving to the new *Arms of Love* property outside Jinotepe, many new blessings started to come to us. More volunteer teams from churches in the U.S. began to come to our place, spending time and hanging out with us. In prior years, the teams typically stayed at the girls' home, as it was more spacious and accommodating than Lomas San Judas, but now we had a "team house" on the new property and the teams loved to stay there and spend time with us. I had a ton of new friends, people praying for me, giving me advice, and sharing time with me. It felt great to play with them, take pictures, and go out for pizza or ice cream. It was an exciting time, and I enjoyed every minute of it.

However, I also had a more structured schedule for my daily life. For half of my last year of secondary school, I was tasked with leading devotions at night. I did it as part of my daily schedule, because it was my responsibility as one of the oldest boys. I had no desire to lead devotions, or even to participate in them. But I did it as part of "being a good boy" and to keep the benefits coming.

We had a lot of guitars in our new home, which had been donated by different teams. We had started attending a new church in Jinotepe, called "The Rock," and some of my soccer friends played the guitar in the church services on Sunday. I commented to Luis that I wanted to start playing the

guitar (though it was mostly because I wanted to become more popular). Luis was a guitar player when he was younger and had been part of a band. So with the help of Luis' instruction, guitar lessons from visiting teams, and online videos, I began to play the guitar with Luis, and everyone in the home enjoyed our music.

After a while, I told one of my friends that I wanted to play the guitar at church. Word got around, until one day the church invited me to come to a three-day retreat, at their expense. Luis and Scarlett were excited to have me go, so they sent me for a three-day weekend.



During my last couple of years of secondary school, I began a new struggle with my emotions, including feelings about my mom that I had never felt before. Questions about my identity continued to frustrate me. “Who am I?” I would ask myself. “What really happened with my family, and what happened between my mom and my dad?” I had many questions about why my mom had abandoned me and had never cared for me, but I wasn't ready to ask my grandma about it. I realized that I was in a home with other kids who had been abandoned like me, but it felt different because when people asked about my parents, I had no idea how to respond.

Physically, I had been growing up fast, but I was starting to feel dry inside. I had become a young man, but the old emotions of anger, pain, and emptiness had started to resurface and grow again.

Much like when I was younger, ulterior motives snuck in, and dominated my reasons for attending the weekend church retreat. All I cared about was the opportunity to play my guitar at church with my friends, and to achieve that, I was willing to do anything the church wanted me to do. On the first day of the retreat, I politely listened, followed directions, and let my friends pray for me. I was not feeling anything myself—I was just letting my friends follow their feelings because I knew that I needed to be nice and respectful. Other people were crying, hugging each other, and seemingly having an intense experience. I was the ice-man of the group, the most unsocial, spending most of my time alone and observing the craziness going on around me.

The third day of the retreat came, and the only thing different for me was meeting a new friend and having a few conversations about soccer. The time came to pray and share about God, and I was doing my best to find ways to skip these moments, as I did the two days before. The people around me were friendly and generous to each other, hugging was everywhere, and there were prayers and crying in every corner. All I wanted to do was escape this chaos.

So I went into the next room and I had my own little conversation with God, alone. I started simply: “God, this is me. Tell me: who are you?” And then I kneeled. “I don’t feel like I have any faith or love in my heart. I don’t want to be *this* Juan anymore. I want you to change my life. And I want to know who you are.” I prayed with true, genuine hunger to know God and to know myself.

I cannot convey in words what happened next, but in the moments that followed, I experienced God in a real way for the first time in my life. It felt like I was being hugged, and the best part was feeling the pain, the anger, the emptiness, and the sadness of my life leaving my heart. My life on the streets and my family were flashing before me. I felt my heart breaking, but the “hug” kept giving me strength and peace. There was sweetness in the middle of my pain. It was a hug that filled and replaced the emptiness in my life, the pain of being abandoned, the sadness, and the anger.

In the days that followed, I began seeing in my mind every person that had helped me when I was in a dangerous situation, and I recognized God’s love and mercy in them. I began to see goodness in the bad moments of my life—and the way I was thinking about my life, viewing situations, and loving others began to change completely. My anger, sadness, and confusion continued to dissipate, and I began to realize in a fresh way, the goodness in my life. I felt faith for the first time.

After that extraordinary experience, I became a different Juan. The way I began to think, act, love, and care for others totally changed. I felt loved by other people before, but this kind of love was different. I began changing the way that I loved others and the way in which I allowed them to love me. What I had harbored for years in my heart had been replaced with the goodness of God. And I knew that I was not the same Juan that I was before.

I still had many questions in my mind. Why did I have to spend years living in the streets? Why I was abandoned by my biological parents? Why did I have to start working to provide for myself and my family when I was 9 years old? Why did I need to deliver drugs and use other kids for the same purpose? I also wondered why I was selected, from among thousands of other kids, to come to *Arms of Love* and receive the blessings and opportunities that I had been given. I have never received complete answers to those questions. But I know that my life has changed.

One thing that changed is that I now see my own life whenever I meet kids living on the streets. I know that they need someone to love them, believe in them, and take care of them. And I am continually thinking of how I can accomplish that. I also consider what *could* have happened to me, but didn't. I was never sexually abused, nor was I ever in a position where my life was in danger. I knew other kids who had been sexually abused, kidnapped, murdered...even my own brother, Lester, had been killed in the streets. Yet none of those things happened to me. Instead, I came to *Arms of Love*, and when I look back, I can see God's hand in my life.

I remember seeing other kids eating from the trash at La Chureca, looking for something to eat to survive. Now I consider myself fortunate that I only had to wash cars and deliver drugs to make money to survive. My life was so much better than it could have been. Before I was focused on the pain, but now I only feel gratitude.

Blessings, one behind the other, falling like rain, cover my life every day.



I will never forget all of the time I spent with my brothers and sisters at *Arms of Love*. One of my most special memories was when we each received a present for Christmas, and the kids were each showing each other what they received—excited, running, and laughing. It was hard, it took time, and it presented many personal challenges, but I discovered what it meant to be part of a family. Ever since then, I have been applying what I learned to my biological family, building relationships of unconditional love, protection, respect, and trust with my own relatives, creating a family where none had been before.

Family consists of people who commit to love and support each other and to never give up—no matter what. Sometimes we can find or develop those types of relationships within our biological families, and other times, it doesn't work out. But we should never limit ourselves to our blood relations. We can always choose to “adopt” others into our personal “family” by committing to love them as if they *are* family. Family is defined by relationships and by love, not by our DNA.



In March 2008, I started working toward a dream that is nearly impossible to achieve for a kid who comes from the type of poor and dangerous neighborhood that I grew up in: I began attending Centro American University (UCA), one of the best private universities in my country.

To achieve this dream, *Arms of Love* sponsored 50% of my educational costs and the other 50% came in the form of a soccer scholarship. I played soccer for my university for more than six years, but during my college journey, I also developed a personal business and a compassion ministry.

One of my most memorable experiences was when UCA was selected to host the “International Conference on Human Development and Capabilities 2013.” Out of nearly 5,000 students, I was selected to represent my university at the conference and was put in charge of organizing the schedule, interviews, conference, and tours for Amartya Sen, a professor at Harvard who had won the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1998. In effect, my responsibility was to attend to his needs and be sure he had a great visit to Nicaragua. Although it wasn't part of my training, I researched and learned his favorite foods, drinks, places to eat, and other activities. I committed to becoming Amartya Sen's best friend in Nicaragua, from the time he landed at the airport until the time he left. I gave it my best effort, without expecting any compensation, and so I was surprised at the end of the week when the university paid me for my efforts.

At about this time, I also met one of my best friends, Rafael Rivas. We became friends because we both played soccer at UCA. Rafa organized events at different colleges around Nicaragua that included medical, business, and leadership training. I worked alongside Rafa for the next several years, organizing

sports events and leading Bible studies. These events were critical in helping me develop my leadership skills—I was in charge of organizing sports events all around Nicaragua, contacting students at different universities, organizing soccer games, and setting up facilities for business and leadership conferences.

One of our primary objectives was to initiate or participate in programs that would help people in need. Every Christmas, for example, we visited poor communities and distributed toys, food, and medicine. We also connected with young students in poor communities and gave them scholarships to attend school or to take English classes, so they could someday find a job as an interpreter. It was very rewarding to see so many young people take advantage of these opportunities and develop marketable skills for the future.

During these final years attending university, I really began committing myself to serving others. For many years, at *Arms of Love*, people served me. But the more time I spent in the poorest communities of my country, the



Juan selling coffee under his brand name, *Mucho Gusto*, to raise money for the *Arms of Love* Children's Home that he grew up in.

more I witnessed both adults and children looking for food in trash cans, sleeping on the ground under a bridge, or begging for money so they could have something to eat. I saw kids suffering simply because no one would help them. My heart broke for them because in the past, I was one of these kids myself. I wanted to be someone they could look up to and receive help from.

It was then that I realized I had changed. I am not the Juan who used to live on the street, the Juan who needed a hand to help me up. I used to be among the millions of people in my country that don't

have the opportunity to attend university—but now that I have a college education, I consider how I can contribute to solving problems in my society and provide opportunities to other people in need. I see kids today who need the same help that I once needed, except now, I am the one in a position to help them.

During my final years in college, I started my own coffee business—Mucho Gusto Coffee—as part of my broader vision to support *Arms of Love* and other organizations that care for children-at-risk in my country. I wanted to develop my own business so I could support these programs directly and help other kids from the street become educated and more self-sufficient. So every time I travelled to different churches across the United States and shared my story, I also brought them the very best, organic Nicaraguan coffee beans along with the message, “Thank you for helping us and for your heart to bring change into the world. Now work with me to bring peace, love, and compassion to still others who remain in need.”

As people began purchasing my imported coffee beans, I donated the profits to *Arms of Love*—and the first thing I did was to purchase soccer uniforms for the kids now living at the *Arms of Love* home where I grew up.



In October 2015, I graduated from university. *Arms of Love* planned a huge celebration in honor of my graduation, as I was the first of the children to receive a four-year college degree. But instead of focusing on my accomplishment, I turned the celebration into one that honored my grandma, who had recently turned 86 years old. Everyone at *Arms of Love* hugged her,



Left to right: Juan’s mother, grandma, and aunt attending his college graduation.



Juan walking with his grandma during his college graduation ceremony.

kissed her...and called her their grandma.

After my grandma walked with me in my graduation ceremony, I realized that my university education did more than prepare me to find a job, earn a higher income, and have an easier life. What matters most is the increased opportunity that I have to empower others, to love them, serve them,

inspire them...and give them hope.

When I shared these thoughts with my grandma after graduation, she told me something that I had never known before. When she used to work in her home making tortillas, many people asked her if they could pay later in time. They had children to feed, but no money to pay for the tortillas. Seeing the need in their eyes, my grandma gave tortillas to anyone who asked, and she never followed-up on promised payments. Even though she was very poor, my grandma wanted to be sure that the children in our neighborhood had something to eat at least once a day. It made her happy to help her neighbors...but she had never before mentioned it to me.



My older sister, Carolina, and my younger brother, Eduardo, also grew up with me at *Arms of Love*, and have pursued their own unique journeys in life.

When Carolina finished secondary school in 2005, she decided to leave *Arms of Love* and move to Guatemala, rather than pursuing a college education. By the time she returned to Nicaragua in 2010, she had a young daughter, Juliana, and was pregnant with her second daughter, Stacy.

Carolina has expressed regret that she left the *Arms of Love* program when she did and that she decided not to go to college. On the other hand, she is now a responsible mother who has two beautiful daughters that have changed her life forever. She manages a small shoe store in Managua and works hard, not only to support her children, but to help take care of our mother and grandma. And she dreams of one day sending her own kids to university.

Our younger brother, Eduardo, is not only incredibly smart, but he has many other talents including drawing and cooking. Eduardo finished college at about the same time I did and pursued a career in natural medicine. He is supporting himself and truly enjoying his new occupation. Eduardo was loved, valued, and protected growing up at *Arms of Love*, just as I was, and today he is an amazing brother with a great heart of compassion.



Today I am living in Colorado, in the United States. I am happily married to my wife Candace—the smartest and most beautiful girl on the planet—and I have a new management-level job in the oil business.

When I am working in the oil fields, sometimes I reminisce about my life in Nicaragua, the years that I spent living on the streets, and the opportunity that I had to grow up at *Arms of Love*. Those memories reinforce my desire to continue helping people in my home country of Nicaragua, and to always be involved in projects and ministries that allow me to serve, love, and care for the people there. In particular, I have a vision for resuming my coffee business and opening a Latin American market here in the U.S., so I can import products from Nicaragua, sell them in the U.S., and donate the profits back to *Arms of Love*.

When I lived on the streets, I had no opportunity to dream, because every day was about survival. While I lived at *Arms of Love*, I began to dream of a better future for myself, something I never before thought possible. Today, I am living that dream...and now I dream of providing new opportunities for others, both in my home country of Nicaragua and in my adopted country of America.

Chapter 8

Winning the Battle

(Myla)

*If you can't fly then run, if you can't run then walk,
If you can't walk then crawl, but whatever you do
You have to keep moving forward.*

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

The dictionary defines “injustice” in a variety of ways: an unfair situation; the violation of another’s rights; an undeserved outcome. But words are inadequate to capture the essence of injustice. It consists of pain and brokenness, where there should be health and wholeness; betrayal, where there should be trust; despair, where there should be hope; isolation, where there should be relationship; rejection, where there should be love.

Injustice is being pregnant at the age of 13, because you were raped by your father, the one you should be able to trust the most to protect you and keep you from harm. Injustice is being rejected, mocked, and shamed by others—at school, in your family, and in the community—because you cannot tell them the truth of your situation. Injustice is carrying your child to term, while living isolated and alone, without any words of encouragement from others. Injustice is having your baby named by the one who raped you.

There is no lonelier place on earth.

My life was saturated with injustice. But the kindness that was shown toward me by just a handful of people sowed hope into my life. They helped me reclaim my value and develop a positivity that helped me battle the injustice. Their commitment reinforced my perseverance and strengthened my resolve to never surrender. And their love for me reflected the love of the God who now fills my life with calling and purpose. My fight continues. But I am winning the battle.



My father knew of my pregnancy and advised me to induce an abortion by taking the mahogany seed. This seed is known as a “bitter seed” and it can be used for an abortion if consumed in a sufficient quantity. But I did not heed his advice, because I thought it would be morally wrong and against God’s commandments. So throughout my pregnancy, I kept going to school, even though my stomach was starting to show a baby bump. Many people asked me if I was pregnant, including my sixth-grade classmates, teachers, and neighbors, but I always denied that I was pregnant because I was ashamed of my situation. I felt hopeless and abandoned.

I was unable to talk with anyone about my situation. No one dared to raise the issue with me because they were afraid of my father. Similarly, I was terrified to tell anyone because my father threatened to kill me or my siblings if I said anything. So I lived in silence, and I continued to attend school throughout my pregnancy, while bearing the pain, the shame, and the gossip of other people. Sometimes I cried aloud and said, “It’s too much...This cannot be happening to me.” And I questioned God as well, “Why me? Why are you allowing me to experience such humiliation in my life?” And yet something inside of me urged me to go on, even though no one dared to help me.

Late in my pregnancy, my graduation from elementary school was approaching, and I attended the rehearsal for my graduation ceremony. But I was unable to attend the actual graduation in April 2004 because I gave birth to my child on April 3, 2004. Her name is Aprilou. My father was the one who gave her a name—apparently because I was legally a minor. I first learned of her name when I saw her birth certificate. He never consulted me or explained why he gave her the name Aprilou.

While giving birth to my child, I did not show any emotions. It was as if I didn’t care what was happening to me—I had completely disassociated myself with the reality of my life and what was happening in the moment. I was just thankful that Lolo Gil’s family was open to receive me in their house and allowed me to labor there. Lolo Gil was the youngest sibling of my grandfather, Lolo Agapito, my father’s father. Their house was near the highway of Barangay Anas and was more accessible to the midwife than our own house.

Our house was located on the very peak of Barangay Anas, so it would have been very difficult for the midwife to arrive there. On account of giving birth at Lolo Gil's house, a local midwife named Nanay Consor was able to assist with the birth. I labored in their house, rather than a hospital, so I lacked proper medical treatment following childbirth.

After giving birth, one of my classmates visited me in Lolo Gil's house. I spent time healing from the wounds of childbirth, while also washing the baby's clothes and caring for her day and night. I did it alone. And when I regained my strength, I went back to my home with the baby.

My life was in chaos. My parents broke up, I was separated from my siblings, and then I became pregnant and gave birth because of the abuse of my father. Through all of this, I never received any encouragement from anyone. No one stepped up to help me. I felt neglected and unvalued, and I was convinced that my life had no meaning, that I was alone in this life, and that I had no one to defend me. Even my closest relatives never helped me before and during these hard times, while others in the community acted like my family was a contagious disease.

In May 2004, my Aunt Femia returned to the Philippines from Switzerland because my Aunt Shirley was about to get married. A few days after the wedding, my Aunt Femia visited me with my cousins, and with them was a social worker. My Aunt Femia had informed the social worker about my situation, and she told me that because I was a minor and a victim of sexual abuse, I would be brought to Tagbilaran City and placed in the custody of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (the "DSWD").

In late May of 2004, I was brought to the DSWD and was later transferred to the Bohol Crisis Intervention Center (BCIC) with the baby. My Aunt Femia even visited me there and gave clothes to me and the baby. During that time, Aunt Femia took care of me in the same way that a mother would normally care for her daughter during such a period and provided me with psychological support. But in many ways, the BCIC felt like a prison, because we were surrounded with high walls and were not able to see the outside world. They did this to protect us from our perpetrators, but in the process, it dampened our spirits.

In the crisis center, I met girls even younger than myself who had been physically and sexually abused by an immediate family member. I developed many friends and they even helped me take care of my baby. We also had housemothers named Mama Arcie, Mama Celsa, and Mama Minda, who did not live with us at the center, but cared for us, guided us, and directed us in our daily routines.

One day, the social worker called me to her office and asked about my plans for the future. Along with other staff, she explained to me the advantages and disadvantages of different options. For example, she explained that in order to pursue my education, I would need to give up the baby for adoption so I could focus on my studies. On the other hand, if I decided to keep the baby, trying to prosecute my father in the court system would diminish my ability to attend school and focus on my education, and I would need to take on the role of a mother at a young age.

I soon began to realize that in order to take good care of the baby, I would need to provide for both of our needs, including adequate food to eat, clothing, and shelter. I asked myself, "How can I take good care of the baby, and where will I get the support? How can I raise my baby alone, having only an elementary school education?" I was only 14 years old at the time, I was unable to find a job because I was a minor, and I could not handle the responsibilities of raising a child. I could not even return to my hometown with the baby. On the other hand, if I gave up the baby for adoption, both of us could have a good future. She might live with a different family, but she would be well-cared for, and I would be able to pursue my dreams of studying and becoming a better person someday.

So, I gave up Aprilou for adoption, knowing she might forget me over time. The social worker told me that when my child is fully grown someday, she will have the option to come and look for me. By pursuing this path, I could complete my education and someday have a stable job, so that if I ever had the good fortune to meet my daughter again, I would be able to sustain her needs. But in the meantime, I felt completely alone, neglected, and without value.

In July 2005, together with my social worker, Ate Clavel Saycon, we travelled with my baby to the city of Cebu, on the island next to Bohol. We

went to the Norfil Foundation, a non-profit organization in the Philippines that facilitates both domestic and foreign adoptions, and left the baby in their care. It broke my heart to see Aprilou crying when I let her go, but I knew that I had to do it for both of us. She was only one year and three months old, at that time, but we had built a very strong bond in that short period of time. I went back to the crisis center two days later. And in the weeks and months that followed, my life began to feel a little bit normal again.

I have yet to learn what happened to Aprilou after I gave her up for adoption. I tried asking Ate Clavel Saycon, the social worker that accompanied me to the Norfil Foundation in Cebu, but she also has no information about the status of my child. Now that I have a stable job and I can provide for her needs, I would welcome the opportunity to raise her. But I have no way of locating her.

My final months in the crisis center taught me many life skills necessary to being a responsible young adult, but nothing impacted my life more than the faith that I developed as a result of knowing one of the housemothers at the BCIC, Mama Arcie. I saw Mama Arcie living a life that was filled with passion, faithfulness, and the servant heart of Jesus. I could see through her love and service to others that she was serious about following God, and this motivated me to learn more about her faith and the God that she believed in.

Through the love of Mama Arcie, I felt valued for the first time in my life. And I knew deep within me that it was the love of God flowing through her that I was experiencing. Despite everyone else abandoning me and abusing me, I came to believe that God had not abandoned me. He was not the cause of the evil that others brought into my life, but rather, was present to carry me out of that darkness and bring purpose and redemption to my life. I had value because he loved me. On November 5, 2005, at the BCIC, I made the decision to trust God with my life. Ever since, I have seen God do things in my life that I never previously thought possible, and I have been blessed in ways I could have never imagined as he has comforted me, guided me, and provided for my needs.



I moved from the crisis center to the *Arms of Love* Children's Home in Bohol in January 2006 at the age of 16. Everything at *Arms of Love* was new to me back then. I was not used to its culture, its people, its environment—and most of all, its family. I moved into the Second Home on the *Arms of Love* property, and for the first time, I felt like I had loving, complete parents in Papa Lito and Mama Ely. They had four children of their own and cared for a group of children much younger than I. The other children in the home felt like my siblings.

For the first time, I had a family where I lacked nothing—including being valued and loved. I could not have asked for more. Every night, we gathered together in the living room, and Papa Lito would ask everyone to share how they were doing. We shared about our problems, our favorite Bible verses, and even told jokes to one another.

Sometimes, when I looked back at the time when I first arrived in *Arms of Love*, I can only smile and thank God for his faithfulness. For the first time in my life, I had a complete family. My own family had broken down, but at *Arms of Love*, I had a giant family filled with many parents, many siblings, many friends, and most of all, a community that understood me. They brought new hope into my life and helped me begin pursuing my dreams.

The community that I became a part of extended far beyond those who lived with me in my new home. The kitchen staff, Ate Pening and Ate Celsa, and the jeepney driver, Tatay Pedro, were very kind to me and always asked how I was doing. Another houseparent couple, Kuya Gino and Ate Ines Valles, were also kind to me. Ines was like a big sister and was very affectionate toward me, while Kuya Gino was humble and had a gentle spirit. For the first time, I felt like I had a family, and that everything that had been stolen from my life was being restored.

Living at *Arms of Love* that first month gave me new experiences and surprises beyond my imagination. I became part of the youth group at the affiliated Vineyard Christian Fellowship church. I also joined camp for the first time and gained new friends from other churches. But one of the most special times was every Saturday, when we travelled to a community near the Badjao's

village. There we provided lunch to the poorest families in the community, played games with the children, and taught Sunday school. The children were so excited every week when they spotted us heading to the meeting area. I had many “firsts” during my stay at *Arms of Love*, and they were some of the best experiences of my life. Through the community of people within the church and at *Arms of Love*, my faith and spirituality grew quickly.

By this time, however, I was four years behind in my education. I had only completed the sixth grade before entering the BCIC, and while living at the crisis center, we were not allowed to attend regular school. As a result, I was enrolled during that time in the Alternative Learning System (or “ALS”), a program for older youth. This prepared me for the examination that would qualify me for high school. After an immense amount of studying while at the BCIC, which continued after I arrived at *Arms of Love*, I took the acceleration exam at Dr. Cecilio Putong National High School, in Tagbilaran City, on February 12, 2006.

On May 24, 2006, I enrolled in high school while I was still waiting for the results of the acceleration exam. Two days later, the results arrived and



Children living at the *Arms of Love* Children's Home in Bohol at Christmas 2009, with YWAM volunteers. Myla is fifth from the right in the back row, wearing a green jacket; Anzelie can be seen jumping directly behind her.

much to my astonishment, it said that I was accelerated not to high school, but to college! I was so excited!

I started attending college in June 2006, at the University of Bohol. I went directly to university without ever attending secondary school. And once again, in yet another way, restoration and wholeness—justice—entered into and transformed my life.

In August 2006, I went back to DCPNHS, where I took the exam, to receive my certificate of completion. The principal told me that if I found college too difficult, I could attend the fourth year of high school instead, but I told him that wouldn't be necessary—I can succeed in college. Through perseverance and having the right mindsight in achieving my goals, I successfully finished my education in college despite never attending high school.

But I did not accomplish any of this purely on my own efforts—I had been blessed with many teachers who encouraged me and enabled my education along the way. Without my teachers in elementary school, like Ms. Adela Gamalo, Ms. Rosel Cardenas, and Ms. Villa Bagotsay, I would not have been able to answer all of the questions during the examination. When I was pregnant and in the sixth grade, my teacher Ms. Gina Salise Bucio inspired me to continue my studies so that I could graduate, and even exempted me from doing certain chores at school so I could study more. And while I lived at the BCIC, my social worker, Ms. Eva Rodriguez, believed that I could change my future through studying and encouraged me while I participated in the ALS program. For each and every one of those people who helped and supported me in my education, I am forever grateful for their dedication and commitment.

I stayed in the *Arms of Love* Children's Home for about five months, and when I began going to college, I moved into a house near the university. But during that short period of time, my life was changed. I learned to communicate my feelings to people and I developed a close bond with the children. I was moody and difficult when I first arrived at *Arms of Love*, but the staff understood me, and through the love I received, my heart was changed. I never got into a fight with any of the kids—rather, I wanted to be a role model for the kids and help the staff and my houseparents take good care of them. It brought me joy that I was able to help the staff with their workload and

responsibilities. Whenever I visit *Arms of Love* today, I am happy that many of the kids still remember me.

Today, when I look back on my past, I no longer see a lonely girl, but a strong woman who emerged renewed from broken clay. Our life is something we must never surrender to others or to circumstances. It is our most precious gift. We are meant to flourish and to live our lives from a place of value. As the saying goes, “A winner never quits and a quitter never wins.”



In June 2006, I started my first year in college at the University of Bohol, supported by the Independent Living Program of *Arms of Love* (“ILP”). The ILP provided financially for my tuition, room, and board, but the staff and other students in the program also helped me grow into an independent and responsible person.

I was one of the first three students who participated in the *Arms of Love* ILP program in the Philippines—the other two students were Jorlinda Neurva, who studied Midwifery; and Desiree Ayco, who majored in Hotel and Restaurant Management. The three of us lived together at a boarding house near the university, together with one of the *Arms of Love* staff, Mary Ann Palgan.

I considered Ate Jorlinda as my big sister, and although she was much older than me, we got along well. After I first arrived at *Arms of Love*, I was



Kim Fisher, *Arms of Love* CEO, with the first three college students in the Philippines in June 2008. *Left to right: Jorlinda, Desiree, and Myla.*

staying in the third home where Papa Lito and Mama Ely were the house-parents. One of the other children in the home was Ate Jorlinda. She was a mature and happy girl, but I did not grow close with her at first. It was only after we transferred to the new boarding house with the first ILP students that we slowly started to draw closer. She even shared with me her own family story and, on certain occasions, other problems like those involving her family, relationship, school, etc. Sometimes, when she was completely tired from her job and from school, I would help her write her class notes because she would need to submit them to her instructor the next day. I even went with Jorlinda to visit her sisters near Island City Mall. Her sisters were very nice to me, even though I was only meeting them for the first time, and they welcomed me into their small home.

Ever since elementary school, I wanted to study biology and proceed to medicine. However, the University of Bohol did not offer a degree in Biology, and after Mary Ann Palgan explained Psychology to me, I agreed to take Psychology instead. The program appealed to me because it was in the sciences and involved the study of human behavior. Although the subject matter did not always interest me, I continued to pursue it because it helped me to understand myself and to open up to others, rather than hiding in my own shell. Maturing as a person and growing socially would be a long process over the next several years, but during my graduation ceremony five years later, my teacher and department head, Ms. Gina Lopena, described me as a butterfly emerging from my cocoon.

My first year in college, I was mostly an observer in the classroom. I preferred to sit in the last row and just listen to my professor's lecture. I only answered questions if I was directly asked. And because of my past experiences, I preferred to remain alone at school. I always wore t-shirts, polo shirts, jeans, and sneakers. I was boyish when it came to personal style. I was introverted and shy, and I didn't share the stories of my life with others because I was afraid to be judged. At college, none of my colleagues, friends, and advisors knew the earlier half of my real life-story, which precluded the gossip that tore me down in grade school. It was my way of coping—as long as my secrets were safe, I could manage living and studying alone and with minimal friends.



Myla with Loragin, another girl at *Arms of Love*, in January 2009.

My refuge and hideouts were limited to school, church, and my boarding house. When my classmates asked me to go out with them to a bar or a drinking club, I chose not to go with them, because I didn't want to suffer the effects of alcohol. I had heard that many unwelcome things can happen when a woman is drunk—men will take ad-

vantage of their weakness, and I no longer wanted to be a victim. Socializing with others can happen anywhere and we don't need to bend to society's demands. I preferred to stay in the church, where my spirit was growing, rather than going places where I wasn't happy. People called me a "conservative," but I didn't care. I only wanted to be a good student and a role model.

During my second year, everything began to change. I was in a group of only 10 or 11 students in my course of study and I became active in various organizations, including the Psychology Society, Peer Facilitator Circles, and Liberal Arts Student Government. I also became the Commissioner of our school Student Government during Election Day. In all of these organizations, I held different positions, and I even became the Secretary in the Liberal Arts Department. This involvement gave me the opportunity to develop friends in multiple departments, and I even served as a guide for the Student Campus tour.

In November 2007, I started working my first part-time job while attending college, managing the office of the Civil Welfare and Training Service (CWTS), which oversees the welfare and involvement of nearly all the university students who are performing community service. The CWTS class is held every Saturday and includes community outreach, such as building homes for people who are disabled and cleaning up the environment. This job gave me the experience of working with many different kinds of people, ranging from teachers to students, even including school officials such as the Registrar and the University President. This work helped me learn to better manage my

time and balance the different obligations in my life. I was also hired to teach English to Korean students who were attending the university.

During my college years, I never pursued any relationships with boys. It may have been the result of my past and a fear that I would be rejected because of it. Although feminine on the inside, I was more comfortable wearing pants than skirts, and t-shirts than dresses. Some people called me a “man-hater” but that was yet another misperception of me. In fact, most of my friends at school were boys in the Criminology and Engineering departments. I never had any relationship during my college years and—surprise!—my life was still normal. I wasn’t opposed to having a relationship, but I wanted to focus on my studies and succeed in college. I didn’t want to waste the sacrifices of the people who helped me reach university and fund my studies. I wanted to make them proud of me—that was my inspiration.

I finished my studies at the University of Bohol over a five-year period. My graduation day arrived in March 2011, and several of the people who inspired me and loved me came to attend the ceremony. Mommy Kim, the former CEO of *Arms of Love*, is like a mother to me and I am so happy that she counts me as her daughter. Mommy Kim flew to the Philippines from the U.S. to be there for my grandest day. She always supported my decisions, gave me advice about life, and always found time for me. She is nice, kind-hearted, and passionate. Even when she was in the U.S., she never failed



Ivy Petallar, Myla, and Kim Fisher at Myla’s graduation from the University of Bohol in March 2011.

to communicate with me and write to me on special occasions. She was like another mom at *Arms of Love*.

Also at my graduation was Ate Ivy, who was the director of the *Arms of Love* Children's Home in the Philippines at the time of my graduation. Although I was not close to her, because I did not live at the children's home for very long before leaving for college, I knew her to be a kind and soft-spoken person. Even my own Aunt Shirley attended my graduation, and after the ceremony, they treated me to a celebratory dinner.

While I studied at the University of Bohol, I remained a part of the *Arms of Love* community and the Vineyard church in Tagbilaran. My boarding house was next to the church, and I loved spending my free evenings there, often having conversations with Kuya Zolito Alaba (the *Arms of Love* treasurer and church caretaker), the pastor of the church, or other youth that gathered there. Sometimes we sang songs together or ate dinner together. I was even appointed auditor of the church and helped handle the finances.

During my final year at the university, I also decided to study part-time at a Bible school, which I then attended full-time for another year after I graduated from the University of Bohol. As I progressed in college, I had a growing conviction that God had redirected my life for a greater purpose and I wanted to spend time exploring God's purposes for my life. I know that I am called to live for Him and to serve others. When I encounter problems in my life today, I just remember God's promises and His purposes for my life.

While attending the Bible school, I not only grew in knowledge and in faith, but when I wasn't attending classes, I often visited nearby neighborhoods with my friends, sharing our faith, praying for the sick, and ministering to peoples' needs. I experienced God in a new and personal way, and my life will never be the same. I graduated from the Bible school on May 6, 2012, and members of my biological family—including my Aunt and my grandma—as well as my *Arms of Love* family came to celebrate with me.



Studying in college is a dream of every student, but finishing it is the pride of every student who perseveres to finish the race. The diplomas that I received were critical to my success in finding employment when I moved

to Manila after graduation. My first two jobs involved working in Human Resources for a motorcycle training company and a construction firm. Since then, I have worked for the same company for the past four years, where my boss saw potential in me and promoted me to the position of Human Resources Supervisor Trainee. In that capacity, I perform human resource and management functions for hundreds of employees of the company, including recruiting, drafting employment contracts, interviewing applicants, computing benefits, and creating and maintaining our Employee's Handbook. I am also the Executive Secretary to the company CEO. In addition to my salary, the company also provides my lodging and meals, and my employment gives me interesting opportunities to meet different kinds of people, process visas of different countries, process legal papers, collaborate with international partners, and so on.

My former roommate in college, Ate Jorlinda, remains a good friend of mine today. Jorlinda is now married to Albert Lopez and they have two children. Sometimes we go on family picnics together, and for Christmas of 2016, I spent the holiday with them. I am also one of the godmothers of Jorlinda's youngest child.

My five years as a student under the Independent Living Program of *Arms of Love* helped me become the person that I am today. It was during those years that I learned to think on my own, make my own decisions, and be responsible for myself. But in fact, I was building on my prior experience. Since my parents split up, I was responsible to care for my younger brothers. When my father left us, for weeks at a time, to attend his court hearings, we were often left with very little food, and we had to cultivate root crops or pick bananas to have enough to eat. That life experience, of taking initiative to survive, contributed to my ability to become responsible and independent.

When people hear about my childhood, sometimes their first reaction is to perceive me as being weak and vulnerable during that time, because I didn't have anyone to lean on. But that so-called "weakness" developed my strength—strength that I needed in order to survive and lead my life. I had to think and make decisions on my own. If I couldn't cultivate enough food to eat, I always found a way to care for myself and my brothers, even if we

needed to run away from home and beg for food in neighboring cities. It's not a sin to want to survive. It's a human instinct—if we don't eat, we will die.

Many people felt pity for us because of our situation, but those challenging circumstances actually trained us to become better people. Others are dependent on their families and cannot live without their assistance. I am not saying that it is a good thing to be abused or abandoned by your family, I am only saying that I used the tough times in my life to learn how to be responsible for myself, to do things without seeking the approval of others, and to live with the consequences of my decisions and actions. I had to rely on myself and I had no one else to blame for my failures. I needed to plan and prepare for my future in a way that was not dependent upon anyone else.

I didn't allow my hurtful experiences to become a hindrance in reaching my dreams. God is my Comforter, Guidance Counselor, Friend, and Rescuer. He comforts me every time I cry, when I reminisce about my past and my life problems. He encourages me not to be weary and to never give up. He gives me life, especially when I am down and broken.

Being poor is not a hindrance to success. Success comes from having a strong will and a passion to study and to advance ourselves. It comes from making the right choices, avoiding peer pressure, and taking responsibility for our actions. It requires that we make a conscious choice to avoid negative thinking, focus on the positive, apply what we have learned, and be grateful for our blessings. And above all else, we need to value ourselves, see the potential in our lives, and strive to fulfill that potential.

In all of my undertakings, *Arms of Love* was there to give its full support so I could fly. It provided support when I was just starting out in a big city like Manila. And because I had their encouragement, I knew that I would make it there.

I am forever grateful for *Arms of Love*. It is the place where I began to feel complete, to experience full love, and to be healed emotionally and psychologically. They also prepared me to become a mature, independent woman. I may be distant to them today, after graduating from college, but I have not forgotten them. They will forever be a part of my life.

I'm not ashamed that I was one of the children of the *Arms of Love* Children's Home. Rather, I am honored that I am a part of their family and

that I was part of the Independent Living Program. When I was in the ILP, they never controlled my life, but offered me guidance and encouragement as I learned how to lead my life. And I was committed to being successful in my education and not to waste the support of my sponsors, because not all young people in this world have such a fortunate opportunity. I was blessed with so much that it was difficult for me to turn my back on the blessings I had been given, become irresponsible, or diverge from the right path.

Thank you so much to all of the people who have accompanied me in my life's journey. God bless you more in everything you do.

Love Kindness



*Life is beautiful, life is precious, and life is meaningful
When it is lived with purpose.*

—Myla Salise

Chapter 9

Fight for Your Purpose

(Myla)

He has made everything beautiful in its time.

—King Solomon, *Ecclesiastes 3:11*

As a kid, I never received love from the people around me. My father raped me. My classmates made fun of me, my mother did not believe me, and most people just looked the other way. My siblings and I were viewed as thieves and people gossiped about our family situation. I can't remember anyone who helped me during those weary times, even when I lacked food to eat, when I was pregnant, or after giving birth. I viewed myself the way others treated me: worthless. Without realizing it, I had allowed the actions of others to define me, which gave them power over my life. But today, I can say that I am a strong, independent woman. I know my value, I have found purpose in my life, and I have forgiven my abusers—for my freedom, not theirs.

I am not defined by my past. When people abused me, it was a reflection of *their* faults and shortcomings, and the evil that persists in this world. It had no relevance to my value or who I am as a person.

After I gave up my baby, Aprilou, for adoption, a few good people came into my life, people that I had no prior connection with. They loved me consistently, without conditions. They sought nothing from me in return. Their message was simple: I had value as a person and their love affirmed it. Like light penetrating my darkness, their love illuminated and affirmed my value. The things once stolen from me were given back freely and without conditions. When I received that message, I was reconnected with my value, and my heart and my life turned outward toward others. The love of a few can overcome the abuse of many – because love is more powerful than hate.

Love freely given and freely received will be freely given again. When I rediscovered my value, I began to invest in others, and that brought further purpose and meaning into my life. The most beautiful thing about love is the singular quality that gives it meaning and puts it within our control: it is a choice that depends on no one but ourselves.

Every person has a story that is unique and distinct from every other. We can never fully understand another person, because we have not experienced that person's life. However, by sharing our experiences, we can receive and provide encouragement to one another, broaden and change our perspectives, strengthen our faith, increase our positivity, and deepen our fulfillment in life.



During the second semester of my third year in college, on November 18, 2008, I received a call informing me that my younger brother Joseph had been in a motorcycle accident. I rushed to Celestino Gallares Memorial Hospital in Tagbilaran City, which was about 10-15 minutes from the university, and I was told by the doctor that his leg had to be amputated. I asked if we could wait for my elder brother to give the consent for the amputation, but the doctor explained that the situation was too urgent to wait. The bones in his leg were not simply broken; some of the bones were scattered and could not be repaired, even with an operation. Joseph had also lost a lot of blood because the veins in his leg had been cut during the accident. Without an amputation, the doctor said that the leg could become infected and that the infection could spread to the rest of his body.

Based on the doctor's advice, I signed the consent. I was only 19 years old at the time.

When my brother woke up, he was very angry with me. He blamed me for allowing the doctors to amputate his leg. Even my older brother asked me why we could not wait for him to arrive. I was hurt because I was only trying to save his life. They were mollified only when the doctor explained to them the gravity of Joseph's situation.

Because none of my parents or siblings lived nearby, I decided to drop all of my classes that semester so I could care for Joseph while he was in the hospital. Joseph underwent multiple surgeries during his two-month stay at the hospital, from November 18, 2008 until January 18, 2009. During that time, I cleaned his wounds, changed the dressing every day, purchased his medicine, and attended to his needs. I slept on the floor next to my brother's bed, using flattened cardboard boxes for my mat since there was no allocated

space for caregivers. The hospital became our home. We made new friends and shared our lives with them.

During our stay at the hospital, the staff from *Arms of Love* visited us, as well as my brother's friends. Our friends and even one of my houseparents from *Arms of Love*, Papa Lito, donated blood for Joseph, repaying the hospital for the blood bags they had used earlier. Our grandmother and aunt also visited us on one occasion. Joseph was so happy when each of his friends and our grandmother visited him. A person's recovery can depend on maintaining a positive outlook, and the support and encouragement that Joseph received from the people around him was critical to his recovery.

During those months at the hospital, I saw that love is just as important to the process of physical healing as it is emotional healing. As much as the love I received from my new family at *Arms of Love* brought healing to the emotional scars in my life, our love for Joseph carried him through his period of physical recovery at the hospital. But our father, even though he was staying nearby, never visited us once.

To raise funds for Joseph's hospital bills, I went to a radio station (DYRD) near the hospital to ask for help. But the radio station told me that our father had already been there and had collected money on our behalf. He must have kept it for himself, because he never brought it to the hospital. Instead, many other people came to our assistance, helping us pay the hospital bills and cover the costs of my brother's medicine and treatment. The *Arms of Love* staff, the head of the CWTS office, and even my aunt gave us money during their visits, which helped us with our daily needs, including meals and medicine. For the expenses of the operation itself, my older brother sold his motorcycle so we could pay the doctor, and we settled as much of our bill as possible prior to Joseph's discharge. We promised the doctor to pay the balance over time.

Because of the good care he received at the hospital—and the love of others that carried him through this difficult time—Joseph lives a normal life today. A foundation called the *Tzu Chi Foundation* helped fund a needed surgery on his other leg in October 2015, and also gave him a prosthesis for his amputated leg. Before the operation on his left leg, Joseph took a vocational course in cellphone repair, and today, he has a cell-phone repair shop located at the Dao Market in Tagbilaran City.



Myla's brother, Joseph, working as a technician in a cell-phone repair shop.

Looking back, I can see how—through all of the love and care others had invested in my life—God had put me into a position where I was *able* to care for my brother during his months in the hospital and his recovery thereafter, while also providing a network of people to support both of us through that challenging time. In the midst of that situation, my life had purpose. I readily sacrificed my semester in college, Joseph needed my care more than

anything else in my life.

How I lead my life reflects the kind of person that I am and whether I am living with purpose. Purpose that reflects our true value is comprised of love and is other-centered. It can come in many different forms—providing protection for another person, meeting their needs, or providing a better environment for them. When I live with purpose, my actions to speak for who I am. Negativity will always lead to downfall, but having a right mind, faith, and kindness toward others can make anything possible. One pat on the shoulder during hard times means a lot.



Being kind is part of the character of a good person. A person does not need to be rich in material things in order to be kind. Every one of us can be kind in simple ways. Simple gestures of kindness mean a lot to the people we touch. And for me, it changed my life.

I would never be living the life that I have today without the kindness of people who had faith that I could do greater things in this life. Countless people demeaned me and put me down, but still, God sent a few good people into my life who believed in me, defended me, and loved me without asking anything in return. People like Mama Arsie Comiso in the BCIC, Mommy Kim, Ate Ines and Ate Jorlinda at *Arms of Love*, and Ma'am Gina Lopena and Sir Lino Garsuta at the university. Through them, I began to feel valued

again, and I was able to reconnect with a God whose love knows no boundaries. That love transformed my life from nothing into something valuable, and I began to face the world in a new way, with a new perspective, even knowing the injustice that people had done to me.

The same people who valued me in the past are still with me today. I treasure these people because they never left me during the times that I was broken. They continue to inspire me every day and I'm so grateful they are in my life. I don't like to get close with people that will just inject negativity into my thoughts. They say they are my friends, but I can't trust them. I don't want anyone to take advantage of me; I'm protecting myself from disappointment and from getting hurt.

Genuine kindness is different from our society's norm of kindness. The norm is that I will only be kind to you if I think that someday, I might need a favor from you in return. That is self-interest—not kindness.

When we show concern to someone we know, it gives us joy, but when we help people we don't know, it has even greater impact—on both them and us. Those are the people whose kindness made me feel valued and loved again, despite years of abuse and mistreatment. When people invited me into their lives and treated me as if I was part of their own family...that was the kindness that changed my life. On account of them, I know that I am never truly alone. There are people who pray for me every day, and I know that I can always turn to them when I need a shoulder to lean on. When I'm down, I ask them for advice and they encourage me. They are near to my heart, even when they are a great distance away. I don't need to see them frequently to know that they are there for me, because I know that I can trust their commitment to me.



After I gave birth to Aprilou, I first saw my father again when I was 21 years old. Every year thereafter, I had the chance to see him, but I refused to speak with him because I had not forgiven him. Then in September 2016, after the burial of my grandmother, there was a family meeting at our house that was attended by all of our relatives. My aunts opened up and shared their hurt and anger over everything my father had done to our family and even



Myla Salise (2017)

mentioned his abuse of me during the discussion. They said that they could never forget what my father had done to me, and that they were extremely angry with him. When my turn came to speak, I told my father that I had forgiven him for what he had done, but that did not excuse his behavior. He still needed to apologize, and he needed to change the way he was living his life.

In spite of my words of kindness and forgiveness, my father never apologized or said he was sorry for what he did to me—even to this day. He is still a drunkard and has no family or home to return to. I have no idea where he sleeps at night, and I no longer have any communications with him. No more connections. No more ties. And I am at peace with that. I grew up not having my parents beside me, and I am fine living my life without them today. It saddens me that we are distant and that neither my father nor mother have expressed any regret or asked forgiveness for the things they have done, but that is their choice. They are the ones who are in bondage now. I have forgiven them and I have moved on with my life, so I am the one who lives in freedom.

It was not easy for me to forgive my parents, who left permanent scars in my life where they hurt me. It takes time for such deep wounds to heal, and the scars are never completely gone. But I knew that I needed to forgive—not for their sake, but for mine. I learned to release forgiveness toward them during an inner healing session with YWAM volunteers when they visited *Arms of Love*. I asked God to help me release the burden that I felt in my heart for so many years, and then and there, I was able to forgive my parents for what they had done. Forgiving my abusers brought me another level of healing, emotionally and psychologically.

But the forgiveness that I extended to them was for my healing. That in no way absolved them of responsibility for the terrible things they did, nor does it mean I have to tell them that everything is okay. It's not. I am still hoping the day will come when both of them will ask for my forgiveness, try to make reparations of some kind, and admit to me and to themselves that what they did was wrong. My heart is always ready and waiting for that day to come. I have forgiven them already, but for reconciliation, they need to recognize their wrongdoing and ask for forgiveness.



My relationship with my mother, since she abandoned me and my siblings when I was nine years old, has been especially painful. In December of that year, she sent us gifts for Christmas, but after that, we didn't hear from her or see her again until 11 years later, when my older brother and I traveled to Cebu to spend Christmas with her. I was aware that she had met another man about a year after she left us and that she now had a family with him. The social worker at *Arms of Love* warned me that it might be very emotional to see her again, for the first time in 11 years, but I decided to go anyway, bravely telling her that I wouldn't cry.

My mother knew that we were arriving because my brother had contacted her. She picked us up at the seaport at about 3 a.m., but it was not an emotional meeting at all. Rather, it was very awkward because we hadn't seen each other for a long time. I was neither excited nor happy to meet her, because there was no longer any relationship between us. If anything, I felt anxious because I had no idea of how she might have changed or what kind of life she now had.

My mother took us to her new place, and the house looked dark and bleak. There was a lot of clutter throughout the house, and even the toilet was broken. I had imagined that my mother had left us for a better life, because that would have at least offered some explanation for her departure, taking away some of the pain of her leaving. But that dream was shattered that morning. There was not even a place for us to sleep. Filled with the pain of realizing that this was the life she had left me for, I went back to Bohol the next day, on December 24, 2009, and spent Christmas at *Arms of Love*.

I never expected that my mother's life would be even worse than what we had in Bohol, yet it was. After that Christmas in 2009, I learned from my half-sister that my mother had left one abusive relationship for another one. Her new husband was once sent to prison for physically abusing her. I see no difference between her current husband and her prior one, my father. They are the same. They have both hurt her. I don't know why she prefers to live a life like that, or why she would have left me for another life of abuse.

The next time I met my mother was in May 2013, at San Mateo Rizal, and we began to see each other occasionally. But I continued to be disappointed in her behavior. One night, she learned that my younger brother Cruz was coming to visit us, but she told our other relatives not to welcome him if he arrived in San Mateo. She acted like that because she felt guilty for what she had done to him, abandoning him 14 years ago when he was only three years old. I failed to understand how, after so many years, she could continue to treat us in such a calloused manner.

Another disappointment came in October 2015, when my brother Joseph had his second operation, on his left leg. Since Joseph was attending his cell phone training course prior to his operation in Cebu, he was staying in a boarding house, on the upper part of a bunk bed. I asked my mother if Joseph could stay at her house while recovering from the operation, because the operation made it painful for him to climb in and out of the bunk bed. Instead of agreeing, my mother became angry with me, said that we are not her children, and told me not to bother her any more. And I thought to myself, “What kind of answer was that? So many years after you abandoned us, Joseph could use some help after his operation, and your answer is that we are not your children?” She even suggested that we go to our “insane father” for help, rather than to her.

Despite these circumstances, my mother still communicates with me, but only when she needs money, and then, only by text message. That’s the reason why I remain distant from her. She never asks how I am doing, even if an entire year has gone by. She has never asked what happened to me after she abandoned me, or how I got through life without her. She just keeps texting me, asking for money because she says she is sick. I sent her money the first few times, but I no longer respond to her messages. As long as she treats me like I am a stranger and fails to even recognize me as her daughter, I can live my life without her.

I still hope for something different. I would like to have a mother-daughter bond as in an ordinary family. I long for a mother that looks after my welfare, someone who asks me how I am doing at work and how I am getting along. I would so appreciate even the simplest things from her. I want to get close to her again as my mother, but she also needs to value me as her



Myla Salise (2017)

daughter. I am willing to work toward reconciliation, but the process cannot depend on me alone—she also needs to take a risk. A relationship requires trust, and I cannot trust someone who has only taken advantage of me. I can forgive them, because doing so is the right thing to do and it empowers me. But I will not make myself vulnerable to them.



I spent the first 14 years of my life feeling neglected, unloved, and unwanted. I questioned how God could allow such things to happen to me. I asked God frequently, “Why me? Why my family? How could you allow such things to happen?” But as I regained my sense of value, through the love and kindness that I began to experience from others, my heart was being prepared to consider another, different truth: that my life could have purpose.

Years later, while I was attending college and being supported by *Arms of Love*, Kuya Zolito, the treasurer at *Arms of Love*, loaned me a book titled, *The Purpose-Driven Life*. Reading that book, I began to realize that despite the evil that had been done to me, my life could still have purpose, and more than that, even my painful experiences could be used for a purpose. And I began to realize how good God had been to me. From my brokenness, he picked me up. When I arrived at *Arms of Love*, I missed my siblings, but now I had many new siblings. I even had new parents, and the people who loved me increased in numbers.

My past experiences contributed to the strong and kind character that I have today. Because I needed to live independently and care for myself and my younger brothers, and I had no relatives to look after me, I needed to survive and care for us on my own. I made daily decisions on my own. I fought my daily battles alone. I solved my problems alone. I had to learn to be strong, because if I was beaten down, who would fight for me? Who would

defend me? No one other than myself. Even my own family would not help me, because they didn't believe what I told them. I learned from an early age that I must be responsible for myself and everything I do.

My past also helped me to become wise, considerate, and kind toward people in need. I am generous to people who have less than me because I have been in that situation before. For example, when I encounter children in the street, I buy them food to eat. It's a natural thing for me to do. I don't care if I spend money in order to help people. Helping them makes me happy. It brings me joy when I see that someone else is happy because of what I have done for them. I even offer advice to my co-workers or friends when they are depressed. Kindness is contagious. After we experience genuine love and kindness, our hearts will automatically direct our thoughts and actions to love others without hesitation.

The course of my life, together with the love and kindness that I experienced, has led me to believe that there is a plan for my life. The evil and injustice that happened in my life was intended to destroy me—but it didn't. Instead, it led me to *Arms of Love*, which was the beginning of a more blessed life. Because of that, I was able to go to college and have a future. I can see now that my life is not filled with purely random events, but it has an overall direction that is enabling me to experience the love of God and his blessings—and then share those with others.

My faith has played a big part in how I have survived in this life. I know that bad things will still happen to me, but I have learned that good can always come out of it, and everything that happens can be used for a purpose. No matter what difficulties I am experiencing, I trust that God will bring me through it and do something better in my life. If I allow my life to be directed and shaped by the love of God, everything that happens has the *potential* to be used for good. I find God's love evident in every part of my life today—despite everything that happened—and He never fails to surprise me.

Love is the agent of change in our lives. When we make decisions based on our love for others rather than focusing on what will most benefit ourselves, our lives acquire a bigger purpose. For example, when bad things happen to us, they can motivate us to help others. That doesn't mean the bad things "happened for a reason," but rather, that WE can bring purpose to the

bad things that happen in our lives when we use them as motivation to love and help others.

We were each born into different circumstances. Some are born into a higher-class family and some into poorer ones. Some are born with complete body parts and some with disabilities. No matter what your condition or situation right now, always remember that God never fails. You and I are not an accident! We were each made by God for a purpose.



I have not yet reached the level of success that I aspire to in my life, but I know that I am heading in the right direction. Every day, I take one more step toward my goals. But I can say that I am happy with the progress that I've made. This may sound ambitious, but my goal is to reach the self-actualization stage from Abraham Maslow's, "Hierarchy of Needs." I have a regular job, I have the discretion to purchase the things that I want, I make decisions for myself, and I blame myself alone when I fail. I have found meaning in my life, being in relationship with God and with others, and I live with purpose. As I once read in the book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, "If you want your life to have an impact, focus it!" A life lived with purpose is a life that freely receives and freely gives the love of God.

The love that I received is the love that I live and the love that I give.

By sharing my journey with you, I hope you have been inspired and encouraged, and that some of the hope and light that transformed my life will enter your life as well.



Myla Salise at a conference in Iba, Zambales (2017).

Chapter 10

A Change in Perspective (Robert)

*Persons appear to us according to the light we
throw upon them from our own minds.*

—Laura Ingalls Wilder

There were certain defining moments in my life that I found so improbable and impactful as to be beyond coincidence. These events permanently shaped my character, perspectives, and heart toward others. They included a chance meeting with my biological father, Norman; the one time that I met my biological mother, Teresa; and the last time I spoke with my adoptive mother, Cora.

Each of these events catalyzed a process of healing, forgiveness, and a change in perspective. The takeaway was always the same: I should be careful not to reach conclusions about other people, because there is so much about their lives, experiences, intentions, and character that I cannot know or understand. When I truly grasped this, it became easier to let go of the wrongs committed against me, and to extend to others the grace, forgiveness, compassion, and kindness that I hope others will extend to me.



A few days before Christmas, 1998, I was sitting in my law office at Cooley Godward LLP, at the corner of Page Mill Road and El Camino Real in Palo Alto, California, and was thinking about purchasing a new Swiss army knife for my upcoming trip to Central America. This would be my first trip to Nicaragua, after which I would decide to build the first *Arms of Love* Children's Home in Managua.

I had a long-term fascination with Swiss army knives. I loved the combinations of tools and gadgets, fancying myself as a modern MacGyver, someone who could solve any problem with a pocket knife and duct tape. I researched local stores and quickly identified a shop called “Williams Cutlery,” in Town and Country Village, only a mile or so from my office. On my lunch break, I got into my car and headed over, excited to make my new purchase.

When I arrived at the store, I opened the door and headed inside. I quickly scanned the glass cases and spotted the section with an array of Victorinox Swiss army knives. I walked over to the section and was immediately greeted by a kind-looking gentlemen behind the counter. He looked to be in his early fifties, about a half-foot taller than myself, heavy set, with long, greying hair and a full beard.

“Can I help you?” asked the man behind the counter.

“Yes,” I replied. “I’m looking to purchase a new Swiss army knife, and I’d like to take a look at whichever options have the greatest number of functions.”

The man opened the back of a glass case and reached inside, selecting several different knives with different combinations of tools. He put them on a cloth on top of the counter for my inspection.

“This is awesome, thanks,” I replied. It didn’t take long to decide on my favorite: it was a model called “The Champion.” I told the gentleman that this was the knife I wanted to purchase. He then went behind the counter, retrieved a box with a new knife inside, and handed it to me for purchase.

With my new Swiss army knife now in hand, I walked over to the cash register on the other side of the small store. When I arrived at the register, I set the knife on the counter and waited for the cashier to ring me up. While I was waiting, my eyes shifted over to a business card holder, which held a stack of business cards that read, “Norman Greenbrook, Manager.”

I froze. My mind immediately went back to a day about fifteen years earlier when I took Cora’s keys, snuck into the deep freezer in my parents’ garage, where they stored valuables and important papers, and dug through the lockbox. That was the day I found my original birth certificate and discovered the name of my biological father: Norman Greenbrook.



Norman Greenbrook

I had never met my biological father. In fact, I had never felt any desire to. I had been told, growing up, that he was a violent person who had abused my mother, Teresa. Nothing kind had ever been said about him by my adoptive parents. Besides, I had a mother and father—my adoptive parents. This “Norman” had never looked me up or tried to contact me—or so I thought—and I was not about to chase after him.

After finding my original birth certificate, I had done a lot of research into my family history, as I was curious about my origins. As a result, I knew that there was only one Norman Greenbrook in the United States, and that was my biological father. Standing at the cash register in Williams Cutlery, I had to know the answer to my next question.

“Who is the manager to the store?” I asked of the cashier.

“Why do you ask?” responded the cashier. “Is there a problem or something I can help you with?”

“No,” I nervously replied. “Just curious.”

The woman gestured in the direction behind me. “The manager is that gentlemen over there.”

I turned my head. The cashier was pointing toward the bearded gentleman who has just finished helping me select my new prize, the Champion Swiss army knife.

My eyes met Norman’s, and for a brief moment, we held each other’s gaze. I turned back around. The cashier finished ringing up my purchase, I handed her my credit card, and I signed the receipt. She put my knife in a plastic bag and I quickly grabbed it and scurried out of the store.

Now outside, I paused. I was 32 years old, I had never met my biological father previously, and I had never attempted to connect with him. Yet there I was, standing only a few yards away from him. Should I go back inside and talk with him? Or should I leave and never return?

Completely unprepared for this chance meeting, I felt an intense mix of emotions stirring inside of me. I had no idea what to do next. Filled with an array of conflicting thoughts and emotions, I got into my car and—too shaken to return to work—I drove home and shared with Kristen what had just happened.

In the weeks that followed, I struggled with conflicting feelings. I always thought that I was simply indifferent to Norman—that I didn't care about him one way or another. I had a father who adopted me, loved me, and raised me. My Dad passed away in 1984. I didn't need another one. But the meeting with Norman brought to the surface feelings that I didn't know existed: feelings of abandonment, rejection, anger...even hate.

One morning, while getting ready for work, I remembered that I had been praying for an increased capacity to love others. I felt that this was something I would need as I embarked on a new chapter in my life, establishing homes for other abandoned kids. That morning, while I was getting dressed, it was as if a voice was speaking to me. "You've prayed that you would learn to love others in a greater and deeper way. You need to start here."

I initially recoiled from the thought. *Love* Norman? The man who left my mother before I was born? The man who had abandoned me? The man who, for 32 years, had never connected with me, never looked me up, never cared how I was doing (as far as I was aware)? No, I said to myself...*I would not*.

In the weeks that followed, I continued to struggle with a range of thoughts and feelings that I could not avoid. I also considered the practical implications of going back and reconnecting with Norman. Did I want to open up my life to him? What about my wife and my two young children—should I connect them with Norman, or protect them from him? What if he abused them as he allegedly abused Teresa? What if he hurt them the way he once hurt me?

But as time went on, I realized that while my adoptive parents had painted a very unfavorable picture of Norman, I knew nothing concrete about him. Perhaps he had tried to look me up over the years unsuccessfully. Maybe he *was* a caring person. What if circumstances beyond his control had driven us apart? I really didn't know.

Over the early months of 1999, my heart began to thaw. A new feeling started to creep into my heart: forgiveness. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that the resentment that I had held onto for so long was something I needed to release. There was something buried deep in my past, my life, and my heart—something that had to change. Something I needed to surrender. Before I could reach out to care for other abandoned and abused

children, I needed a fresh healing in my own life. I needed to forgive and love the man who—from what I knew—had once abandoned me.

In June of 1999, six months after seeing Norman in the store, I had not only forgiven him, but I was open to reengaging with him and renewing our relationship. So I pondered my next step. After much reflection, I decided that the best approach would be to reach out to Norman and offer to have lunch. If he was interested in reconnecting with me, he could accept the invitation, but if not, he could turn it down. It seemed like the most constructive step to take.

So, one day, in late June of 1999, I looked up the phone number for Williams Cutlery and called the store. “Can I speak to Norman Greenbrook?” I asked.

“No, I’m sorry. Norman doesn’t work here anymore,” said a woman’s voice at the other end.

“Do you have a number where I can reach him?” I inquired. “I would really like to get in touch with him.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” the lady responded. Then she paused. “Norman passed away just last week.”

I felt a knot in my stomach. I had just met Norman for the first time six months ago, and here I was, finally ready to reconnect with him, to meet him again, and potentially, to have a relationship with him. But now he was gone. Forever.

I did some checking around after I got off the phone, and learned that Norman had been buried at a nearby cemetery, Los Gatos Memorial Park. It was the same cemetery where my adoptive father, John Benson, had been buried almost exactly 15 years before. I drove out to the cemetery, found his gravesite, and wept.

Loss is never easy. But lost opportunities can be even harder. I would later learn that shortly after my chance meeting with Norman in December 1998, he was diagnosed with cancer. During the six months when I struggled with whether to reconnect with him, he was terminally ill. As a result of my delay in reaching back out to him, I forever lost the opportunity to talk with him, to learn more about him and our common past, to have a relationship with him...and to tell him that I loved him.

Nevertheless, my meeting with Norman served a purpose. It brought to the surface feelings of anger and resentment, and of unforgiveness, that needed resolution. During those months, a broken and unresolved part of my life began to heal, something that was necessary before I could move forward with *Arms of Love*. But despite that insight, I could not help but dwell on an opportunity that had been unexpectedly presented and then forever lost.

Following Norman's death, I thought this latest episode of my life had concluded—but it had not. A few months later, I had an unusual dream. I dreamt that my biological father, Norman, had left something for me. When I woke up, I began to wonder if he had any surviving family. I had not considered this previously. What if Norman had a surviving spouse, parents, or siblings? What if I had brothers or sisters that I never knew about? A fresh wave of thoughts raced through my head, and I realized what I needed to do.

Later that day, I began searching the internet for the name "Greenbrook." As I scrolled through the results, I learned that there was a woman named Gayle Greenbrook who lived only a few miles from my home in Saratoga, California. According to the articles I had identified, Gayle led a professional tap dance group in San Jose called "Tap Explosion." I found an email address for Gayle and reached out to her.

As a result of our initial correspondence, I discovered that Gayle was Norman's sister and the only remaining member of his immediate family. As our conversation progressed, I learned about another side of Norman—and of my past—that I never knew. Gayle was about 11 years old when I was born and remembers many of the conversations and events that took place during the early years of my life. During that time, the Greenbrook family tried to connect with me, visit me, and spend time with me, but were prevented from doing so by Teresa's parents. Cora had a vendetta against Norman for what she perceived as his "poor treatment of Teresa" and/or convincing her to elope, and she did not want Norman or his family to have any contact with me. The Greenbrooks felt like they could not afford to hire an attorney to fight for visitation rights. As a result, I was insulated from the Greenbrooks while I was growing up and I never had any contact with them—even though they wanted to have a relationship with me.



John Benson gave Norman this photo of Robert in 1967—and Norman carried it with him the rest of his life.

One day, according to Gayle, my grandfather (and later, adoptive dad), John Benson, visited the Greenbrook home. When they opened the door, they found John waiting nervously on the front porch. He quickly mumbled some apologies about their inability to visit me, handed them a few photos of me, said repeatedly, “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” and quickly left.

The first time I met Gayle in person, she handed me one of those photos. It was a small wallet-sized picture, one that was well-worn and wrinkled. She told me the story of how John gave that picture to the Greenbrooks about 30 years earlier, and how Norman kept that picture of me in his wallet for the rest of his life, wishing that he had the opportunity to know me.

On more than one occasion, Norman had tried to visit me while I was living with my grandparents, Cora and John, but they refused to let him see me. In fact, it was as a result of those visits that Cora and John decided to become my legal guardians, and when I was nine years old, to legally adopt me. They did not want to risk Norman obtaining the legal right to visit me or perhaps remove me from their care.

While writing this book, I asked my Aunt Gayle if Norman had every tried to meet with me during my adult life. Gayle told me that she had asked Norman, “Why don’t you try to find Robert?” But he declined, assuming that any such effort would be futile for two reasons. First, my adopted name, Robert Benson, was so common that it made it difficult to find me. Second, Norman was afraid that if he did find me, I would not want to speak with him. “Robert has heard nothing but awful things about me—why would he want to meet me?” Norman said to Gayle.

I asked Gayle, “When did your last such conversation with Norman occur?”

“The month before Norman was diagnosed with cancer,” Gayle replied.

That was December 1998—the same month when, unbeknownst to him, he had met me at Williams Cutlery. But once he learned that he had cancer, the possibility of looking for me was forever postponed. And so, he carried the photo and the memory of me to his grave, never knowing that a

few months before his death, he had actually met me in the store where he worked.

I also learned a few other things about Norman that changed my perspective of him. For example, later in his life, Norman dressed up as Santa Claus and visited the same children's shelter in Los Gatos where I lived for a time after Teresa abandoned me. It was something that Norman looked forward to every year, giving presents to the children at the shelter and wishing them a Merry Christmas. It was a side of Norman that I had

never known: a man who was caring and kind, who—like myself—had made mistakes in life, but still had a heart to care for others.

As it happened, Norman had also left a few things for me, as prompted in my dream. In addition to the picture of me that Norman carried in his wallet, Gayle gave me the Santa Claus costume that Norman wore every year when he visited the shelter where I once lived, a leather jacket that Norman wore when he rode his motorcycle, a cowboy hat and a belt buckle, a gold bracelet with his name engraved on it, and one other item of particular sentimental value: a gold ring, bearing the image of a lion's head, embedded with three diamonds. Norman designed and made the gold ring himself using his mother's and grandmother's wedding rings.

I still wear the ring to this day.

I learned, through this experience and others, I can deepen my ability to love and care for others if I have forgiven those who have injured me. The more my heart and emotions are consumed with resentment and bitterness, the less capacity I have to be loving and kind. Moreover, the decision to forgive is entirely within my power—it is a choice to no longer hold something



Aunt Gayle with Norman Greenbrook wearing his Santa Claus costume.

against someone, to view them and treat them as if the past wrong had not occurred. In the act of forgiving, I found a new freedom to love others, because my heart and my actions are no longer constricted by the past.



Meeting Norman precipitated a series of events that radically changed my perspective toward him. But it also reminded me of another one-time meeting that had happened many years earlier.

In November of 1982, as Thanksgiving approached, I was 16 years old and a senior in high school. I had heard a lot about my biological mother, Teresa, as I was growing up, but I could not recall meeting her. As with Norman, most of what I had heard was derogatory. Teresa's mother, Cora, rarely had anything positive to say about her. Most of what I heard related to how Teresa had neglected me and abandoned me when I was young. In the years since, she had been in and out of contact with her parents and our family, but as far as my memory went back, never visited in person.

By 1982, there had been a significant shift in Teresa's life. Teresa began talking with her parents (my adoptive parents) in a more constructive way and they began patching up old differences. As their relationship improved, and as I approached my graduation from high school, my adoptive parents decided that they would allow Teresa to meet with me. So over the Thanksgiving holiday in 1982, Teresa and her only sibling, Patricia, came to our home for Thanksgiving dinner, and our entire family was together for the first time.

My memory of Thanksgiving Day, 1982, remains vivid. I still have a mental picture of being in the family room of the house I grew up in, sitting across from Teresa and Pat, as we talked and shared about our lives. One exchange that stands out in my mind was when Pat was talking with Teresa and referred to me as their brother. Teresa gave her a confused look and said, "Pat, Robert is my son. He's not our brother."

"Yes, he is," insisted Pat. "Our parents adopted him. That makes him our brother."

That exchange left all three of us feeling visibly awkward and uncomfortable. But Teresa graciously dropped the topic and the conversation moved on from there.



Robert with his mother, Teresa, during their only meeting, on Thanksgiving Day in 1981. Also pictured is John Benson and Teresa's third husband.

What I remember most about that day is Teresa's smile, the kindness in her face, and her sweet disposition. This was not the woman that I had imagined her to be or the person depicted by the stories recounted by Cora. Teresa had an infectious laugh, appeared genuinely happy, and had an attitude of loving and caring for the people around her. *Could this really be the same person who neglected and abandoned me so many years ago?* I thought to myself.

Teresa also played the guitar, and she had brought her guitar with her to our home that afternoon. I had also learned to play the guitar, taking lessons for many years beginning in the third grade. And so we both got out our guitars and began playing and singing together, sharing our hearts through music.

That afternoon Teresa taught me the lyrics, melody, and chords to one of her favorite songs, "Make Me a Channel of Your Peace." The lyrics of the song, written by Sebastian Temple, were derived from a writing known as the Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi:

Lord make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is error, truth;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
And where there is sadness, Joy.

O Divine Master grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled, as to console;
To be understood, as to understand;
To be loved, as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.^[4]

A few months later, on Saturday, February 19, 1983, I was sitting in the very same room—in the same house that Teresa also grew up in—when the phone rang. Cora answered the phone, and within a few moments, she began crying hysterically.

“No! No! No! It can’t be!” I heard Cora say, through her tears and sobbing. When she hung up the phone, Cora gave me the devastating news: Teresa had drowned at Davenport Beach near Santa Cruz. The police had searched her belongings in the van that she had been living in, which was parked by the beach, and found the phone number for our house. Teresa had been knocked against rocks by the surf until she became unconscious, and a bystander working at the Davenport Cash Store near the beach swam into the waves and nearly lost his life attempting to rescue her. Shortly thereafter, three separate rescue attempts were thwarted by the rough surf: one by a U.S. Coast Guard helicopter, one by a Coast Guard cutter, and a third by a MAST helicopter. A witness described her running into the surf, nude, and “splashing around like a little kid” before hearing a scream and then seeing her body being swept out to sea. In the weeks and months that followed, we waited for the body to wash up onto the shore, but it never happened.

Following her unexpected death, John travelled to Santa Cruz and returned with Teresa's van and the few possessions that she had. I spent quite a bit of time in that van, thinking about Teresa and the other side of her personality and person, which I had so briefly glimpsed.

Teresa's death was the first death of a close relative in my life. In the days that followed, I wrote a poem that I titled, "The Life Thread Can't Be Broken," which was printed in the bulletin for Teresa's memorial service on February 27, 1983. At the service, I paid her one last tribute from my heart—a final goodbye. I picked up my old Gibson guitar, stepped to the microphone, and sang the only song that she had taught me: *Make Me a Channel of Your Peace*.

After Norman's death in 1999—and after I learned of the "other side" of his life from my Aunt Gayle—I had a renewed curiosity about my mother, Teresa. I began wondering what there might have been about her life that I also never learned of. So, when my adoptive mom, Cora, had to move out of her house and into full-time residential care due to dementia, I began going through all of the papers in her house. In the back room, I found a file cabinet. And thumbing through it, my heart stopped when I reached a yellow-colored hanging file folder with a tab that read, "Teresa."

Although she owned very little, Teresa had an assortment of papers in her van when she died, and unbeknownst to me, Cora and John had put those papers into this folder. I had never seen them previously. As I quickly scanned through the folder, one paper in particular caught my immediate attention—it was a three-page summary of her life, beginning in her early childhood and continuing up to the last year of her life. I quickly read through it. Teresa described her early years as resembling a "well-rounded all-American girl's life" and her home life during her teen years as "fairly intense." After enrolling at San Jose State (my own alma mater), she wrote, "I ran away from home the day after I turned 18 and dropped out of school. The next several years were spent in total rebellion against the moral and religious system in which I was raised." But there was no mention of the fact that she eloped that day with Norman and got married.

I continued reading. Would she say anything about me—anything about having a son? Would she share any regrets, any memories of me...anything at all? Teresa spoke of joining the Salvation Army and becoming a social worker.

She conveyed her growing experience in that field over the next eight years, while working for various organizations. She described each of her jobs, her volunteer work, and her passions in life. But I reached the end of the story and my heart sank—there was no mention of me at all.

I poured over everything else in that file, and every other paper that Teresa had left behind: handwritten prayers, resumes, letters of recommendation, paystubs, photos, a few important documents. But nowhere did I find a single photo of me or a single reference to my name.

It was as if I had never existed.

And yet, despite that void, I learned of another side of Teresa. She spoke of joining the Salvation Army in 1974 because they provided her with an opportunity to break into the field of social work, despite her prior lack of experience or education in that area. In the summer of 1975, Teresa worked for a Salvation Army day camp, serving 30 to 50 children from low-income housing projects. The following year, she began serving as a houseparent for 15 developmentally disabled adults. Teresa continued to work in various group homes over the next five years, while also assisting local churches in establishing programs for the developmentally disabled. In 1981, she operated a program that cared for disabled children between the ages of three and 30 for periods of time ranging from three days to two weeks, to give their parents some time off.

Teresa's two final positions before her death were the most revealing. Teresa did relief work for the Charila Foundation, which she described as "serving teenage girls who, for different reasons, can no longer live at home." And in her other role, Teresa worked for the Children's Home Society, "a shelter care program for children who are abused, abandoned or neglected." The Teresa that I met on Thanksgiving Day, the one who was laughing, loving, and caring, was more of a reflection of who Teresa was than the person I had been told about. Her career as a social worker reflected her true heart and her desire to help others. And in her final two jobs, she was helping teenage girls who had run away from home—just like her—and children who were abused, abandoned or neglected—just like me.

I was in her story after all. In her heart and in her mind. In the fabric of her life. And in that tapestry, I saw a kind and loving person, who—in her own way, later in life—tried to care for me by caring for other children who

had been neglected and abandoned. As I similarly embarked on a mission to care for neglected and abandoned children, I realized that not only did I see a reflection of myself in those children, I saw a reflection of Teresa in me. And the lyrics of the song that she taught me, *"Make Me a Channel of Your Peace,"* stayed with me the rest of my life, became my personal creed, and is now reflected in a work of art that hangs on the wall of my office.

Even Teresa's last transition in her spiritual search for meaning seemed to bear a loose connection with our personal story. When Teresa converted from Christianity to Sufism, she joined a Chisti Order called "Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti." The founder of the order was, himself, orphaned at the age of 14. Also known as "Gharib Nawaz"—which means "kind to the poor"—he was known for giving up his personal possessions and distributing the money to people in need. During his final discourse to his students, Chishti wrote, "Never refuse to bless and help the needy and the poor, the widow, and the orphan, if they come to your door." The name that Teresa assumed, "Nafisa Firdaus Al-Chishti," adopted "Chisti" for her last name and then added "Nafisa," which means "very precious," while "Firdaus" is the Arabic name for the best place in heaven.

As I finished thumbing through Cora's file, I came across one more letter authored by Teresa. It was written in early 1974, apparently in response to a request not to contest the petition for my adoption. Here again was a reflection of her true self—not an uncaring, disinterested mother, but one that had my best interests at heart:

I do not want to take the child away from you. You have given him a good home when I could not, and I'm sure you have given him some kind of Christian education. If [Norman] tries to take Robby, I will do anything I can to testify in your behalf and against Norman—not out of any hatred for Norman, but because it is best for the child spiritually to be with you. Hope everything turns out alright.

Sincerely,
Teresa

Reflecting on Teresa's life—and the new information I had learned—underscored that our lives are not defined by a single moment in time, or a particular season of years. It is only when we consider the entirety of our experiences in life that we can begin to assess and appreciate who we are. And when it comes to other people, our interactions with them are quite limited. We barely get a glimpse into a tiny fraction of their lives. And yet we can be so quick to judge them and to form conclusions about them based on that tiny slice that we are privy to, the handful of minutes or hours that we spend with them.

Consider a house that is mostly boarded up. You walk around the house, and by peering thru a few windows, you are able to view a very limited portion of the interior. But the areas in which you can view are limited by the angles and the interior lighting, which is dim. Much of the house cannot be viewed at all. And even if you are invited in, you may only find yourself staying in the parlor.

So it is with our experiences of other people, even those we are closest with. No matter how much time we spend with another person, even a spouse, it is still but a small fraction of their lives, and we have only shared in a small portion of the life experience that comprises who they are. We have no basis on which to fully appreciate or assess their identity or character.

I have spent countless hours reflecting on my experiences with Norman and Teresa, the one occasion on which I met each of them, and the radical change in perspective that was precipitated by getting even a small glimpse into their lives. I realized how foolhardy and wasteful it is to form judgments about another person. It is so much better to treasure every moment that we spend with a person...to love them and to sow kindness into their life, as we become a small part of their own life story.

Similarly, we should never assess ourselves, our value, or our worth based on a single event or season in our lives, or a single success or failure. Who we are is comprised of the entirety of our experience, none of which is to be devalued, but all of which is to be treasured and appreciated. Moreover, our identity is not yet complete, as much of life remains ahead. The person we are is always growing, changing, maturing. As long we have breath, we have the opportunity to build upon our identity, to sow more love into the lives of

others, and in the process, further define ourselves and others through our inter-connected life experience. There is always an opportunity for redemption.



After my adoptive dad John passed away in 1984, his wife Cora continued to live in the house they purchased in 1958, in Santa Clara, California, where Teresa and I both grew up. After I graduated from San Jose State University and moved to Berkeley to attend law school, Cora continued to live there and resided alone in the house for another 20 years.

In the spring of 2006, Kristen and I began noticing some unusual behaviors on the part of my mom. For example, when we talked on the phone, Cora frequently had no memory of conversations we had just the day before. Then one day, Kristen received a call from the Department of Social Services in Santa Clara County. A neighbor of Cora's had become concerned about her well-being and placed a call to the department. A social worker responded to the call by visiting Cora, and based on her observations of Cora's living environment, she admitted Cora to the hospital and put her on a 72-hour hold for observation, called a 5150. Cora was already in the hospital when I received the call.

As soon as I was able, I flew up to Santa Clara to visit Cora and assess the situation. When I entered Cora's home, I noticed that it was dramatically different than the last time I had visited a couple of months earlier. There were huge stacks of mail, clutter, and food everywhere in the house—on the kitchen table, on the counters, everywhere I looked. Much of the food appeared to be spoiled. Post-it notes covered the refrigerator and the kitchen table—not with the usual reminders of things to do, but with the names of her children and grandchildren and the most basic facts of her life.

The observations of the doctors at the hospital were equally concerning. Although Cora was already thin, she had lost weight in recent months and was only 95 pounds, an unhealthy weight for her height of 5 feet 4 inches tall. Moreover, the extreme clutter and unsanitary nature of her house was shocking, because Cora always kept the house exceedingly clean and organized.

Further consultations with the hospital staff and physicians confirmed my fears: Cora was in the early stages of progressive dementia or Alzheimer's,

and she was no longer able to live alone or care for herself. Decisions needed to be made about her living situation, and as the person holding the durable power of attorney for her health care, those decisions fell to me. After several days of evaluations and consultations with Cora's doctors, friends, neighbors and her personal attorney, I reluctantly concluded that Cora needed some form of full-time care beyond just an assisted living facility.

After investigating many options, I learned that there were homes in ordinary residential neighborhoods, where I lived in Orange County, California, that provided full-time care for elderly patients with dementia. These group homes provide residents with a lot of personal attention, outings, and activities. The atmosphere felt much more like a home than a typical nursing facility. I moved Cora to a residential home near us in Orange County, Granny's Place, where she would continue to live for the next six years.

I had often read about how difficult it is to care for someone with progressive dementia or Alzheimer's, and how it slowly steals a loved one away from you. Experiencing this, however, is heartrending. Week by week, I experienced Cora's memory slowly fading and her level of confusion growing. I visited Cora at least once a week, taking her to church with my family, and I never knew what to expect. Some days, she was in a positive mood, grateful to see me, and enjoyed spending time with my family going to church and having lunch afterwards. But there were other weeks, which slowly became more frequent, where she either refused to get in the car with me or became confused while riding with me to church. Unable to fully understand her surroundings or where we were going, Cora sometimes became very agitated and angry as she imagined where I might be taking her, and oftentimes, I had no alternative but to turn around and bring her back home.

During her final years, I experienced an unexpected phenomena. As Cora's mental capacities and memories continued to fade, she became sweeter in spirit. The frequent bouts of anger, outbursts, and emotional swings that were part of my everyday experience growing up, eventually ceased. When I came to visit her, her face would light up, and she exhibited a simple joy and happiness that was previously lacking. One of her favorite activities was ballroom dancing, and the staff spoke of how Cora would dance with them and other residents and how much she loved music.

And so it was, during these last years of her life, I experienced a gentleness and a sweetness in Cora's spirit that I had never known before. Those moments—moments when she was almost childlike in the simplicity of her joy and kindness—are the memories that I treasure the most.

In early 2011, I remember one visit in particular when I went to see Cora together with my oldest daughter, Jessica, who was 16 years old at the time. It was Easter Sunday, and we had just taken Cora home after church. I remember that Jessica

and I were sitting on either side of Cora on the couch in the living room, and Cora looked at Jessica with such kindness in her eyes. She reached out and stroked Jessica's hair and said, "You are so beautiful, Jessica. You are so beautiful." Over and over, she repeated it—and it came straight from her heart. What I didn't know was that it would be our last conversation with her.

Later that week, my family traveled to Hawaii for a two-week vacation. It was our first visit to Hawaii and filled with a combination of rest and adventure. Kayaking, snorkeling and hiking trips punctuated several day stretches of relaxation on the beach, during which my kids took their first surfing lessons. But at the end of our vacation, I received a call from the home where my mother was staying. Cora had experienced a severe stroke, they told me, and although her condition was stable, she was in a coma and on life support in the hospital.

When we arrived back home two days later, Cora's condition had not changed. The doctors advised us that it was a medical certainty that Cora would not regain consciousness, but she could continue to live as long as she



Cora Benson reaching for bubbles while enjoying a dance during her years living at Granny's Place.

was on life support. Once again, decisions had to be made, and Cora was unable to help make those decisions. I reviewed Cora's advance health directive and determined that she did not desire to be kept alive on life support if there was no real hope of recovery. After further consultation with her physicians, friends, and attorneys, we decided to respect her wishes, and Cora passed away a few days later under hospice care.

After Cora passed away, I went home and took a short walk near our house. On my walk, I passed through an open space at the end of Calle Cabrillo, where our house church holds its outdoor Easter service every year. My mind was taken back to that Easter Sunday a few weeks before, the last time that I had visited with Cora, and it was then that I remembered an unusual series of events that had transpired that morning.

That Easter Sunday, on April 24, 2011, I picked up my mom as I did most Sundays and brought her to my home, where she began enjoying the music that was being played before the service, sitting beneath an umbrella that shielded her from the morning sun. Shortly before the service started, I spotted a woman who looked somewhat familiar. Suddenly she fell into place—she was one of the teachers from my elementary school.

"Mrs. Giusti! How are you? What brings you here?" I asked, excitedly.

"My son and his wife live here," Mrs. Giusti responded, pointing to the house behind her. "I came down to visit them for the Easter holiday, and when I heard music, I came outside and saw everyone setting up chairs. How are you doing?"

Mrs. Giusti and I continued to talk and to reminisce over the years we knew each other at Sunnyvale Christian School. She shared, in particular, her memories of my adoptive dad, John, and how he would frequently visit the school and volunteer to help with different activities. She spoke of how John especially enjoyed teaching science to the students and serving as a judge for the school's science fair. "He was such a kind and sweet man," Mrs. Giusti recalled. "I always looked forward to the times when he would come and visit, teaching and sharing his knowledge of science with the kids at our school."

It felt like an amazing coincidence. Here I was, living in Foothill Ranch, California, nearly 500 miles from the home where I grew up and where Mrs. Giusti taught at my elementary school. Yet here she was, on Easter Sunday,

visiting my neighbor, who, unbeknownst to me prior to that day, was Mrs. Giusti's son—just two houses down from my own home.

But the “coincidences” didn't stop there. During the service that Sunday morning, I shared briefly about my chance meeting with my biological father, Norman, and the healing process that arose out of that experience. After the service—and an emotion-filled singing of the song, *I Know That My Redeemer Lives*—another visitor walked up to me. Greg Faris was visiting his brother Bill, the pastor of our small house-church, and he travelled to Southern California from Seattle for a visit that Easter weekend. Greg came up to me after the service and said, “Robert, I was really interested in hearing your story this morning about Norman Greenbrook.” Greg paused. “I knew your father.”

“What?!” I exclaimed. “How did you know Norman?”

“When I lived in the Bay Area, I used to visit Williams Cutlery on a regular basis,” Greg explained. “Every time I went into the store, I visited with Norman. He was a very kind and gentle person, someone I always enjoyed talking with. He was always very helpful.” He paused again. “Your father was a good man, Robert.”

Only a few dozen people had attended our Easter service that morning. But among them was Mrs. Giusti, who was visiting from 500 miles away, and she shared with me her memories of my adoptive dad, John. Greg was visiting from 1500 miles away, and within the same hour, he came up to me and shared his memories of my biological father, Norman. Both affirmed the gentle and kind natures of my biological and adoptive fathers. And just a few feet away, was my adoptive mom, Cora—the last time I would see her before she had a stroke and lost consciousness forever.

As I contemplated this series of events, standing in the same place where it occurred a few weeks earlier, a stream of thoughts passed through my mind. What happened that day was not a coincidence. God gathered those people together, at that precise moment in time, as an encouragement to me. When others had abandoned me, God did not abandon me. He brought people into my life to care for me and to direct my path. Now each of my adoptive parents and biological parents had passed away, but in my heart I knew – and

the events of that day confirmed – that I am not alone. God is still present, he is still with me, and he will never leave me.

And then I remembered the words of Jesus, as recorded at John 14:18, “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.” And I reflected on the love that was embodied in his life and sacrifice. He sought after the lame, the leper, the tax collector, the prostitute, anyone who was rejected or scorned by their communities. He elevated women, children, and people of other ethnicities, anyone who was not equally valued by the society of his day.

It was that same love that had pursued me.

Like a fresh rain slowly seeping into a soft soil, I began to appreciate my adoptive parents and the events of my life from a new perspective. In 1968, when Cora and John brought me home from the children’s shelter in Santa Clara County, they had no obligation to love me or to care for me. It was a choice. They chose to love me. Not because of anything I had done. Not because I merited it, deserved it, or earned it. They made a choice to bring me into their home and to make me a part of their family.

Why?

The overriding theme of my childhood was expectations. My parents expected me to get straight A’s in school, win academic competitions, and maintain a high standard of behavior. I resented it. It seemed to me that Cora regretted how her daughters turned out—particularly their rejection of her and their disenfranchisement from the family—and I was her chance at redemption as a parent. The one who would turn out “right.” The one she could be proud of. I was unable to see their heart, because their intentions were eclipsed and obscured by their expectations.

When I was a toddler, however, they could not have known anything that would follow. Whether I would be smart, talented, and dedicated to the family, or a poor student with a rebellious attitude who would only cause more heartbreak. So, why? Why did they start over, raising another child after their own children were already grown?

I reached a conclusion that I may have considered previously, but if so, it never really sunk in. My parents brought me home from the shelter that day because of their heart for me. They saw something in me that they considered worth sacrificing the next 16 years of their life for. Sacrifices of time, energy,

and finances. Sacrifices of the freedom that they would otherwise have to do other things in life. And they only would have sacrificed all of that if they thought...I was worth it.

It was the value that they saw in me that motivated their actions. They surrendered the next season of their life to care for me, because I was worth it to them. They valued me. They loved me. The magnitude of their sacrifice was proportionate to the depth of their love for me and the immensity of the value they saw in me. Viewed through that new lens of their unmerited love toward me, as the object of their love, I was able to gain a new confidence and insight into my personal value and worth. I *am* valuable. I *am* loved and worthy of being loved. And while my adoptive mom certainly had her issues, which resulted in years of emotional abuse following the neglect and abandonment that led me to her care, her shortcomings no longer obscured those important truths.

The pitter-patter of these raindrops began soaking my heart until I began to make another connection...so it is with God. The adoptive love of my parents was a reflection of something bigger. God chose to love me...not because I earned it or deserved it, but because of the value He saw in me. Through faith, I had been adopted into another, spiritual family. And because of that, no matter what happens in life, I can be assured of my immense and eternal value and worth.

Excelling as an attorney is not where my value lies. Being a loving husband and father is not where my value lies. Starting and operating homes for abused children is not where my value lies. Doing those things may be a *reflection* of my identity and value, but they are not the *source* of my identity and value. When I allow my value to be determined by how well I do things, I am only setting myself up for one crisis after another. From time to time, I fail at all of those things. Everything shifted when I realized that my identity and value lie in being the object of God's love, loved as an orphan who is chosen to be loved. That is an identity and value that never changes.

Do I still struggle with knowing my value? Every day. Do I often doubt whether anyone truly cares about me? All the time. But I can always go back to those moments when I was convicted of my value and worth. Feelings change over the years and cannot be trusted, but what actually *happened* in

my past cannot be denied. So when new trials and challenges nearly break me, I go back to those moments and cling to the truths they revealed.

The next day, I boarded a plane and flew to San Jose, California. There, I rented a car and drove again to Los Gatos Memorial Park, where my adoptive mom would now be laid to rest next to her husband John, not far away from the final resting place of my biological father, Norman. I was the only one attending Cora's internment that day, her other friends and relatives having passed away years earlier. I brought my old Gibson guitar...the same one I had played with my mother Teresa the one day that I spent with her...and I played and sang Cora's favorite hymn, standing beside her casket, *Just a Closer Walk with Thee*.

"Jessica...you are so beautiful." Cora's last words to me still echoed in my mind. After returning home, I passed my Gibson guitar to a new generation—to my daughter, Jessica—who now plays the same guitar when she leads worship with her friends or in church, or accompanies herself when singing a song that she wrote. An instrument by which she shares and expresses her heart. The same guitar that shared the handful hours I spent with my mother, Teresa, when she taught me "The Prayer of St. Francis":

Make me an instrument of thy peace

Where there is hatred, let me bring your love

Where there is despair in life, let me bring hope

And where there's doubt, true faith in you.

Chapter 11

Love Fiercely

(Juan)

*People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did,
But people will never forget how you made them feel.*

—Mary Angelou

While I was living at the *Arms of Love* Children's Home in Nicaragua, my grandma frequently came to visit me on the weekends. She usually came by herself, and I looked forward to our times together.

One weekend, I received word that my grandma had arrived to visit me. I excitedly ran to the visitor room, where we typically met. But when I entered the room on this particular weekend, I was surprised to see a second person sitting next to my grandma.

It was my mom.

The last memory I had of my mom was the moment before she knocked me unconscious with a piece of firewood, in my grandma's house, about seven years earlier. I woke up later that same day in the hospital, with blood on my hands and a permanent scar on my face. This was only the second time that I could recall meeting my mom. And—as with the first time—this occasion was unexpected and caught me completely by surprise.

My grandma told me that my mom wanted to talk with me, and was hoping that I would listen to her. My mom started crying even before she could speak, and through her tears, she just began pleading, "Please forgive me for everything. You have no idea how bad I feel. I miss you so much." My mom cried as she spoke, looking into my eyes, searching for my reaction.

I felt very vulnerable and was confused about the mix of feelings swirling inside of me. Seven years ago, the last words I had spoken to her were, "You are not my mother. I don't have a mother." But my heart had been changing. I found myself unable to speak, so I decided to just give my mom a hug. It was the first time I could remember hugging my mom, in all my life.

I was nice and respectful to her that day, but I could not yet trust that any of this was real. I still carried the pain of our past, and pictures kept flashing through my mind of her hurting me.

In the following months, my mother continued to visit me with my grandma, a couple of times every month. She started to act with greater kindness toward me and would always bring me candy or a small gift when she visited. Still, I was not sure what her motives were. I felt confused, scared, uncertain, and vulnerable. At the same time, I felt a sincerity in her, and my confidence grew over time that there might be a path toward rebuilding trust in our relationship and working towards healing. Deep within me, I wanted to experience what it would be like to have a mom.

More than a year passed, and I was nearly 20 years old when I decided to ask her for forgiveness for my *own* behavior. I cried then as I am doing now, writing this, remembering everything. I had to face my memories—especially the pain and the anger—when taking that step of allowing myself to love, and to be loved, by my mom. I took a risk opening myself up to her. But I made the decision that I wanted to restore our relationship, show her how much I loved her, and how thankful I was that she brought me into this world. During our conversation that day, we decided that we would help each other build a long-lasting and mutually satisfying relationship. After that, I expected my mom to visit me every weekend, and she knew that I would be disappointed if she didn't come.

Rebuilding our relationship would prove to be a difficult task, and it took a few years. But I had learned how to persevere through immense difficulties in order to reach a goal. When I lived on the street during my childhood, I always had to find a way to survive—it was never an excuse for me to say, “I can't do this.” Similarly, when I developed my soccer skills, it wasn't easy—I had to practice, read about it, train for it, and really love it, not just focus on how hard it would be. In the same way, I committed myself to developing a new relationship with my mom. No matter how difficult it would be, I made the decision that I would continue to work at it and never give up. So I started to build up genuine feelings toward her, so that my mom would feel loved by me, even when I was not yet ready to feel loved by her. I decided to jump

in first and show her love, to the point that she cried almost every time we met, because she felt healing in her own heart for what she had done to me.

Eventually, our relationship developed into one of pure love and time filled with kisses, hugs, letters, and having fun together. But in many ways, I had to initiate this, encourage her, and make her feel loved by a son that she herself didn't love when he was born. I decided to rescue my past and my family, and to build myself into someone unique, who truly knows what it means to love and to be loved. I compared our relationship to my favorite sport of soccer: just because you can run, doesn't mean you can kick the ball. My mom came to me and asked for forgiveness, but she didn't know how to proceed from there. It was more than enough for me. She had decided to run toward me, so I would teach her how to kick the ball.

Each time my mom visited me, I began to see her a little bit differently. We were experiencing better moments whenever we spent time together, and those memories were gradually replacing the older ones of pain and anger. I knew that my mom was never loved by any of my brothers and sisters, and I wanted to break the cycle by finding ways that she would feel loved. Whether it was celebrating her birthday, going for a walk, buying her some coffee or ice cream. Over time, it became easier us for us to apologize for anything that didn't go according to plan, like being late when we planned to meet or missing the other person's phone call.

Today, my mother is very proud of me and is happy to know who I am and what I am doing. She says that she is honored to call me her son, and our times together are truly amazing. Nearly every time when we hang out, she cries, while the Juan that she rejected, hurt, and didn't love for almost 18 years takes her shopping, cooks for her, takes her out for coffee and great conversation, and brings her a special gift for Mother's Day.



Loving and forgiving others is the key to success, both in our relationships with others and in maintaining our own emotional well-being. I looked in the mirror one day and saw in the reflection a man that was handsome, eager to learn, able to help others, and capable of success. The fact that my own family rejected me, didn't mean that I had to reject them. It was up to me to

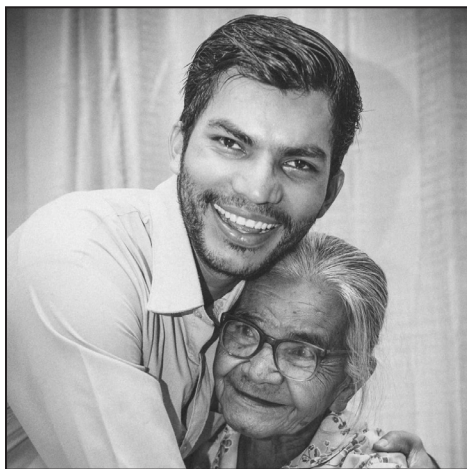
move forward and stop living in the same cycle. I was afraid of being rejected because I wasn't valuable or capable of being loved. I had to challenge those feelings and move forward in spite of them. Those feelings were preventing me from loving others and being vulnerable in relationships. So I decided that instead of waiting to be loved by my mom, I would love her first.

Just as I asked my mom for forgiveness, I also asked my grandma to forgive me for all of my lying and the hard times that she went through because of me. She said, "Juan, I forgive you. And I apologize that I didn't have the means to raise you myself." I told her, "There is nothing that I have to forgive. You are the greatest blessing in my life."

Ever since that time, my grandma and I have loved each other in the most incredible way. We always laugh and have fun together, and our time is filled with love, kindness, and compassion. When people see us together, they always comment that my grandma is so "cute" and "full of joy and peace." And every time I am going to see her, I think about how I can surprise her and make her feel that our time together is special. We are family again. But I learned the meaning of "family" during my years at *Arms of Love*.

When I became a part of *Arms of Love*, I was treated as a family member. Of course, in every family, there are problems. But can you imagine an 11-year-old boy coming into your family, who has never attended school, unable to read or write, no moral values, and has never loved or experienced

love? That was the boy, Juan, who first came to *Arms of Love*. Yet from the very first day, I felt valued, even though I could not give or contribute anything to them, and regardless of what I had done in the past. They saw who I was as a person, and on that basis alone, they loved me and cared for me. And that is what I needed to do for my mom and my other relatives.



Juan with his grandma today.

I was only able to love in this way because it had been modeled in my life so many times before. I would like to share with you about a few of those people whose love changed the trajectory of my life and brought me to where I am today.



I met Mamerto Martinez in April, 2000, when I first arrived at *Arms of Love* in Nicaragua. He was one of the first people involved with *Arms of Love* in Nicaragua, when it began in early 1999. After I ran away from *Arms of Love* multiple times, he personally came to my grandma's house to talk with her about me coming back, even though he had been with me when I was angry, aggressive, and disrespectful. Back at *Arms of Love*, he was at the home all day until late at night, and on the weekends, he cared for us so the house-parents could have some time off. No matter how angry or disobedient I was, Mamerto was always kind, gentle, and humble with me. Mamerto was the first person that I felt genuinely valued me, believed in me, cared about me, and protected me—and he was the first person that I learned to trust.

Mamerto sacrificed a lot in order to give his best to us. I was 16 years old, and I had already been living at *Arms of Love* for five years when I first met his wife, Mima. As each of the *Arms of Love* kids greeted her, Mamerto took our hands and placed them in hers. It was the first time we realized that Mamerto's wife was blind. Mima later started visiting us once a month and became another special person in my life, and we always looked forward to talking and singing with her.

Mamerto became the father to me that I had never had. Even when I was mean or disobedient, Mamerto never yelled or said anything to make me feel bad. He always responded with love, telling me how smart I was and how much he believed in me. He spoke with me, walked around with me, and worried about me. It was evidence that I was important to him. The longer I knew Mamerto, the more I appreciated how he dedicated his life to service, and that he loved me without expecting anything in return, because he believed in me and valued me as a person. I felt that I was enjoying time that I had missed in my earlier childhood, and my heart was full of joy.



Juan with Mamerto Martinez shortly before his passing.

Even after I began attending college and no longer lived at *Arms of Love*, I always tried to find time to hang out with Mamerto, and I was grateful for any time that I could spend with him. He said that he was very excited for the man that I was becoming, and the time we spent together made us feel like father and son. In fact, we often joked about the fact that we shared a last name—Martinez—and on several occasions, including my interview for college, he introduced me to other people as his son. Likewise, when I introduced him to my college friends, I introduced him as my father.

When I was close to finishing college, I told Mamerto that I wanted him and my grandma to be the two people that walked with me during the commencement ceremony. Sadly, only my grandma would be able to walk with me. On December 1, 2013, Mamerto passed away, after suffering a stroke the week before. He was in intensive care, and the staff were only allowing his family to visit him. I told them that I was his son, and since my ID had the same last name, they allowed me to see him. When I arrived in his room, I saw him connected to many different machines, and my heart was broken. I was crying and hugging him, even with all of the cables around his body,

and I told him, “Mamerto, if you can hear me, this is not Juan, this is *Arms of Love*. We need you.” A few days later, Mamerto passed away.

Sadness enveloped all the children and college students supported by *Arms of Love*. I soon realized that I was not the only person who saw Mamerto like a father. Powerful comments were left by some of my brothers and sisters at *Arms of Love* on social media. One wrote, “A big tragedy has happened, one of the most special people in my life has died. Mamerto was like a father to me.” Another shared, “I wanted Mamerto to walk with me at my high school graduation. He was like a father to me, as he was with me since I was a kid.” Many others similarly expressed how Mamerto was the biggest influence in their lives.

I will always remember the last time that I saw Mamerto. He came to my college house and I prepared breakfast for both of us. We had coffee too, of course—he was a big lover of coffee—and since I was running an organic coffee business, I always made sure that he and his wife had a full supply. We hugged each other as he left, for what would be the last time.

I continue to look up to Mamerto as a great example for me, and I challenge myself to honor Mamerto by being a son whose actions reflect his: always patient, humble, kind, serving, forgiving, easy to love. Since then, to honor Mamerto, I have worked on bringing my entire family back together—my cousins, aunts, grandma, mom, brother, and sisters—to share time with them and to love them. I now have amazing relationships with all my relatives. We celebrate birthdays together, we cry together, we laugh together, and we are learning to love and value each other again because I made the decision, following Mamerto’s example, to love them, care about them, and value them, even though they had once abandoned me.

I am deeply thankful to Mamerto for the person that I am today. I feel Mamerto’s presence every time I visit *Arms of Love*, and every time I have the chance to serve others. And I feel him singing with me every time I play the guitar.



I remember meeting Robert Benson for the first time shortly after I arrived at *Arms of Love*. I remember hearing that he was the founder of *Arms of*

Love, but I was not impressed. In later years, however, when I asked Mamerto how he wound up working for *Arms of Love*, he said that it was because of Robert. Mamerto described Robert as a very kind and compassionate person, who had a vision for helping others, and in particular, to create a home that would provide hope for kids who would otherwise have no hope. It was because of Robert's passion, vision, and hard work to establish *Arms of Love* in Nicaragua that Mamerto said he decided to commit himself to working with *Arms of Love*. Sometime later, seeing the very poor conditions that Mamerto was living in, Robert even built a new house for Mamerto, so he and his blind wife Mima would enjoy a better standard of living.

Most of the kids and staff at *Arms of Love* only know Robert as the founder, but during the writing of this book, I had the honor of staying with Robert and his family a few times when I was visiting Southern California. I knew that there was something special about Robert from all of my conversations with Mamerto, but I wanted to get to know him myself. And I especially wanted to know more about *Arms of Love* and how the idea came about, because it was my home and I wouldn't be the person that I am today without it.

When I began talking with Robert, I immediately felt connected to his past and his passion to provide a future for children who had been separated from their families. I listened to Robert share about his own abandonment, and the personal struggles he has had throughout his life with feeling loved and learning to love others, much as I had experienced. I also learned of some of the sacrifices that he had made to make *Arms of Love* possible, and how the ministry took a significant toll on his own family, time, and resources.

My conversations with Robert changed some of my perspectives. Like many of the kids at *Arms of Love*, I thought people in the United States were very wealthy and that they never struggled with emotional issues like those we had experienced. We often had a sense of entitlement to our care, because we perceived that they were rich and we had nothing.

Mamerto had mentioned on several occasions that Robert was someone who had sacrificed a lot to provide me with a home and a future. I never fully understood it until I met Robert in person and learned the background of what it took to start *Arms of Love* and sustain it over the years. Robert continues to inspire me as an example of unconditional love, and it inspires my life



Juan with Robert Benson in Silverado, California.

even more when I consider that we have struggled with similar issues in our lives. I now consider Robert as our collective father in *Arms of Love*.

Even more special was the opportunity that I had to enjoy a mission trip to *Arms of Love* in the Philippines in July 2015, with two of his beautiful and smart daughters, Danielle and Stephanie. To be working with these young ladies in their teenage years and to already see in them such a great heart to serve, to love, and to share their lives with others had a deep impact on me. And I could see, in every moment, Robert's passion, love, and care for others expressed through his daughters, as we served together at *Arms of Love* in the Philippines.



Scott and Vicki Burlingame, a couple who live in Ohio, first visited *Arms of Love* in 2005 with a team from their church, when I was about 16 years old. I learned years later that they felt something special for me, but I had no idea at the time. Sadly, we lost contact for several years, and during that time, I had no indication that this couple was thinking about me and praying for me that entire time.

Years later, Scott and Vicki came back to Nicaragua, and we had the opportunity to renew our friendship. During this visit, I began to understand

how special I was to them. In October 2010, they invited me to come to the U.S. and to spend time with their family. But unfortunately, I was unable to obtain a visa to visit the U.S. because of my unique status as a child who had grown up in a children's home apart from my relatives, nor could I show that I had an income or any economic status. Because I was part of *Arms of Love*, and I had no employment or income or family to support me other than *Arms of Love*, I was denied permission to come to the U.S.

A year later, in October 2011, we tried again. My circumstances were the same, and yet this time, I was granted a three-month visa to visit the U.S. When I received the news, I was so excited! To this day, I can scarcely believe that it happened. Ever since I was a kid, I would look up at the sky, watch the airplanes flying above me, and wish that someday I could be on one of them. And now, despite only knowing a few English words, my dream would come true at Christmas in 2011.

When I arrived in Ohio, Scott and Vicki received and accepted me as a part of their family. Upon landing at the airport, I looked through the window of the plane and saw...SNOW! In Nicaragua, we don't have snow, so for me, this was amazing. Later that same day, I saw the snow begin to fall again. I ran outside and let the snow land softly on my arms and on my face, until I suddenly realized that I was nearly frozen. Within days, we had five inches of snow covering the ground, and I remember how it glistened in the sunlight, so stunningly white and beautiful.

The next thing I discovered, upon arriving in the U.S., was fast food drive-thru restaurants. They have a system where a line of cars wait in a long line, and then the driver picks up food from a window while still sitting behind the wheel of the car. Back in Nicaragua, the only time I saw a long line of cars lined up for food, was because a charity was handing out food for free. So the first time I saw this in Ohio, I told the friend that I was with, "We should go to that place! Look! They are giving away free food!" But my friend just laughed and said, "No, that is a way that you can buy food quickly. For many people, they cannot take too much time away from work, so this works better for them." It was so different from Nicaragua.

After a time, Scott and Vicki also began helping to fund a partial scholarship for my university education. They were loving me as if I was their son,

yet for many years, I still didn't open my heart to them. But as they became increasingly involved in my life and in my college education, I gradually began to feel that they loved me, valued me, and believed in me.

Year by year, our relationship grew stronger. I have no words to express how thankful I am for Scott and Vicki and that they chose to “adopt” me in this way. It felt strange to spend time with a normal family and be treated as a son—sharing tears and laughter. Talking about the future and discussing our faith. They even gave me a key to their house. Looking back, I can see how they took many risks, and made many sacrifices, to bring me joy. Their love and sacrifice made them feel like another mom and dad to me; even though we've lived at a distance, I know that I am loved by them. I would not be where I am today, except that they treated me like their son and cared for me in a way that made me feel loved and a part of their family, just for who I was, not because of anything I could ever do for them.



Juan with his wife Candace and Scott and Vickie Burlingame in Ohio.



Many other people have also impacted my life since I arrived at *Arms of Love*. I would like to share about a few of them here.

Ted and Kelly Rodgers visited Nicaragua more than 10 times, leading volunteer teams from their home church in Missouri, before deciding to move to Nicaragua in 2014 to serve with the *Arms of Love* Children's Home. The Rodgers have taught me the true meaning of service. They literally gave up their careers in the U.S. and everything else in their lives to minister with the people and children of Nicaragua. Kelly's heart is full of love and compassion for other people, her kindness will melt anyone's heart, and she has always treated me as a son. Similarly, her husband Ted has an incredible commitment to always give his best to show his love for others. No one else in my life has provided such a strong example of what it means to surrender everything for the sake of loving and serving others.

Luis and Scarlet were a houseparent couple from Nicaragua that I had the honor to live with for several years. They encouraged us to contribute to our home in a variety of ways, whether it was cleaning, working in the field, doing laundry, or performing other chores. If we did something wrong,

they would talk to us privately and never made us feel unloved or inadequate. Rather, they made us feel like we were part of a family that did fun things together but also shared responsibilities. Luis even played soccer with us, despite knowing that he was slow and old, because he wanted to be a part of our lives.

Kim Fisher started as the new CEO for *Arms of Love* in 2007, and after a few years of meeting with her several times each year, she began to win my heart. Kim



Juan with Ted Rodgers in Nicaragua.

spoke to me as a mother would, directing me and advising me—and most importantly, never giving up on me. When I made a mistake or failed a class, she inspired me to improve rather than being angry with me. Kim valued me, believed in me, and shared her heart to the point that it made me feel safe being vulnerable with her. She impacted me deeply.

Doug and Julie Effinger were another amazing couple that I had the honor to learn from. They taught us to develop life skills such as growing fruit and vegetables, and to learn vocational trades such as being a mechanic, electrician, or carpenter. They wanted to be sure that we were prepared to support ourselves in the future. Over time, Doug and Julie became very special to me—treating me as a son, advising me, talking with me about my future, and sharing their hearts with me.

Maria Luis, the staff psychologist, was another person that I especially admired. She sacrificed her time and personal resources to be with us, to serve us, and to teach us how to be responsible and self-sufficient. No matter what the circumstances, she always corrected me with love. Maria Luis was like another mom for me. Her love and care for me was unique, and I have amazing memories of our times together.



I cannot finish writing this chapter, sharing about those whose love changed my life, without talking about my recent marriage to my wonderful wife Candace.

I first met Candace in January 2011, after the Rocky Mountain church came to visit *Arms of Love* from Colorado. We became friends on Facebook soon after. The following year, when Candace visited Nicaragua again, we had the opportunity to talk further, but it was always as friends—I had no intention to try to win her heart.

In July 2012, *Arms of Love* planned for me to attend an appreciation dinner at Club 33 in Disneyland, California, honoring those who had been involved in *Arms of Love*. As I arranged to fly to the dinner, Candace was also booking her flight home to Colorado after volunteering at *Arms of Love* Nicaragua. We decided to take the same flights, and in Miami, during our lay-over, Candace took me to dinner. As we talked, I noticed something different

about her smile, the way she turned her head, and how she touched her hair to be sure it was in place. For the first time, I found myself attracted to her and began to think about her in a special way.

After my trip to California, I decided to visit Colorado for a week to spend more time with Candace. On one of those days I had a few drinks and suddenly found myself confessing all my love to her. We agreed that it wasn't a good time for us to start a relationship, as we were attending college in different countries. I was sad that I had to return to Nicaragua, but we kept in touch.

Several years later, in November 2015, Candace texted me to see if I was going to be in Nicaragua at Christmas, because she was coming with another team and was excited to see me. Unfortunately, after my college graduation on October 15, 2015, I had flown to Florida where I was starting a coffee business, and I had no plans to return to Nicaragua until the middle of 2016. I asked her how seriously she wanted to see me, and she said, "It's important, you better be there!" So I flew back to Nicaragua in December 2015, a few days before she arrived, and when I saw her again for the first time in three and a half years, I had never been so scared walking up to someone and saying, "Hola!"

Over the following week, we shared our feelings with one another more deeply than we had previously, and it was clear that our relationship was entering a new stage. Saying goodbye this time was exceptionally difficult, so I found another opportunity to visit Candace and her family in Colorado in March 2016, and in Nicaragua in June 2016.

Candace and I saw each other frequently over the next few months, and in October 2016, we were legally married in Colorado. But since my family and friends were in Nicaragua, we decided to plan a wedding celebration in Nicaragua as well. So on June 17, 2017, we celebrated our marriage on a beach in my country of birth, with my relatives and my *Arms of Love* family all in attendance to bless our future life together.

Marrying Candace has given me the opportunity to love, and to be loved, in an entirely new way. I know that this is only the beginning, but I can already see myself learning how to be a better husband for my wife, as I become



This incredible rainbow appeared above Juan and Candace during their wedding on June 17, 2017.



Juan and Candace Martinez, after their wedding, with Juan's grandma, aunt, and mother (left to right).

more compassionate, considerate, and capable of loving others in a deeper way. Candace makes me complete.

I am the first one of my siblings to marry, the first one breaking the cycle of uncertainty, and the first one who is making my family proud.



We can deeply impact the lives of others when we spend time with them. Whenever I felt alone and empty, and other people were there for me, it impacted me in a profound and powerful way. God sent the perfect people into my life at the perfect times, and I want to thank every one of them for serving me, sharing their lives with me, and sacrificing their time and resources to be with me.

Today I am a person full of love, and the love that I have was collected from all of the people who sowed into my life. I want to be sufficiently humble and kind that I will always look back, see other kids in need, and not only give them a hand, but share my life with them, serve them, protect them, and love them. *Arms of Love* is the example for me. My years at *Arms of Love* transformed my life, and I want to transform the lives of many other “Juans” who still fight for survival on the streets.

Chapter 12

Live Fearlessly

(Juan/Hector)

All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.

—J.R.R. Tolkien

My oldest brother, Lester, was known on the streets by his nickname, “Guerequano.” Lester was born with several disabilities, which resulted in him having only 50% control of his right arm and his left leg. Since Lester was unable to move normally, it was difficult for him to figure out how to be accepted in society. He never attended school consistently and was unable to maintain his job at the bakery near our grandma’s house. As a result, Lester spent most of his time living on the streets, but he rarely left our neighborhood because he knew that his physical condition made him more vulnerable than other street kids.

Growing up on the street, Lester never felt loved, valued, or protected. His father, Danilo, was always drinking and smoking drugs, so Lester had to figure out how to survive on his own. In particular, he had to learn not to let others intimidate him or abuse him on account of his physical disabilities. But his disabilities didn’t prevent him from defending others—when Danilo tried to hit our grandma when he was drunk, Lester protected her by forcing Danilo out of the home.

Every August, a massive traditional festival is held in Managua to celebrate its patron saint, Santo Domingo de Guzman. Several segments of the principal avenues of the city are jammed with people celebrating the holiday. One year, during this festival, Lester was encouraged by several of his friends to join in the festivities, who promised to stay with him for his safety and protection. But late in the evening, a gang assaulted Lester’s group, trying to steal their money, and Lester’s friends ran away. Sadly, Lester was unable to run very fast. He was captured by two of the attackers, who were apparently under the influence of drugs, and they stabbed Lester multiple times in his chest and belly.

Lester was later found lying in the street, close to death, by Johana, one of his friends who invited him to the festival. Johana and Lester grew up in the same neighborhood and were friends since they were young. Johana called an ambulance and rode with Lester on the way to the hospital, but Lester was slowly dying and passed away at about 4:00 a.m. the next morning. With his final words, Lester asked for his mom, dad, and grandma, but only his mom reached him before he died. Less than a year later, Lester's dad and cousins killed one of the kids that murdered Lester.

Less than a month before his death, Lester had visited me at *Arms of Love*. We talked about my new home and how great it was, we ate together, and we shared time with one another. I was very excited that I was finally getting to know my older brother. As he was leaving that day, I remembered his last words, "Juan, those shoes are upside down." He seemed to be saying that my shoes were on the wrong feet. I looked down to check, but then I realized he might be suggesting that my new shoes ought to be on his feet, but he didn't feel comfortable asking me for them. So I gave him my shoes before he left, never suspecting that this would be the last time I saw him...and that he would be wearing my shoes when he died.

Our brief time together felt like a dream. I was just starting to connect with Lester right before he died, and his untimely death filled with me anger. Anger at those who took advantage of his disability and stabbed him to death. Anger at Lester's friends, who convinced him to go out drinking that night and enjoy the festivities, while promising to take care of him. Anger at myself, for failing to take the opportunity to get to know him better when I had the chance. Sadly, I will never know much about him.

I went back to my neighborhood on several occasions to talk with people who knew Lester to learn more about him. People commented that he was friendly, that he tried to stay out of trouble, and he was always smiling. But it was a Lester that I only heard about...a Lester that I never knew, and now, would never have the chance to know. But his memory—and his loss—would profoundly impact me.



When I moved into the *Arms of Love* home in April 2000, I was the oldest boy in the home and I had no idea how to love, treat, or play with other kids. Lester had never been involved in my life and we never had a brother-type of relationship. Yet now, I was the oldest brother in the home, and I needed to learn how to play with the other kids, how to be accepted by them, and how to make them feel loved. This was exceptionally challenging for me, because prior to coming to *Arms of Love*, I had never experienced love or the care of an older brother. I was struggling with questions about why people were caring about me and how to respond, and at the same time, I had new siblings looking up to me for the same type of love and care that I was unaccustomed to receiving myself.

During the first two years that I lived at *Arms of Love*, I was frequently fighting with the older boys, for any number of silly reasons—maybe I wanted to kick the ball first, or perhaps I couldn't find my shoes and suspected one of the other boys of taking them. The other boys had come from environments similar to mine, or even worse, but I gave little thought to that at the time. After we fought, I would see the other boys crying, running to the corner, or hiding in their room, and it led to a deep sadness in my heart. We might not talk again until the next day, but then they would want to do something with me again—no longer angry, no longer wanting to fight.

I was impacted by this new situation. Back on the street, when you fought with another kid, you never wanted to see him again. There was little chance that you would later become friends, because your focus after a street fight was revenge, not friendship. Yet here, in my new home, I found myself not wanting to fight with my new siblings, and I felt sad to observe one of the other kids crying because of something I did. I had to find a way to maintain and develop relationships with my younger brothers in the home, to love them and to be loved by them, despite our frequent fights and conflicts. I had no clue how that could be possible and yet, in my heart, I knew it was something that I longed for.

Becoming an older brother to the younger kids, and learning to love and care for them, was a long process, but looking back, I can see a progression of

motives and steps that contributed to the process. One of my first realizations arose purely from self-interest: I realized that if I wanted to borrow from, play with, or hang out with the other kids, I needed to be nice to them. So at that stage, I only tried to be kind in order to receive benefits for myself.

Over time, a second phenomenon took place—the kids began to look up to me as an older brother, and something within me wanted to set a good example. Moreover, the younger kids started coming to me to help resolve conflicts, enforce the rules, ensure that others were doing their chores, and to maintain order. I felt that they admired and respected me, and I tried hard to meet their expectations. It increased my sense of value, so I tried to fill the shoes that they wanted me to fill. But Lester's death, and the time that followed, brought me to a new place in my journey.



One Sunday morning, Mamerto shared a message on the subject of honor. Later in the day, we talked about it further. I mentioned my brother Lester, my anger and sadness over his death, and that I had been having dreams about him. With his soft eyes, filled with kindness, Mamerto looked at me and said, “Lester may no longer be with you, but now you have many new brothers here at *Arms of Love*. Lester was never loved and didn't know how to love. But you can honor Lester by becoming the type of older brother that you wish Lester had been for you. Play together, share with each other, take care of one another.”

At first, I was very confused by Mamerto's advice. “How would this honor Lester?” I asked. None of it made any sense. Mamerto explained, “Rescue your memories of Lester by being the older brother you wish he had been to you.”

And then Mamerto said simply, “Make Lester proud of you.”

I thought long and hard about Mamerto's words to me. As I thought more about Lester, I realized that, in the midst of his struggles and physical disabilities, he was trying his best to work, provide food for our family, and attend to our grandma. In hindsight, I realized that Lester intended to be a good older brother, but he didn't know how or even where to start because he was never loved, valued, or protected himself.

I knew, from that point forward, I needed to turn my memories of Lester into something positive. Over the following weeks and months, inspired by my brother, I worked on becoming a different person: someone more compassionate, loving, and kind. In my mind, I was now Lester, the other 30 kids at *Arms of Love* were Juans—my younger brothers—and I would love them the way that I had wanted to be loved. In this way, I kept Lester alive in my heart and made him an inspiration in my life.

What happened next was something that I had never experienced before: the kids loved me back. Some gave me hugs, others served me (for example, by washing my dishes after a meal), others drew me pictures. I will never forget these wonderful years of my life. The way that I was loved by the other kids impacted my life far more than my efforts to love and to serve them. And I was proud to have become the Lester that I know, in my heart, he aspired to be.

Although Lester died in a horrible way, I learned to use our short time together in a positive way. His memory inspired me to become the person that I am today, someone that loves, values, and protects others in an unconditional way. And now, every time I see a kid living on the streets, I see my younger self—I feel the child's pain, emptiness, and sadness. But at the same time, I see his potential, a kid like myself that can someday love and value others, if only someone will come into his life and love and value him.



About eight months after I moved into the first *Arms of Love* home, in January 2001, a newborn infant, Héctor, came into our home. Héctor was born in Managua on November 5, 2001, and three months later he was admitted to *Arms of Love* due to abandonment and physical abuse by his mother. When he was brought to *Arms of Love*, he received a medical examination that revealed he was already suffering from malnutrition at his young age.

After his first couple of years at *Arms of Love*, Héctor was smiling and treated everyone nicely. When he turned three years old, his mother received permission from the Ministry of the Family to visit him, yet when she came, she never showed any sign of love or care toward him. Héctor's houseparents were the ones who filled his life with love and his heart with affection.



Héctor (far left) with several of his siblings and cousins during his first year at *Arms of Love*.

When Héctor entered school, he consistently stood out as one of the best students and athletes. He was selected as a representative of the school for his exceptional soccer skills. He also began to take music classes, became a good flutist, and learned to play the drums, which became his great passion. As a result, he became the drummer and a leader in the *Arms of Love* band. He was one of the best-behaved children at *Arms of Love* and demonstrated a high-level of leadership.

In August 2016, Héctor was taken to Hospital Regional in Jinotepe due to high fever and body pain. He was admitted for observation for suspected dengue fever. Two days later, he was discharged because he was feeling better,



Hector at *Arms of Love* in 2006, at the age of four.

but the doctor recommended a number of additional medical tests to be completed over the next 30 days. On September 7, 2016, the *Arms of Love* staff took him to a specialist because his hemoglobin levels and platelets were alarmingly low. The doctor recommended that he be taken immediately to the hospital, and he was admitted to La Mascota Hospital (a children's hospital) located in Managua. After some additional tests, he was diagnosed with Acute Myeloid Leukemia (AML), which has a survival rate of only 25%.

Once Héctor was admitted to the hospital, all the *Arms of Love* staff, regardless of their position, offered to take care of him at the hospital, meaning they would travel to Managua and stay there for 24 hours since Héctor was just a teen and unable to stay alone in his condition. The staff created a schedule to coordinate which persons would stay at the hospital and care for Héctor during different shifts. The entire *Arms of Love* family came together to show their love and care for Héctor, who was going through the most difficult season of his life—even more difficult than the separation from his mother. And immediately, our friends from Nicaragua, the Philippines, and the United States formed an army of prayer for Héctor's health. Every day at 3 p.m., people around the world prayed for Héctor, regardless of where they were.

As soon as I heard the news from Ewner, the director of *Arms of Love* in Nicaragua, my heart immediately told me to go visit Héctor. But I was in Florida at the time, and I had been planning a trip to see my fiancé, Candace—we were even talking about getting married soon. Yet when I spoke with Candace, knowing my heart, she encouraged me to go back to Nicaragua immediately and visit Héctor. “I support you and I want you to go,” Candace told me over the phone. So I called Ewner back and expressed my desire to visit, but he said there was no chance I could visit with Héctor in person because he was undergoing chemotherapy and was being kept in a sterile environment. Undeterred, I decided to travel to Nicaragua to see my younger brother.

While I was in Nicaragua, the medical staff allowed me to spend time with Héctor every day in the hospital, until one day, I was allowed to care for him through the night. He needed to stay in bed most of the time, as he had several needles connected to his arms and needed assistance any time he needed to move or change positions. We watched movies together, ate snacks, and reminisced about our years growing up together. The next morning, I washed his feet and helped him take a shower, as he was getting ready for another set of medical examinations.

Every time I saw Héctor in the hospital, he reacted with joy to see me. By the end of the week, he was asking me to communicate with some of our other brothers that we had grown up with but who were no longer at *Arms of*

Love, such as Eduardo, Ronny, and Alex, because he wanted to see them also and not too many people knew of his situation.

What impacted me most during this time was our deeper sharing with each other, as we discussed how he was impacted by the leukemia, the chemotherapy, and everything else going on in his life. Instead of being worried, he expressed confidence and trust in God that he would make it through this difficult time, and he was very positive about his chances of recovery. But he told me that his condition and the treatments were sometimes painful, and he was scared when he didn't know what was happening. So Héctor always asked detailed questions of the doctors so he could develop the deepest understanding possible concerning his medical condition, treatments, and possible outcomes.

As I cared for Héctor the week he was in the hospital, I reflected on the time I had spent during the preceding 15 years being in relationship with the younger kids in my home. I didn't want them to suffer and struggle to the same extent that I had, or to face their struggles without the help of a caring older brother. So I did my best to give them advice, listen to them, encourage them, help them assess their strengths and weaknesses, and most of all, hear their hearts. And the more I saw them succeed and receive healing in their lives, the more it brought healing to mine.

As I was traveling back to Florida, my heart was at peace. I had grown in my role as an older brother to the other children that I grew up with. The shining smile of Héctor in the midst of his painful chemotherapy was humbling to me, because his faith and determination in the face of life's greatest challenge far exceeded anything I had experienced. And the opportunity to share those moments with him brought me joy and hope.



María Luisa Gómez, the *Arms of Love* psychologist since its beginning, has known Héctor since he was an infant. She says that when she first visited him in the hospital, she was extremely sad because he mentioned he wanted to die. But after he noticed that all the *Arms of Love* staff was taking shifts to watch over him and that all his brothers from *Arms of Love* were sending encouraging messages—and particularly after my own visit to Nicaragua—he

told Maria Luisa that he was motivated to beat the leukemia and fight for his life. As a result of my visit and the care of others, María Luisa reported that Héctor became joyful and full of life, even though he was still fighting leukemia.

In the many conversations that the *Arms of Love* director, Ewner, had with Héctor during the three months after my visit, he never noticed any regret. Héctor was always caring for others. Ewner was humbled to see how Héctor cared for other kids at the hospital and shared whatever he had with them.

Héctor is a fighter. By early 2017, medical tests indicated that Héctor's leukemia was gone. Héctor continued to have regular monthly appointments with his doctors and continued to take medication, but he was able to resume his normal life, leading the music band and the soccer team at his school. Then on June 17, 2017, when Candace and I celebrated our new life together, Héctor also celebrated his new life by serving as one of the groomsmen in our wedding.

Héctor writes of his recent experience as follows:

Since I was little, I have suffered from anemia. But beginning in July of 2016, things got worse and I started to get sick more and more.

At the end of July my health deteriorated and I was diagnosed with Acute Myeloid Leukemia. Only a miracle could save me.

Immediately they began to treat me with special medications and chemotherapy. I was hospitalized for six full months, and I could only go to my house a few times. It was very difficult ... several times I



Juan with Hector in early 2017, wearing caps that Juan brought back from his visit to *Arms of Love* in the Philippines.

thought that I was not going to be able to get out alive or bear all the pain.

I want to say thank you to all the people who supported me, including all the Brazos de Amor staff who took care of me in the hospital in the mornings, afternoons, and nights.

After four months it started to improve and God made a miracle in my body, my bone marrow, and in my blood. Thank God that I have life, I am healthy, and I have a future ahead of me. My cancer is all in the past.

In the future, I want to be a business administrator and have a family. Thank you for giving me that opportunity.



Hector as a groomsman in Juan and Candace's wedding in June 2017.

DO JUSTICE



Jess Mora with the children of *Arms of Love* Philippines, January 2017.



Linda Bagley with the girls at the Victory Center in Morelia, Mexico, in October 2005.

*What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and
To love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*

— Micah of Moresheth, Micah 6:8

Chapter 13

Dare Greatly

(Robert/Volunteers/Yessica)

*Life's most persistent and urgent question is,
"What are you doing for others?"*

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

Simple and discrete acts of love and kindness make a difference and can have far-reaching impact. When we extend this to consistently living our lives for others, it requires significant determination, dedication, and sacrifice. We don't often see the results. It can be discouraging. It can leave us feeling drained and exhausted. But it is worth it.

I have found that any time I set my heart and efforts toward a new initiative, it seems as if every conceivable challenge and obstacle arises in my path. My efforts are invariably met with frequent setbacks, and at times, apparent failure. Children initially admitted to our homes sometimes ran away. Some chose to leave the program prematurely. Some projects, once started, were unable to continue or morphed into something much different than envisioned. Kristen and I encountered significant challenges in our marriage; conflicts with my career needed to be navigated; friendships were sometimes lost. Mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion often resulted. But I have come to the conclusion that what matters most is not whether we make mistakes or how often we err, but the direction in which we strive and our willingness to struggle and battle for what we believe is right. As Theodore Roosevelt eloquently stated:

It is not the critic who counts; nor the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.^[5]

The results of our efforts in life cannot be measured, and are usually beyond our power of perception and observation. What matters is that our hearts and our lives are striving in a worthy direction, driven by purpose and a genuine love for others.

During the 15 years that I led *Arms of Love*, literally thousands of individuals from around the world became engaged in some capacity—participating on short-term teams to the project locations, sponsoring children, praying for the staff and programs, giving donations, doing administrative tasks, and making countless other contributions. Many of them said that I had inspired their actions, yet it was their creative efforts and love for others that continually inspired me and kept me going over the years. I invited a few of them to share their reflections here.

Connected through Children-at-Risk Conference

In March 2007, I organized a “Children-at-Risk Conference” held in Anaheim, California, which many speakers and attendees described as the first of its kind. I personally recruited and brought together more than 40 speakers from 26 countries to share their experiences working with children-at-risk, to equip, inform, and to inspire those interested in such work. More than 400 people attended from about 200 different churches and organizations. But what stood out to me most was the feedback that I received from many of our international speakers: “Organizations in the U.S. often sponsor conferences for us, but this is the first time that we have been invited to come to the U.S. and share our insights and experience from working in the field.” It stunned me, as I thought, “Isn’t that what makes the most sense?”

Ten years later, the effects are still being felt. A few weeks ago, Dwyatt Gantt, the Executive Director of Children’s Home International, ran into an *Arms of Love* board member in St. Louis, Missouri, and commented that our conference in 2007 was the most “real” conference he attended over his many years of ministry. He is now 85 years old.

During the conference, a couple approached me and introduced themselves as David and Gaye Brobeck. They said they had read an article that recently appeared on the front page of the Orange County Register, “A Global Embrace,” which chronicled my personal journey and the work of *Arms of*

Love. Reading that article, David and Gaye Brobeck decided to come to the conference and talk with me. It turned out that something similar had been on their hearts—rooted in their own story of love, tragedy, and personal redemption.

David Brobeck Writes:

There are dates we remember because they recall happy times. But there are also dates that relate to tragic events. For our nation, September 11 will always be one of those dates. But for our family, September 12 is a date we cannot forget.

Our daughter, Heather, was an extraordinary child. Everyone she came in contact with, from neighbors to teachers and friends, all remarked about her sweet, loving and mature personality. She was excited about being able to be a sponsor for a child through World Vision, something that we did on behalf of all three of our children. She also had a real heart for kids with special needs. True to her nature, in late August 1977, she befriended a girl with a brain injury her age who was confined to a wheelchair. Less than two weeks later, Heather's life changed forever.

On September 12, 1977, less than a month from her 8th birthday, Heather was excited about going back to El Morro School to begin the third grade. She and two friends were riding bikes near our home in Laguna Beach, California, when Heather was hit by a car. Unconscious, she was rushed to South Coast Medical Center.

Heather almost died on the operating table. During ten hours of cranial surgery, she stopped breathing several times, and her pulse was almost gone. I remember one of the nurses saying, "This little girl isn't going to make it."

Against all odds, Heather survived, but she suffered a very severe brain injury from the accident, and she spent the next 18 months in a local hospital. Heather came home to us on January 31, 1979, 506 days after the accident. My family built a special room addition to our home and arranged for around-the-clock nursing care. Heather progressed from being completely comatose to semi-comatose, but in spite of years of efforts at therapy and other treatments, Heather did not improve further.

Nevertheless, despite Heather's inability to speak, there were times when I felt we were able to communicate. One night, I gathered Heather into my arms and settled the two of us into the rocking chair. As I rocked her slowly, I looked into her distant face.

Suddenly, I realized her eyes were focusing on me. "I love you, Heather," I said softly.

Her eyes brightened briefly. I could almost imagine that she smiled. Then, she closed her eyes once more. Contentedly...she slept.

After lying in bed for nearly 29 years, Heather passed away in July of 2006, yet her life and story had a tremendous impact on the lives of many people throughout our community. Through it all, God gave us his wonderful peace and comfort. We know that she is in heaven and more alive than ever, and that we will see her again.

My wife, Gaye, had always dreamed of someday creating a place where abandoned children could live in a real home setting with substitute parents. The difficulty was knowing how and where to start such a program. Then one morning we picked up our local morning paper, the Orange County Register, and we read an inspiring article on the front page about a guy named Robert Benson and the children's homes he founded. We literally had tears in our eyes as we read the article together and realized that Robert's vision was exactly what Gaye had envisioned also. The article ended with the following paragraphs:

It's not easy having 100 kids. There's always something to worry about—staffing, rebellious teens, all the complications inherent in dealing with five foreign governments. And then there are the ghosts, the weight of each kid's story.

"When I see the suffering and injustice that these children have endured, I cannot help but wonder why," Benson said. "But whenever I begin to doubt the existence of a loving God, I am brought back to my own experience. I would not be here today except for God's intervention when I was abandoned as a child.

"I have also learned that love has meaning because there is a choice involved. We have a choice to love or not to love."

Benson has organized a conference to teach others how to do what he's done. It will take place March 9-10 [2007] in Anaheim.^[6]

When we reached the end of the article, we realized this was an answer to our prayers.

The following week, we attended the "Children-at-Risk Conference" described in the article and we became acquainted with Robert at the conference. We learned more about the *Arms of Love* project in Nicaragua and the need for an additional house for young girls. We were amazed to learn that the *Arms of Love* campus in Jinotepe, Nicaragua, was just a couple of hours from a home we had recently purchased in northern Costa Rica. We committed then and there to finance what would become "Heather's House"—a house that 8-12 girls now call home.

Since Heather's House opened back in 2008, we have made several trips to Nicaragua with our family, including one for the groundbreaking and another to officially dedicate the new girl's home. On each occasion, we have been so impressed with the love and dedication of the houseparents, the Director, and all of the staff that supports and mentors the kids. But the most wonderful part of visiting is seeing the joy and security the kids feel because of the genuine love and nurturing that permeates the *Arms of Love* property.

I have been privileged to serve as a volunteer member of the international Board of Directors of *Arms of Love* for nearly 10 years now, and it has been a joy for our family to continue to support the mission of *Arms of Love*. We have seen firsthand the fulfillment of Robert's vision of providing at-risk kids with "a home, a family, and a future."

Connected through a Local Church

Another long-term board member of *Arms of Love* was someone that I met under very different circumstances. Dr. Steve Bagley and his wife, Linda, led one of the most respected marriage & family therapy practices in Orange County, California. Over time, Steve became my personal mentor, and



Upper left and clockwise: The Brobeck family in 1977; Heather Brobeck prior to her accident; Dave and Gaye Brobeck with their daughter Holly and her daughter, visiting Nicaragua in 2007; and Dave and Gaye Brobeck with the girls living at Heather's House.

now—about 15 years later—he lives with our family, is my closest confidant other than my wife Kristen, and is loved by everyone in my family.

It never ceases to amaze me how our relationship evolved over time. When Steve first started mentoring me in a formal capacity as an “executive coach,” our conversations sometimes revolved around how I might be able to wind down my law practice someday and lead *Arms of Love* on a full-time basis. Instead, I continue to be a full-time partner at Orrick; my legal career is thriving more than ever; I am currently leading Orrick’s Taiwan practice; and after Linda passed away, Steve retired from his practice as a therapist and began leading *Arms of Love* as the President and Chairman of the Board. I asked Steve to tell the story.

Dr. Steve Bagley Writes:

I heard Robert Benson speak at the Crown Valley Vineyard church in early 2002. He shared with the congregation about how God had called him, an international patent attorney, to establish family-styled children’s homes in Nicaragua, then in the Philippines, and subsequently in Mexico and Senegal—and he was preparing to tackle the Brazilian Amazon.

You could feel Robert’s compassion as he painted the picture of his vision. People within our church were moved to help him partner with local houseparents so that abandoned, abused and neglected children would have a home, a family and a future.

As I walked away from that morning’s service, I couldn’t shake two questions that kept crossing my mind: “Why so many different cultures?” and “What in his life is motivating him to take on such an important and big mission?”

My curiosity grew to the point that I was compelled to search out Robert’s phone number and ask if I could interview him by phone. Instead, we met in person shortly thereafter. Toward the end of an hour and half discussion, I had heard most of the details and events which led to the founding of *Arms of Love*, and that brought me to one of my most pressing questions: what guided him to each of the countries? His answer was effortless and simple, “God put people in my path that had the same heart for the kids. It didn’t matter what part of the world they were in—I knew I was supposed to partner with them.”

Having uncovered how Robert read God's map explained a lot to me, but I was still missing the link between Robert's life and his accepted life mission.

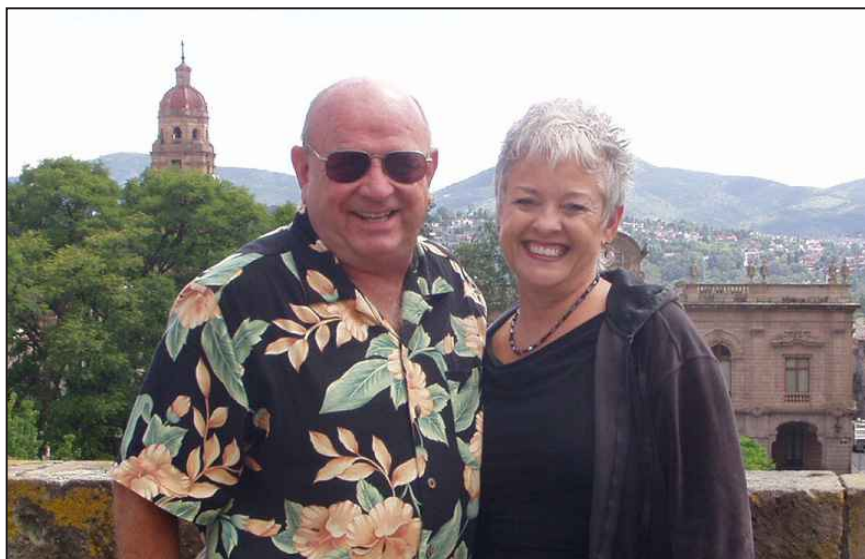
I wasn't sure how to form a question that would help him tell me what I was looking for. All I remember was saying something like, "Why street kids?" Silence followed. After a deep breath, Robert began telling me about being abandoned on the streets of San Jose, California, at two years of age.

Robert Benson's past, his childhood pain, and his fears had become empowered by love. He would not standby and do nothing. His empathy lit a fire in his heart that drove him to action. My curiosity had been satisfied: shared abandonment motivated Robert to face the need and injustice he saw, and he then formed relationships with compassionate people to overcome the obstacles faced by orphaned and abandoned children and give them hope.

The connections that formed between Robert's family and mine, over the next several years, wove us together far beyond sharing a concern for third world children. Robert asked me to join the *Arms of Love* board shortly after our phone conversation. The Benson family later moved to Foothill Ranch and began attending the same church as us; my wife Linda mentored Kristen for 10 years; and I coached Robert in his law practice.

We are now writing a brand new chapter of how close, deep, and involved relationships in a spiritual family can be. I am "grandpa" to the Benson kids, as well as to my seven grandchildren. After my wife Linda passed away, Robert asked me to take on the Chairmanship of *Arms of Love*, when his case load became impossible to maintain concurrently with leading the ministry. And today, I am living with the Bensons in their home, where our church now meets on Sunday mornings.

In what is now our common home, we sometimes sit on the couch and marvel at how God brought us together and the global impact that is resulting from our lives. And every day that passes, I am reminded of James 1:27: "This is pure religion, to care for widows and orphans in their distress."



Steve and Linda Bagley, in Morelia, Mexico, during their trip in October 2005 ministering to the girls at the Victory Center.



Steve Bagley visiting children at *Arms of Love* Philippines in July 2017.

Connected through a Mutual Friend

By 2005, I began to realize that Kristen was right: I had overextended myself between my legal career, my family (that now had four young children), and the ministry of *Arms of Love*, which by this point was funding operations in five countries. I had yet to hire a single employee in the U.S.

and I ran our global operation purely on the volunteer efforts of myself and others. Realizing that a change was needed, I worked with the board to post a job position for an executive director and we collected more than 50 resumes. After an extensive screening and interview process, we hired two individuals, each on a half-time basis, who we thought were the most qualified and experienced to help us maintain and raise funding for the organization. Neither worked out, and within a year, we had terminated both of their contracts.

I had no idea where to turn next. My efforts to define a position—and then recruit someone to fill the position—had fallen short. Weeks turned into months, and before long, nearly a year had passed. That's when Pastor Charles Brown gave me a call. I had accompanied him on my second trip to Costa Rica in 1996, ten years prior. I had not spoken to him in years, yet he called me up and said that he knew someone I needed to meet. I was about to learn an important lesson in organizational leadership: sometimes, rather than recruiting people for a position, you need to wait for the right person, and then design a position around them.

Kim Fisher Writes:

Robert and I first crossed paths in November of 2006. At the time, I had my own business and also worked as the director of development for an organization that was working in Russian orphanages. We were introduced by a mutual friend who heard that *Arms of Love* was looking to hire its first full-time executive. I told him that I wasn't interested. Having had no children of my own, I was never strongly drawn toward working with kids and I had NO interest in working in tropically hot countries! However, when Robert contacted me shortly thereafter, I agreed to meet him for breakfast one morning. What harm could come from that?

Little did I know that our breakfast would send me on a lifelong adventure that I never could have imagined and that it would change the trajectory of my life forever. We shared our stories, and I left feeling intrigued by Robert's vision for the work of *Arms of Love*. However, I just didn't feel a calling to it, and I certainly was not looking to give up the business I had worked so hard to build.

But from the time I was a young girl, I felt a desire to make a difference in my world. With degrees in business and psychology, and a few decades of experience as a business executive, I began to wonder if I was being led to use my skills and experience in a more far-reaching way. A few weeks later, I felt a very strong impression, “Call Robert Benson.” The next thing I knew, I was picking up the phone, having no idea what I was going to say. After Robert answered the phone, I found myself asking, “Are you still interested in my working with you?” Three weeks later I had a job offer to be the CEO of *Arms of Love* and I was left with my head spinning. What had just happened to my carefully laid plans? I so clearly remember saying, “I am not sure I feel a personal calling to this work, but I know, that I know, that I know, that this is the plan for me in this season of my life. I will have all that I need to walk out this calling.”

The next seven years became an extraordinary adventure. I felt my heart grow larger and larger in ways I could never have imagined. I still remember the first trip I made to Nicaragua and held held Luisa in my lap, a child who had just arrived that day, in my lap. Something so profound and deep happened in my heart. In my faith journey, I had an understanding of how God loves and cares for the orphans in a special way. And I had spent a lot of time in Russian orphanages. But this was the first time that I understood, deep in my soul, what that really meant. I began to weep, and I knew that I was on hallowed ground. I knew then that I had been given such an extraordinary gift, for the first time in my life, to truly feel the heart of God beating in my own, as it beat together with Luisa’s.

I began to fall deeply in love with these incredible children and knew that I would do everything I could to give them a home, a family and a future. They soon became the “children of my heart” and I am grateful that I became “Mommy Kim” as they welcomed me into their own hearts and lives. While much of my time during my trips to the homes was spent managing operational issues, what I always loved most was the countless hours I spent in conversation with these amazing kids, learning about their lives and their dreams. Encouraging them, challenging them, and watching them become extraordinary adults became an integral part of my personal life journey.

I am also grateful to have participated in the journeys of so many faithful volunteers. I enjoyed being with them on trips and watching their day-by-day transformations as they learned that they were receiving more than they were giving. They would then get “addicted” and visit year after year, sharing their personal talents and skills such as dance, music, counseling, sports, and construction. Lives were changed in this part of the world, as people found their callings and developed the courage to pursue their dreams. Some volunteers went back to college to pursue degrees in social work and other disciplines that would equip them to pursue new careers. Some started their own non-profits. Some sold everything they owned and moved to work full-time in developing countries. Each of their stories began with them making one simple decision to step outside their busy lives and sacrifice their time and money to visit children they didn’t know, in a country so far from their own.

Many people over the years have asked why I invested so much in international work while many people need help in our own country. There is nothing that has grown me and formed my own perspectives as a person, a woman of faith, a patriot, and a professional, than falling in love with cultures and people so seemingly different from my own life experience. I was humbled time and time again as I made mistakes and had to ask for forgiveness. I learned how to think and work outside my own box to resolve issues. Children across the world taught me things I would have never learned otherwise about generosity, acceptance, patience, and faith.

In recent years, my own life and professional journey have taken me in new directions. But some of the greatest joys of my life were watching Anzelie graduate from high school, being honored by Myla as her mother at her college graduation, watching Juan fall in love with Candace (who later became his wife), and seeing Yessica and so many others grow in healing and confidence to pursue their futures.

I am so blessed that they call me “Mom.” They changed my life. They are my heroes.



Kim Fisher with Anzelie (at her high school graduation), Juan, Myla, and Yessica.

Connected through Short-Term Teams and Volunteering

A few years ago, I decided to take some time off from ministry and non-profit work. My children were nearly grown and heading to college, and I wanted to spend more time with my family. After some time off, I would launch a separate non-profit organization and pursue a new but related vision. But I needed to slow down and take a sabbatical from non-profit work, as Kristen had been asking me to do for many years.

As I contemplated this important transition, I looked around in the *Arms of Love* organization to see who was the most involved and committed, who really shared the vision and heartbeat of the ministry. Jessica Burge—now Jessica Mora—was one of several people who stood out from the rest. Jess had decided to enter the field of social work as a result of her short-term volunteer

experience with *Arms of Love*. Over the preceding five years, she had cumulatively spent about a full year of her time volunteering at the *Arms of Love* homes in Nicaragua. She had a genuine passion and demonstrated commitment to the children and to the vision of *Arms of Love*. I thought to myself, “Jess is the perfect person to be on the leadership team for *Arms of Love* going forward.” And then I remembered what I had learned many years earlier: the most effective way to grow an organization is to find the best people who share your passion and vision, design roles that allow them to flourish in their strengths and gifts ... and then let them run with it.

So I flew to Colorado and met with Jess over a couple of days. Toward the end of our time together, I said, “Jess, if you could design your dream job, what would it be?” I listened to her heart, and then created a full-time position at *Arms of Love* that was designed around her dreams and strengths—one that would have her spending about half her time interfacing with the children’s homes in Nicaragua and the Philippines, and the other half of her time interfacing with churches, short-term team leaders, and key donors in the U.S.

Today, several years later, Jess Mora is the Executive Director of *Arms of Love* International. I invited her to share her story of involvement.

Jess Mora (Burge) Writes:

My heart for low-income communities threaded with love and compassion for working with children, youth, and young adults, have been interwoven throughout my life. I have committed my career to the education of the heart and mind. For nine years, I worked with marginalized and underserved students in K-12, and then at Colorado State University. However, my deep-rooted passion was to work with people in a different capacity—and that unfolded after a mission trip to *Arms of Love* in Nicaragua in 2008. It was supposed to be a one-time service adventure. Now, eight years later—after more than 20 trips to Nicaragua, three trips to the Philippines, and a huge career shift—it is safe to say that my one-week trip was just the beginning.

My first trip to Nicaragua was heart transforming. The stories of the children vary from begging on the streets to being orphaned by car accidents, but all have been physically, sexually, or emotionally abused. Devastating,

but beyond their horrific and heartbreaking pasts, are stories of resiliency and the promise of hope and a future where the cycle of poverty and abuse will be shattered. *Arms of Love* has afforded children an opportunity to have their basic needs met, to receive a great education, to be part of a family that will love them and allow them to experience a childhood, and to receive counseling from a psychologist who can help them process their brokenness and take steps toward healing. And change is occurring, one hug and one child at a time, with many children having now graduated from university!

Beyond my connection to the children, another reason I was drawn to *Arms of Love* was its unique approach and beginnings. After my first trip, I was eager to learn how *Arms of Love* was founded, and I was humbled to learn that Robert Benson, an orphan himself, had developed the organization as a calling on his life. When Robert created *Arms of Love*, he developed a family model that was not based on international adoption. The organization believed in raising children within their own culture, in a family environment built on healing and opportunity.

One of the opportunities afforded to children by *Arms of Love* is education. It is beautiful to walk beside a child and encourage them to complete high school; however, *Arms of Love* provides opportunities for youth to attain a higher education. Education is one of our greatest weapons against poverty, and *Arms of Love's* mission includes the desire for children not only to survive, but also to thrive and become leaders of change in their communities. With a career in education, I loved this unique approach that was empowerment based!

After my first trip to *Arms of Love*, I found myself continuously getting more involved. I led short-term teams; helped domestically with projects; and went on month-long trips to serve as respite to the staff. I was privileged to be there when a new child was brought in from the streets; to have the girls disclose their survival of sexual abuse; to sit in meetings with the CEO, Kim Fisher, during conversations with staff and children; and to witness incredible transitions and transformations take place with teenagers. These experiences provided me countless opportunities to witness the overwhelming number of social issues that oppress people in global communities, and the long-term impacts on children.

Social work is not just a fixing job—it is about processing with people, often to unlearn choices and reactions that have defined their very existence, many times for generations. Social work is about enhancing and empowering people in the communities where they live; it is about challenging people to step in the shoes of others, who are devalued in society; and it is about helping people recognize and apply their privilege to advance the rights of those who do not share the background of privilege.

While in graduate school, I completed an international internship in Nicaragua, and then took opportunities to be trained in Culturally Modified—Trauma Focused—Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. After graduation, my commitment to *Arms of Love* continued to grow. I was committed to work with marginalized populations using a multi-level, community-based approach that enhances lives, breaks down historical barriers, and intervenes and empowers at the individual, family, and community levels. I continued to work at Colorado State University, but at the same time, I used every opportunity to volunteer at *Arms of Love* in Nicaragua.

Then one day, I had the opportunity to meet Robert Benson, the founder of *Arms of Love*, in person. Robert and I had several months of conversations. I was blessed to hear his story firsthand, although I had been inspired and blessed by his commitments for years. He shared both history and vision for the future of *Arms of Love*...and then he gave me an opportunity to become a part of the team.

That invitation afforded me the opportunity to combine my passions and convictions with my training on a new level. Today, I am blessed to be a part of *Arms of Love*, an organization started by an orphan for orphans, to help improve peoples' lives in a healthy and empowering way.



Jess Mora with the children of *Arms of Love*.

Connected through Marriage

Very few e-mails have touched me as deeply as this one, which I received from Juan on October 19, 2016:

Dear Robert,

I hope this e-mail finds you well.

Today I have started a new chapter in my life... you know my story, and my happiness grows more sharing it with you.

I am officially married! I am the first one in my family, and I have been really impacted by the fact that I can look at you and say, *if you made it, I can make it*. It has encouraged me to keep moving forward.

You gave your best, invested your time, and sacrificed your work and your life to create:

Hope

Future

Opportunity

I am very proud to be the Juan (example of your unconditional love).

Blessings,

Juan M.

Several months later, as I was working with Juan on completing his chapters for this book, I received another unsolicited writing...from Juan's new wife, Candace. I would like to share a portion of her story with you here.

Candace White Martinez Writes:

The first time I travelled to Nicaragua in 2005, I loved the culture, the scenery, and the adventure of it all. I had no idea that this trip would set me on a life-changing trajectory.

In 2010, I began attending a new church, and I saw that they were going on a short-term trip to work with *Arms of Love* in Nicaragua. I immediately signed up, desperate to return to Nicaragua. It was during that trip that I first met Juan Martinez, who was attending university in Managua. Six months later, I returned on another short-term trip with my church, and then in January, I stayed for a full month. In preparation for my return flight to Colorado, I realized that Juan was also flying there—and then he changed his flight so he could fly with me. During his visit to Colorado, Juan boldly told me he had feelings for me...and I told him it wasn't going to work. Nevertheless, we kept in contact, and we saw each other a few more times in the next couple of years, when I returned to *Arms of Love* on intentional visits to see my friends there.

I did not see Juan for a four-year period after early 2012. But then in January of 2016, while I was planning another trip to Nicaragua, I messaged Juan—who was living in Florida at the time—and said that I would love to see him again, since it had been such a long time. He made arrangements to be in Nicaragua during my visit, and by the end of my trip, he asked me to be in a relationship. He had to ask twice before I finally said, in a half-committal way, “I will try.”

In March, Juan came to meet my family, and in June, I flew to Nicaragua with my sister and brother-in-law to spend more time with him. By October, Juan moved to Colorado and we were married. Soon thereafter, we after adopted our first fur baby: Reyna, an Alaskan malamute. And on June 17, 2017, the following year, we had an incredible wedding in Nicaragua.

One of the many individuals that I grew close to in Nicaragua was a young woman named Katherine Vanessa, who grew up at *Arms of Love* with Juan. I met Vanessa in 2011 on my first trip to *Arms of Love*, and a deep connection sparked from the moment I met her. Our relationship has continued to grow over the past six years, and one of my favorite parts of the wedding



Candace with Juan on the day of their wedding, June 17, 2017.

was having her as one of my bridesmaids. It contributed to my realization that now, when Juan and I return to *Arms of Love*, I am not only reconnecting with friends—I am spending time with family.

Our wedding was delayed due to a rain storm, the photographer was MIA for a good period of time, and to get to the location of the ceremony, I had to bundle up my dress into the front seat of a dirty vehicle that dropped me off in the middle of everyone waiting to be seated for the wedding. I embraced every second of the chaos. After the rain passed, a beautiful double rainbow appeared in the sky during our ceremony. Juan and I felt like this was yet another confirmation that God had his hand in our story and that He destined for us to be together.

I am so thankful for Juan and the impact he has made on my life. Juan is patient, calm, forgiving, funny, adventurous, competitive, friendly, and loving. I am so excited that I get to share my life with him. I know there will be

difficult times ahead, but I am confident we can make it through anything with the support of our families and the promises God has given us.

Connected through *Arms of Love*

To round out the current chapter, I would like to share the story of Yessica, a young woman who grew up in the *Arms of Love* homes in Nicaragua and recently graduated from university with a degree in pharmaceutical chemistry. Today, Yessica is not only employed full time in her field of choice, but she is on the board of directors for *Arms of Love* Nicaragua—one of many young people who are rising up to serve as a new generation of leaders for *Arms of Love*. This is Yessica's story, in her own words.

Yessica Ramsin Writes:

Before writing a little bit about my life, I want to express my gratitude for having this opportunity. There were times when I no longer wanted to continue living, but on account of the love of God and of others who cared about me, I am able to share my life story with you today.

If you are struggling through difficult circumstances or with a painful past, I hope that my story will encourage you toward a future of hope and healing. And if you are in a position to help someone else, I hope my story will inspire you toward acts of kindness, knowing the immense and unforeseeable impact that your actions might have.

As long as I can remember, I grew up with my grandparents and my mother. I lived in a poor neighborhood, and like every girl in my community, I experienced discrimination. My grandparents were also the type of people who constantly argued—there was no love in our home. Moreover, there were many times when we had nothing to eat. Sometimes we went to the market to sell a few of our possessions, so we could have enough money to purchase food. Many days I had to go to school without any food in my stomach and without any money in my pocket. But none of those things prevented me from going to school, because I knew that my education would continue to benefit me for the remainder of my life.

The saddest moment of my childhood was when I lost my mother, at the age of eight, when she died of a stroke. As a result, my brother Luis and



This photo of Yessica was taken only a few days after she arrived at *Arms of Love* in January 2007.

I grew up with our grandparents and they became our parents. After a few more years, however, my grandparents began to get physically ill. Thankfully, I was able to finish elementary school with my grandmother's support. She even purchased the gown for my graduation, but sadly, neither of my grandparents were able to attend my graduation ceremony.

Other than the loss of my mother, the saddest thing that happened to me growing up was when another relative abused me and took my innocence. It

was difficult for me to overcome that tragedy. From that time forward, I have been cautious around men, I have guarded my heart, and it is difficult for me express my feelings. Someday, I would like to get married, have my own family, and enjoy the fullness of life, but truthfully, it is a challenge for me to be in a relationship where I make myself vulnerable to someone else.

When I began high school, I needed to start working in order to pay for my school supplies and my education. My jobs were varied and included washing other people's clothes, throwing out trash, ironing clothes for our neighbors, baby sitting, and other odd jobs. After I finished my work, I was able to do my homework, but as the situation with my family worsened, my workload grew, and maintaining my education became increasingly difficult.

When my grandparents reached a point where they were no longer able to physically care for us, my grandfather went to the government Ministry of MiFamilia, and I was referred to *Arms of Love*. I arrived at *Arms of Love* on January 8, 2007, and that date is unforgettable because from that moment on, my life completely changed.

At the outset, I was sad because I was no longer with my family. I cried for an entire week, but with the comfort I received at that time, I began to realize that I had a new family with new sisters and brothers and more grandparents, uncles, and aunts. As time went by, I became fond of my new

big family. And for the first time in many years, I was not working for other people but was able to focus on building my new future. I was blessed to be able to study, have food and clothing, and most importantly, the love of people who wanted the best for me. And while I didn't start out with a trusted friend, I found a confidant of my mischief and craziness in one of my new sisters, Pilar, and she encouraged me to study and strive for a bright future.

When I was in my third year of high school, it came to my mind to study Chemical Engineering. The great thing was that I began to yearn to become a professional girl. At the time, part of me thought that such an ambition was impossible, yet another part of me thought, "If you want to make it happen, you can do it." And I began to study harder than ever before.

At about this time, an organization called ORPHANetwork was creating a partnership with *Arms of Love* to support young people like me through university. Through their counseling, advice, and evaluations, I identified three different professions that fit my profile: law, social work, and pharmaceutical chemistry. The one I chose was Pharmaceutical Chemistry.

When I finished high school, I prepared myself for three months to take the admission test for college. If I did not qualify for my desired degree, I had no idea what I would do, so I studied as hard as possible for the admission test to study Pharmaceutical Chemistry at the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua. I qualified on my first taking of the exam, and when I saw the results, I cried of excitement because I knew I was starting another new phase of my life.

When I began attending university in Managua, however, I could not get used to being away from my new family. So, every weekend, I traveled back to Jinotepe to visit the *Arms of Love* family and spend time with them.

I chose to study Pharmaceutical Chemistry because I wanted to help other children in need. In the meantime, I wanted to serve at the same place where I grew up, at *Arms of Love*, to reciprocate for the love and care that was shown toward me. Thus, while attending university, I sometimes took care of the girls when there were events with the staff, and on other occasions, I stayed at the children's home on the weekends to help take care of the girls.

When I was 18 years old, in 2012, I lost my grandfather, who was the only father I had known. He died of thyroid cancer. I was devastated, as he

was the one who encouraged me, from an early age, to reach for a future full of triumphs. But then in the same year, a new girl joined the *Arms of Love* family, my cousin Cheydi. She had lost her mother to leukemia, and I committed myself to care for her as if she were my little sister. I soon found myself loving Cheydi very deeply, and I later had the privilege of participating in her sixth-grade graduation ceremony.

In 2013, my brother got involved in the world of addictions, right after my grandfather died. I was no longer at *Arms of Love*, as I was attending university, so I immediately became responsible for him since my grandmother was not able to. A short time later, with the help of Jess Burge from *Arms of Love*, my brother was admitted to a rehabilitation center to help him defeat his addictions, and this enabled me to finish my degree successfully.

While attending university, I participated in several pharmacy internships. Those internships provided me with the opportunity that I had longed for: the ability to work with children, so they could succeed in school and avoid the hard times that they might otherwise experience.

In 2014 and 2015, while I was finishing my college education, I began journaling about the yearnings of my heart for my future. One of those goals was to successfully finish my degree and to complete it on time. I also wanted to finish my class in English and achieve a job in the same field as my degree. And finally, I wanted to prove to myself that I could achieve all of this, and take full advantage of the opportunities presented to me, before starting a family. I achieved everything that I wrote about in my journal—and



Yessica graduating with a degree in Pharmaceutical Chemistry from the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua on March 10, 2017.



more—always believing that with God’s help and strength, I could accomplish every dream and goal that I had set before me.

I am currently working in a pharmaceutical laboratory, which is involved in the manufacturing of medicines. I am so thankful to have found a job within the field of my degree. Moreover, I was able to start my job immediately after graduating from college, and there are many young people who did not find a job that quickly. I also enjoy my work because even though it is tiring, I am learning more about life and it keeps my mind continually engaged.

As I look back on my past abuse, I can see how others deprived, devalued, and despised me—but that was not a reflection of who I was as a person. From those experiences, I learned how to move forward in my life, no matter what happens, with the help of God and the strength that he gives me every day, and to leave my hurts to God and to time.

Past experiences are just that—they are in the past. They are moments that will not return. Don’t cling to the past—take the good and discard the bad. If, in our story, there is pain and sadness, then let’s overcome that, so we become stronger having overcome our pain and our fears.

Faith has been the key to my life, because without faith, I would be unable to appreciate the good things that have come out of my life. For example, I went through some very difficult times with my brother when he gave himself over to addictions. I shed many tears and prayed for him continually that he would seek the help he needed. He eventually dedicated himself to recovering from his addictions, but only because of the love he received from Mrs. Iris Leyton and her unwavering commitment to him.

The most satisfying moment I have had was finishing my university degree. I am now continuing my education by taking a nursing course, which I know will help me in the course of my



Yessica in May 2017.

life. I am a proud graduate in Pharmaceutical Chemistry and now I have the opportunity to serve other people. And my transition years living at *Arms of Love* were among the best years of my life because I became part of a new family, who loved me and supported me unconditionally.

After years of growth, I have found purpose in my life by helping others, working in my new profession with children and the elderly as they are the most exposed to the diseases that surround us. There is only one measure of my success and satisfaction in life—the extent to which I am able to help meet the needs of others, with the love, skills, and education that I have been given.



Following her college graduation, Yessica continues to volunteer with the *Arms of Love* Children’s Home in Nicaragua and serves on the local board of directors.

Chapter 14

Continue Our Story

(Robert)

*Why should I wait for someone else?
Why don't I take a step and move forward?*

—Malala Yousafzai

“Dad, you are a hero,” Danielle told me, as we pulled into the parking lot of her high school. My daughter had just returned from her first trip visiting the *Arms of Love* Children’s Home in the Philippines, where she had spent two weeks volunteering.

I gave her a puzzled look.

“I had no idea of the impact that you’ve had,” Danielle continued. “The children at *Arms of Love* are so filled with joy—they are amazing. And whenever the kids heard that you were my Dad, they were so excited to meet me! You’re like...an orphan rock star over there.”

I have never considered myself a hero...quite to the contrary, I spent much of my life dogged by the question:

Is there anything I can do that will really make a difference?

I had a full-time career as a corporate litigator in a big law firm. I had a family. I had financial obligations. I was abused and abandoned as a child. I struggled with depression. My degree in aeronautics didn’t seem relevant. I felt trapped.

I wanted to help with needs in less developed countries, so I researched volunteer opportunities with various non-profit organizations. There were needs for doctors, dentists, teachers, psychologists, computer programmers, and many other professionals. There were positions for contractors, electricians, and all sorts of other skills. It seemed like the very last thing anyone wanted was a lawyer.

But then one day, I took a step forward.

I signed up to go on a short-term trip with my church to Costa Rica. The following year, I signed up again. The third year, I led the team. I started some relationships in Costa Rica during those trips. Moved by my experiences, I

developed a vision for a home that would care for abused and abandoned children. I shared my heart with my contacts in Costa Rica, and they connected me with someone in Nicaragua who shared my vision.

I got on a plane to Nicaragua. We designed the facilities. I wrote a check. I connected with other people, churches, and organizations who provided additional support for the effort. A year later, the first eight children moved into the first home.

One step, and then another. Every time I took a step, another opportunity arose.

Nicaragua...then the Philippines. Then Mexico. Then Senegal. Then Brazil. Countries I would have never chosen. I kept following the connections, and they kept leading me forward.

I spoke at my church. I received an invitation to speak at another church, then another. I started out giving five-minute talks. My short presentation was soon accompanied by a power point. Soon thereafter, churches began inviting me to give the main message on Sunday morning. A prominent church in Yonezawa, Japan, developed an afternoon conference around my visit.

I wrote fundraising letters and sent them to my friends. I started a newsletter. I established a charity to sustain the operation. Eight children became 100 children. A children's home program led to a university scholarship program. Community outreach programs originated from the *Arms of Love* campuses. In the aftermath of devastating earthquakes and typhoons, *Arms of Love* coordinated relief efforts.

An attorney practicing near my office in Orange County, Dave Brobeck, read about my story in the local newspaper and funded the construction of a new home for girls in Nicaragua. Other attorneys and colleagues joined in the effort. At one law firm where I was a partner, the chairman gave a personal donation every year.

Doug and Julie Effinger, a couple from Washington, moved to Nicaragua, and connected us with an entrepreneur and CEO, Andy Salisbury, who worked near my office. Together we developed a new campus in Jinotepe that allowed *Arms of Love* to expand its programs.

Another non-profit organization, ORPHANetwork, began to help fund the programs in Nicaragua. Seeing the success we were having with

our kids—including a 100% graduation rate from each grade—they applied some of our concepts to other orphanages in Nicaragua. A non-profit in Florida, Cross International, helped underwrite our educational expenses.

People from around the world connected with me through the *Arms of Love* website. I shared what we had learned, provided them with all the materials and manuals we had developed, and hosted them at our project locations in Nicaragua and the Philippines. They replicated our work by starting other children's homes in India, Africa, and elsewhere.

Over the past 20 years, hundreds of abused and abandoned kids became part of a new family at *Arms of Love*. They became connected with thousands of people around the world who—together—helped change their lives. Young people like Juan, Myla, Anzelie, and Yessica have shared in this book how their lives were transformed as a result of those connections. Their lives were changed by the influence of local teachers, social workers, pastors, government workers, and houseparents. Their lives were changed by the financial, relational, and prayer support of people around the world, some of whom became their “child sponsors” or flew to the project locations to visit and to volunteer their time. Their lives were changed by volunteers in the U.S. who performed administrative tasks that included data entry, updating websites, accounting, and stuffing envelopes.

Then those kids grew up... Juan started a business and used the profits to support the children's home in Nicaragua. Anzelie fulfilled her lifelong dream of becoming a teacher. Yessica became a pharmacist to help children and the elderly receive needed medical care. Myla impacts the lives of hundreds of employees through her position in human resources. Countless other young adults pursued other careers, started families of their own, and had unique impacts on their communities.

All of that is just a tiny slice of what has happened... and it can be traced back to a single day in 1968, when my adoptive parents took me home from a children's shelter.

Looking back, I realize that I *did* have useful experience and skills, I just didn't appreciate what they were or how they could be used. As a partner in a law firm, I had relationships with people in many different fields and disciplines. I was connected with people who had access to financial resources and

relevant educational backgrounds. I had learned principles of leadership and management. I was a skilled writer and an oral advocate. Those skills laid the foundation for starting an organization that had global reach.

But nothing that happened was planned in advance. I just took a step forward. Then another. And then another. To the extent that plans developed, they were organized around the direction in which events and relationships were leading me.

Simple Acts

A single act can have global impact. “I alone cannot change the world,” wrote Mother Teresa, “but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples.” Nor can we leave it to someone else—in the words of Mahatma Ghandi, “We must become the change we wish to see in the world.”

Myla put it well when she wrote,

A person does not need to be rich in material things in order to be kind.

Every one of us can be kind in simple ways.

Simple gestures of kindness mean a lot to the people we touch.

For me, it changed my life.

I have learned a great deal over the past 20 years, as I worked as a volunteer, operated a charity, raised a family, and maintained a career. Some things worked well, a lot of things could have been done better, and I made more than my share of mistakes. In this final chapter, I will share a few of the things I learned.

A Principled Framework

Over the years, I developed an ideological and practical framework for my efforts, which is centered on three principles: compassion, mercy, and justice.

Compassion motivates our actions. Compassion is a deep movement within our souls, a breaking of our hearts, when we see someone in need. It necessarily moves us to action on the other person’s behalf. By cultivating compassion in our lives, we can increase our impact. The painful experiences of our past and present can be utilized as one means for increasing our compassion.

Mercy governs our actions. Mercy extends our compassion equally to everyone in need, regardless of their background, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic class, past conduct, or any other factor or circumstances. Mercy levels the playing field for our compassion. Compassion integrated with mercy sees only the person and what may be lacking. Forgiveness empowers mercy, because when we let go of the wrongs committed against us, our compassion can be extended equally to others irrespective of our past history with them.

Justice is what our actions accomplish. Justice is advanced every time we bring wholeness or restoration to a life or a situation that is lacking something that it used to have or that it ought to have in a world that is just. It is providing a family for the orphan, a home to the homeless, medical care for the sick, freedom for the oppressed or those trafficked in slavery, food for the hungry, companionship for those aching of loneliness in a nursing home or prison. But that is just the beginning—doing justice includes empowering and equipping others to maintain that wholeness going forward, independent of others.

Cultivate compassion. Show mercy. Do justice.

As we move toward the end of this chapter, I will also share additional principles that I have found to be foundational to maximizing impact: how to effectively partner with others, redefining how we measure “success,” and the importance of understanding our lives and our actions within the broader story that we are a part of.

Compassion: The Engine Within Us

Be compassionate toward yourself first. We must love and care for ourselves in order to maximize our capacity to love and care for others. We can only give out of what we have. By caring for ourselves physically, emotionally, and mentally, we increase our capacity to care for the needs of others—or to simply be a friend. Conversely, if we only focus on the needs of others, we will quickly burn out. We must recognize our limits. We will not, and cannot, accomplish everything or meet every need. We were never intended to.

You are qualified. Compassion never reads our personal resumes before moving us to action. We each have the ability to love others unconditionally—it involves a choice and a commitment to maintaining that choice. It isn’t

easy—but it's within our power. And when our love touches another person's life, the long-term effect can be exponential. We should never allow our perception of our shortcomings to limit our vision.

Nor should we limit our endeavors to what we can accomplish on our own. When we partner with others in a given endeavor, the magnitude or scope of our direct contribution does not limit the outcome. Whether we are casting a vision or joining a vision, when we work with others, far more can be accomplished than we might ever dream of.

Find purpose in your past. Our past neither limits us nor defines us, but it is a part of our identity and it can empower us. For example, our painful experiences and struggles can be utilized in positive ways when they help us relate to others who are experiencing similar situations. Across the world, we have more in common than appearances suggest. Our exterior circumstances may be radically different, but our inner journeys have much in common. Like threads of many varied and brilliant colors and textures, our common experiences can weave us together into something strong and beautiful.

Every day presents us with new choices and opportunities. We are rooted in our pasts, but like a plant growing toward the sunlight, we can always grow in new directions, take new paths, develop new gifts, and start new relationships.

Cultivate compassion in your life. It is one thing to read that there are millions of children living on the streets...it is another thing to spend time with those children. We cultivate compassion in our lives by putting ourselves in situations where it will be triggered.

When you observe needs around you, what situations break your heart in the deepest way? Rather than avoiding such people or situations, seek them out. Be intentional about starting relationships with people who are experiencing challenges. Follow your heart, wherever it leads, and then allow your compassion to move you to action. Compassion is like a muscle—the more we exercise it, the stronger it becomes, and the more we accomplish.

Focus your compassion on specific individuals. When we hear about a need and it is merely abstract or conceptual, it may not trigger a compassionate response. The magnitude of the need overwhelms us and we freeze. We feel powerless to respond—and as long as a need remains without a face, it

may be easy to ignore. But when we focus on a specific individual—we know their name, see their face, meet them in person—our compassion locks in and we are moved to action. It is important, therefore, to focus on meeting the needs of one specific person at a time.

Mercy: Our Posture Toward Others

Value others equally. The strength of our compassion and our compassionate response should be blind to the faults, mistakes, or shortcomings of others. When we focus on a person's circumstances or past wrongdoing, we may be reluctant to help them. Others may be more sympathetic or seem more deserving. We need to look beyond everything else and focus solely on the inherent value of people. Only then will our compassion have the freedom to move us equally on anyone's behalf. That is the heart of mercy.

Moreover, those who come from the most challenging backgrounds are often those who have the greatest potential. Consider Anzelie, Myla, and Juan, for example. By any objective measure, the world would view them as a lost cause. Their families gave up on them. Their communities ostracized them. But when genuine love was sown into their lives, they developed into incredible young adults who are now serving and loving others in profound ways.

Act without expectations. When we value people equally based on who they are, not what they can do, then our compassion is extended equally to others and our actions are no longer governed by our expectations. Acts of love and kindness impact others when they are purely volitional and motivated by how much we value the other person. When we mix our motives with expectations, others will perceive that our conduct is driven by what they potentially offer us, rather than our love for them and how we value them. People cannot see our intentions when they are obscured by our expectations.

Love is not a feeling—it is a choice to embrace the entirety of a person for who they are, to see such enormous value in them that we will sacrifice anything to advance their interests and help them realize their dreams. Love never depends on what the other person says or does. It never seeks or expects anything in return. It simply reaches into the greatest depths of a person's soul and whispers you are precious...you are valued...you are loved.

Forgiveness is part of the foundation for mercy. When we have been wronged by others, forgiveness is the personal decision not to hold that wrong against them. Forgiving someone does not mean that we excuse their behavior or that we diminish, in any way, that it was wrong. Rather, it is a letting go, a decision to move on. Forgiveness releases us from our past, so we can focus on the future. It is empowering and freeing. It releases hatred and bitterness that will otherwise usurp our energies and diminish our joy. And when we let go of the wrongs done against us, it puts others on equal footing and allows our compassion to move us equally toward meeting the needs of those around us.

Do Justice

Don't "help" others—walk alongside them. When we adopt a mindset that we are “helping” another person, it tends to set us up as their savior. It has the potential to diminish the value of the other person, reinforce power differentials, and create dependencies.

Rather than “helping” someone—be with them. Walk alongside them. Love them and relate to them as people of equal value. Learn from each other. Do not determine their direction or path for them, but empower them to realize their own dreams, based on their own hearts, identities, culture, values, and gifts. Contribute toward bringing restoration and wholeness into their lives, in a way that will meet existing needs, but do so in a way that reinforces their value and empowers them.

Start with your family. Sometimes the greatest poverty of feeling unloved, unwanted, and uncared for is right in our midst. Don't venture beyond the front door until the needs at home are met first. Our immediate family—particularly spouses and children—are our first responsibility. Moreover, we need to care for our family first so that we have a strong foundation for blessing others. When our family is behind us and working alongside us, supporting us in every way that they can, it enables us to be far more effective and productive in loving and serving others outside of our family.

This is an area where I have had significant shortcomings. When I first had the idea for starting children's homes in other countries, Kristen was excited about being part of my vision. But she wanted to develop things

slowly and deliberately, whereas I wanted to accomplish as much as possible as quickly as possible. Taking the time to negotiate a common plan with Kristen, when we approached things very differently, only felt like a hindrance. So I raced ahead, making unilateral decisions about countries, staff, budgets, and travel, while leaving Kristen behind. Literally, at home with our young children. That planted seeds of resentment that would later cause challenges in our marriage, rather than laying a strong foundation for success by keeping Kristen and my family involved from beginning to end.

Serve in the context of relationships. Too often, we become task-focused and project-oriented rather than people-focused and relationship-oriented. If a person has a need, they usually welcome having that need met; however, if meeting the need happens in the context of a *relationship*, and it embodies and expresses one person's love and care of another, something more powerful is at work, because the other person knows they are valued.

If you are moved by compassion to meet another's need, do so in the context of your personal relationship with them. Where that is not feasible (e.g., due to geographic distance or other factors), then empower, equip, or enable someone who is in relationship with the other person, who can be your proxy in loving them and caring for them.

Empower others to fight injustice and win their battles. We need to be careful not to fight other people's battles for them, which can be disempowering. Our actions and strategies must be designed to empower others to take on injustice and prevail. Moreover, we must empower others to achieve their goals, which may be different from ours.

Depending on our role within power structures, our influence, and our access to authority, there is often a place and a role for our advocacy. Oftentimes, injustice cannot be addressed in the absence of advocacy. Battles are not fought and won alone. But the result of our advocacy must be putting people into a position where they can then continue to advance on their own. So, if we can exercise influence to remove an injustice, we should do so, but once the playing field has been leveled, we need to support people in excelling and advancing on their own merits.

Focus. We may be inclined to target large-scale problems or the broader, long-term impact that we hope to achieve. But doing so can cause us to

stretch ourselves and our resources too thin. The greatest impact we can have comes from focusing our love, care, time, energy, and resources in the lives of a discrete number of people. Love spread too thin may not only lack long term impact, it may not be love at all. Genuine love demands our focus.

When we invest our lives and our resources in other people, we should do it well and to the best of our abilities. We need to focus. Not only will our impact increase, but our efforts will reflect the depth of how much we value the other person. We can scale up as resources permit—but we must also remain committed to the relationships we start. Investing in the entire person—and remaining committed to them—requires the most from us, but it is most likely to have a lasting impact and change the trajectory of their lives.

See the potential in others. I started *Arms of Love* based on the following premise: that the greatest potential often lies in those who have experienced the greatest poverty of feeling unwanted, unloved, and uncared for. My heart was to reach out to children who came from the most difficult circumstances, who had experienced the deepest pain and the greatest trauma, and bring them into a family environment. An environment where love would be poured into their lives, and they would be treasured and valued. Where they would receive a good education, individualized care, and have their needs met by people who genuinely cared about them. I believed that those kids were not only desperate for care, but that they had the potential to develop a special compassion and capacity to love others—and to have the greatest impact on their families and communities.

Rather than focusing solely on those who need a small “boost” to move past a current obstacle or challenge, reach out to those in the greatest need. Recognize their potential—and help them realize it.

You cannot stay protected and take on injustice. Any time we advocate on behalf of others who have been unjustly treated, we will encounter the power structures that allowed, enabled, or caused their mistreatment—whether it is within a family, a community, the legal system, the workplace, or otherwise. We will meet resistance. There will be a cost.

When people are unfairly or unjustly treated, oftentimes someone else is benefiting from the injustice. When we fight injustice, our actions threaten to take that “benefit” away from that person. If they are knowingly participating

in the injustice, they will resist any change to the situation. But people are worth fighting for. They are worth any price.

Be intentional. Acts of love, kindness, and justice don't usually happen spontaneously. Perhaps, with practice, they become natural. But I have always found it necessary to be intentional. If I am not intentional in being kind and thoughtful, the busyness of my life takes over. I become immersed in my daily activities, fighting fires at work, getting everything done that needs doing. And then I fail to reach out and touch others.

We must ask ourselves the question: are we being intentional about pursuing what we find meaningful and purposeful in life, or are we just allowing life to happen to us? It takes a conscious choice to accomplish justice on behalf of others, especially when it has no direct impact on our own lives or livelihood.

Take a first step. Oftentimes, we hesitate to become involved or we fail to engage because we are not sure where to start. Perhaps we are overwhelmed with the magnitude of the needs around us, or conversely, with our own competing obligations in life. We may not feel a clear sense of calling, or we may lack a vision for our long-term role or contribution. When we find ourselves in those situations, we can still take a step and see where it leads us. What connections are made as a result? What new opportunities arise? What needs do we become aware of? Where are our hearts directing us? Then take another step. Then another.

As we move forward, our knowledge, insights, and connections will increase. Based on that, a longer-term vision may evolve, and we can develop a plan to further implement that vision. Defining a vision and developing a plan are immensely valuable in that they provide us with a basis for making longer-term commitments, partnering with others, and allocating our resources. Along the way, we must adopt the posture of learners, continually reassessing our plans and strategies based on new information and changing circumstances. Adaptation and innovation are key to long-term success.

But it all starts with taking a first step. We can only go wrong when we do nothing.

Partner with Others

Partner with others who share your heart, vision, and values. We can each make a difference—but we are most effective when we partner with people who have complimentary resources, strengths, expertise, and experience. We are limited in what we can do working alone, but there is no limit to what we can accomplish working together. The needs invariably exceed our resources and we must be aware of our limits. Teaming with others enables us to distribute the work, avoid burnout, and accomplish more.

It is important to partner with those who share our vision, values, and heart. When people share a common vision, they pull in the same direction and complement each others' efforts. When people share the same values, there is greater alignment and synergy in how people work toward their shared vision, and fewer disagreements over the mechanics of getting there. And a common heart and passion gives the team a shared emotional energy that leads to people understanding, encouraging, and supporting one another.

Develop a horizontal team of leaders. When a team shares the same vision, values, and heart, a strong hierarchical structure of management is not needed for the members of the team to maximize their effectiveness and productivity. Each person on the team can have a unique role, designed around their personal talents and strengths, and exercise leadership within that defined role. Roles of team members should be designed in a way that is complementary, so people can be as autonomous as possible. Coordination is needed, but strong communications within the team can accomplish this together with someone tasked with the coordination, a role that can be fixed in one individual or rotated within the group.

Releasing each person into leadership is feasible when roles are well defined and everyone on the team has shared vision and values. When each person is empowered to develop and implement their own vision within a defined area of responsibility, the creativity and initiative of each person on the team is unleashed. More is accomplished, less energy is expended on management, and because each person can recognize and appreciate the difference they are making, they are excited and energized by their contributions. An organization thrives when each member of the group is supported

in implementing and owning a part of the work that they have specific skills, vision, and passion to accomplish.

Follow paths of relationship. It is invariably most effective to build on our existing connections and relationships of trust. People often ask, “How did you end up working in five different countries in different parts of the world?” I followed paths of relationship. As I moved forward, I encountered people who shared my heartbeat, and then we found ways to work together. People that I developed relationships with introduced me to other people. It was organic. It was messy at times. Relationships always are. But the results were always worth it.

Redefine Success

Invest in people and in relationships. When evaluating where we should invest our time, we ought to prioritize what has the greatest and most lasting value: people. If we truly want to make a lasting difference in the world, it will only happen through the difference we make in peoples’ lives. We often get so caught up in doing things that we forget the importance of just being with people. Our greatest influence happens when we are present with others, listening, loving, and caring, and yet we spend most of our time running around, trying to get as many things done as possible. I should know. My greatest regret is spending too much time doing, and not enough time just being in the moment.

As I was writing this chapter, I received the news that a friend had committed suicide. One of my last memories of Ron is standing next to him at a concert with Lynyrd Skynyrd performing Free Bird, “If I leave here tomorrow, will you still remember me...” I do remember you, Ron, but more importantly, you remind me of the importance of making ourselves available to the hurting people around us.

The most valuable things in life cannot be quantitatively measured. If people and relationships are the most important thing we can invest in, then it follows that we should not—and cannot—apply quantitative metrics to determine our level of success in life.

I recall a conversation with a foundation that was considering a grant to *Arms of Love* to build a new children’s home. The foundation asked how many

children one of our homes would accommodate. I said that each home had six to 10 children residing in it, in addition to a house parent couple and other staff, to simulate a family environment for the children. I also explained the range of cost involved to build one of our homes in certain other countries.

The other individual responded by saying, “Thank you for sharing that data with me, but *Arms of Love* will not qualify for a grant from our foundation.”

“Why do we not qualify?” I inquired.

“Because *Arms of Love* does not satisfy our ROI parameters,” the person responded. “You have explained that for x dollars, you would build a home that only accommodates six to ten children. For that same amount of money, we can purchase a warehouse in Russia that will accommodate 50 children.”

I was stunned. The potential donor had articulated no interest in—and had asked no questions regarding—the quality of care that we provided. His only concern was how many children could be housed under a roof for every dollar spent. And that was the end of our conversation.

How do you quantitatively measure the value of a person’s healing from past trauma or abuse? How do you quantify the impact on another person’s hope, value, and identity that comes from knowing they are loved and cared for? The most valuable things in life cannot be quantitatively measured.

The fact that we cannot measure things of value provides yet another reason why we should never decide who to invest in based on our expectation of the return we might receive. Such an action does not value the other person for who they are. It does not affirm them. It does not hear them. It does not see them. It does not love them.

When our actions are motivated by how much we value others, our actions are inherently valuable. When we value another person based on who they are, and we act on that value, our actions have inherent value. How the other person responds does not take anything away from the value of our actions. Whether something concretely and directly results from our actions is likewise irrelevant. When we live in this way, success does not depend on a particular outcome and is never measured by the results.

Success is measured by what we sow, where we sow, and the continuity of our sowing—it has no relationship to the return we receive or the results we perceive.

Sow love and kindness. Invest in others. Value and appreciate people for who they are. When we do that, we find true success in our lives, no matter what the apparent outcome.

Our Lives Are Part of a Larger Story

Your identity is reflected in the entirety of your life story—and the rest of your story has yet to be written. It is important for us to embrace the entirety of our life story, the pain and the joy, the light and the darkness—it is only in doing so that we learn who we are and we can bring the entirety of ourselves to bear on the present and our future.

Our past is a part of who we are, but it does not define us, limit us, or dictate our future. We are not defined by where we are at today, or where we were in the past, but by the totality of the road that we travel. When we are able to see how the events of our past, present, and future all contribute to our identities, we can embrace the entirety of our lives as having value and purpose.

No matter who we are today, our lives are unfinished stories. It does not matter what our past might consist of, we can finish writing our story and take the plot and the characters in new directions. There is always a new opportunity to live life differently, to make a fresh start, to redeem ourselves, and to realize our value by initiating new acts of love toward others.

Love and faith connect us with the larger story in which we are a part. Love, by its nature, connects us with something bigger than ourselves. Love originates outside of us, connects us with those around us, and affirms the intrinsic value within us. When we receive that love, it can be transformative and turn our hearts outward toward others. Love given and received is given again. Love only moves in one direction: forward.

If love is something that is bigger than ourselves, then faith is that which embraces it. Faith is our response to someone or something outside of ourselves, which may be based on our experience but exists beyond our direct knowledge. For example, how can you know that another person loves you?

You can examine the evidence, by their words and their actions. But you do not know what is in their heart. We can only receive love through faith. And when love and faith combine, they create bonds between us and others that are stronger than any other—the only bonds that can survive long after our passing.

In each of our stories, love and faith played critical roles in our journeys. They were both completely absent at times. We questioned whether anyone could possibly love us or see anything of value in us. We also questioned the existence and nature of a God who would allow such horrific abuse to happen to us. But over the course of time, we saw evidence that we were genuinely loved by people who entered our lives. We saw, in that love, a reflection of something greater. We saw evidence that there might be a plan and a purpose for our lives. In our own ways, in the midst of our struggles, we opened our hearts and minds to the possibility of God's love for us, and God met us in a way that we found palpable and real. Those experiences led us back to a renewed faith that we *were* valuable and loved, both by God and by others.

As our confidence in God's love for us deepened, our lives became anchored by a love and a reality that could never again be stolen from us, one that depended neither on ourselves nor the people in our lives. As C.S. Lewis wrote, "Though our feelings come and go, God's love for us does not." And from Brennan Manning, whose writings about God's grace have been my life preserver in the darkest times, "Define yourself radically as one beloved by God. This is the true self. Every other identity is illusion."^[7]

Regardless of our personal faith, religion, or spirituality, when we recognize that we are no longer limited by what originates from within us—that there is something that originates outside of us that can enter our lives, change us, and empower us—it opens up new and unlimited possibilities. The people we can become. The impact we can have. The dreams we can realize.

Love and faith work together to break the chains that would otherwise limit our vision for our lives and imprison us within our perception of our intrinsic abilities.

Derive purpose from the larger story in which you are a part. We are part of a larger story. When we appreciate that, we can begin to understand the far-reaching impact that our actions can have. We can develop a heart that

lives for others. We can follow a vision that strives for something greater than ourselves. We can live with purpose.

Consider what it is like to ride in a hot air balloon. When you are moving with the wind, you cannot feel the wind. Without observing the ground or anything that is fixed in the environment around you, you would believe that you are completely stationary. But when you observe the world around you, you can tell that you are moving—and the speed and the direction in which you are moving. So it is with life: we cannot know our purpose, e.g., the speed or direction in which we are moving or where we are headed, unless and until we are aware of the bigger story that we are a part of.

Marian Wright Edelman overcame immense odds, segregation, and discrimination to become the first black woman admitted to the Mississippi bar. She later established the Children's Defense Fund and became one of the strongest voices for disadvantaged children in America. Her experience of injustice—the context of her life experience—gave her purpose. It fueled her fight for justice on behalf of others. Edelman quoted her father as saying, "If you follow the need, you'll never lack for a useful purpose."

When I was abandoned as a toddler, my life could have gone in many different directions—but I was adopted by a couple who provided me with a home and a good education. It changed the trajectory of my life. When I consider the direction my life took, and the countless lives that have been impacted since, I see God's hand and provision. And I see purpose.

The "coincidences" in my life are too numerous to tally: whether it be the "chance" one-time meeting with my father Norman before his death, the one-time meeting with my mother Teresa shortly before her unexpected death, the unusual convergence of people in my life on the last day I spent with my adoptive mother Cora, the connections that led to the establishment of each of the *Arms of Love* homes, or any one of numerous other such events. I cannot escape the conclusion that my journey has been infused with purpose and that it consists of something beyond a sequence of completely random and improbable events.

My experience of God has been a deeply personal one. There have been periods of time—often extended ones—when God has felt distant and removed, if not entirely absent. And yet there have also been moments when

God felt so close to me, his presence was palpable. This was reinforced by those occasions when I felt God speaking to my heart, including that meeting on August 14, 1998, when I first got the vision for *Arms of Love*. When God feels distant and nowhere to be found, I hang on to those moments and memories. I recall what God has already accomplished through my life, and seeing purpose in my past, I trust there is purpose in my future.

Your spirituality or faith journey may be very different from mine, but it is nonetheless important for us to appreciate that our journeys are part of a bigger story which intersects with the journeys of many others. Viewing ourselves within that larger story brings purpose to our lives and expands our vision to encompass unlimited possibilities. The ripple effect of our lives and the love and kindness we show to others can never be underestimated. The stories of this book provide just a few examples of this principle.

My story also continues in the lives of my children. My oldest, Jessica, recently graduated from UC Berkeley with a double major in math and theatre, is studying for a master's degree in social entrepreneurship at USC, and has started a career in teaching. My son, Andrew, is pursuing a degree in sociology at Point Loma Nazarene University and plans to enter law enforcement. This past summer, he enjoyed working full time in a kids program at a local church.



Danielle and Stephanie Benson have volunteered at *Arms of Love* in the Philippines during the past few summers. In the above photo, they relaxed with one of the children, Ellysa, after the memorial service for Director Randy Pepito.

Danielle is a freshman at William Jessup University studying psychology and plans to become a therapist. My youngest, Stephanie, is a freshman at Crean Lutheran High School and is very involved in dance ministries. I am excited to see where their future journeys will take them. For whatever I have done wrong in my life, if I did anything that helped inspire my kids toward loving and serving others...it was all worth it.

Align every part of your life with your values, your purpose, and your identity. There was a time when I kept my life highly compartmentalized. Career, family, friends, and charitable work were mostly separate. To some extent that made sense, but in other ways, it created tensions and inefficiencies. In recent years, I've made efforts to create alignment and synergies between the different parts of my life—and while sometimes life can be a bit messier, overall, I find it more fulfilling.

If you are engaged in charitable work, find opportunities to involve your family and interested co-workers. Develop friendships in the context of your non-profit work, people who share your heart and passion for a particular cause. In your workplace, care about the people around you, be aware of needs that you might be able to meet, look for opportunities to encourage others, and be available as a friend. Value the *people* that you meet in the course of your business, rather than focusing exclusively on the business side of the relationship. Bring your identity into every part of your life, and welcome others into yours. Form genuine relationships wherever possible.

A friend and mentor of mine, Greg White, accompanied me on a business trip to Taiwan many years ago. "Every time you meet someone," Greg told me, "Don't just focus on potential business opportunities. Perhaps a business relationship will develop, but maybe there is an entirely different purpose to your meeting. Always ask how you can help and remain open to every possibility—otherwise, you might miss the real reason you are there."

For every act of love you receive, forward that love into the life of another. We can positively influence the trajectories of peoples' lives through the depth of the love and commitment that we express in our relationships, whether as a relative, friend, colleague, or mentor. But no less valuable are discrete acts of love, kindness, and generosity toward others, which can serve as small building blocks in their lives as we affirm their value.

Acts of love and kindness are never futile. Nothing has as strong a ripple effect as an act of love that springs purely from the heart, expects nothing in return, passes no judgment, and seeks only to bless and affirm another person. One of my favorite passages comes from the book of Ecclesiastes where Solomon writes,

Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days.
Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you know not what
disaster may happen on earth ...

In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good. Ecclesiastes 11:1-2, 6.

The way in which we sow into the lives of others is a reflection of who we are, and our identity never depends on the results. Thus:

- Sow acts of love and kindness.
- Sow generously, consistently, and continually.
- Sow without any expectation of results or return. Don't look back and try to measure the outcome.
- Sow into the life of each person you meet, without judging whether the "soil" appears rich and fertile, or dry and barren.
- *Never stop sowing.*

If feeling unwanted, unloved, and uncared for is the greatest poverty, then unconditional acts of love can restore what was lost. Nothing renews the human condition like love that is solely focused on the value of another—the knowledge that someone else truly understands, values, and embraces who we really are, without any desire for us to change or reciprocate.

When we receive such love, it resonates within us. Our personal value and identity is affirmed and then reverberates throughout our lives as we give that love to others—in our families, in our friendships, in our workplaces, and beyond.

Love is intentional—even when we do not feel valued or loved ourselves, we can make the choice to value and love others. When we build up others, invest in their lives, and empower them toward their goals and dreams, it increases our own sense of joy, purpose, and fulfillment.

Take a step—Then another

“Taking a new step, uttering a new word, is what people fear most,” wrote Fyodor Dostoevsky. And yet, any time that I have taken a new step, if I was following my heart...and was guided by compassion, mercy, and justice...I never regretted it. Even when I failed—and failed spectacularly. I have tried to learn from my mistakes and to do better. But acts of love leave no room for regret. The only things I have regretted in my life are the steps that I didn’t take.

Reflect on the acts of love that have been sown into your life. How have they impacted you and your journey? Has the love sown into your life given birth to a particular compassion or empathy toward others? Can you see an alignment that points your heart in a particular direction? What opportunities exist for you to sow love into the lives of those whose journeys intersect your own?

Each of us who have shared our stories in this book realize that we would not be where we are at today—and may not be here at all – except for the people who entered our lives and valued us. Loved us. Cared for us. Encouraged us. Empowered us.

It is our hope that our stories will inspire you toward new acts of love and kindness, because we fervently believe, based on our personal experience:

You can make a difference.

If you are inspired by our stories toward new acts of love and kindness, then you are writing the next chapter of our story.

Just take a step.

A step of faith.

A step of opening your hand and letting go of what you have.

A step of opening your arms to wrap around the lonely.

A step of opening your doors to someone caught in the storm.

A step of opening your heart to the hurting.

A step of opening your life to the possibilities.

Just take a step...then another.

Continue our story.

Take a step and *Love Forward*.



Kristen and Robert Benson in Jamaica in August 2016.



The Benson family at Danielle's high school graduation in June 2017.

*Faith, hope, and love abide, these three;
But the greatest of these is love.*

—I Corinthians 13:13

Endnotes

- [1] Mother Teresa. *Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the 'Saint of Calcutta'*. New York: Doubleday, 2007. Print.
- [2] Manning, Brennan, *Abba's Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1994. Print.
- [3] Jean-Matthew III, Tamba. "Senegal children face modern-day slavery." *Al Jazeera.com*, 1 Sept. 2014. Web. 23 Sept. 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2014/08/children-senegal-africa-modern-slaves-beggars-islam-alm-2014821114722759241.html>
- [4] The Story Behind the Peace Prayer of St. Francis." *The Franciscan Archive*. Web. 23 Sept. 2017, franciscan-archive.org/patriarcha/peace.html
- [5] Theodore Roosevelt, "The Man in The Arena," excerpt from the speech "Citizenship In A Republic" delivered in Paris, France on 23 April, 1910. *Theodore-Roosevelt.com*. Web. 23 Sept. 2017, www.theodore-roosevelt.com/trsorbonnespeech.html
- [6] Sforza, Teri, "A Global Embrace," *Orange County Register*, 3 March 2007. Print.
- [7] Manning, Brennan, *Abba's Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1994. Print.

Love Forward Scholarship Program

Beginning in 2007, *Arms of Love* developed a scholarship program (the “Independent Living Program”) that enabled Myla, Juan, Anzelie, Yessica, and others who graduated from the *Arms of Love Children's Homes* to continue their education, make a successful transition to adulthood, and pursue their dreams. Unfortunately, many students who age-out of orphanages when they turn 18 lack the same opportunities and are pulled back into cycles of poverty and abuse.

In 2017, Robert established a new section 501(c)(3) charitable organization, *Love Forward*, to provide a higher education to students who were separated from family due to death, abandonment, or abuse, including gender-based violence. This new program is receiving students who graduated from the *Arms of Love Children's Homes*, but is also receiving referrals from dozens of other orphanages, crises centers, and social services organizations. Through the *Love Forward Scholarship Program*, such students are supported in their transition to a successful future through a combination of a college education, vocational training, mentoring, internships, and/or professional networking.

With your support, we can do more than change the present for abandoned and abused youth—we can change their future. In 2018, *Love Forward* is launching new scholarship programs in Nicaragua, the Philippines, and India. A new website will be launched in early 2018 to support these new programs. For more information and to support this new initiative, visit www.loveforward.com.

