

DOWN HOME: Children of Zacapa: God bless them all

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Pichi grabbed my attention. Alex fired my imagination. Manuel warmed and broke my heart.

They live in an orphanage in Zacapa, Guatemala. I met them when a group from my church, First Baptist in Lewisville, spent most of a week there. We'll send three mission teams per year for at least three years to Zacapa, working in cooperation with Buckner International.

Pichi came up to me as we entered the compound. She didn't say a word, but she spoke with the biggest, brownest 4-year-old eyes I've ever seen. She smiled; I got weak in the knees.

Later, Pichi nestled into my lap as we listened to a Bible story delivered in English and translated into Spanish. She didn't squirm, but leaned into my chest and traced the outline of my fingers with her own. If the laws of two countries didn't prohibit it, I'm sure I could've been convinced to buy an airline ticket and bring her home to Texas.

Alex amazed me two minutes after I met him. My friend Jamie pulled out a parachute, and Alex immediately realized the possibilities for fun and how to lead the other children—even before Jamie could give instructions.

“Una casita!” Alex screamed, and all the children flipped the parachute up, ran underneath and pulled it down behind them, giggling uncontrollably. When Jamie and I threw whiffle balls onto the parachute for the children to bounce, Alex figured out how to time their motions so the balls would fly high, and he called out instructions, which the others followed with gusto.

I couldn’t help but wonder how far Alex will fly—if the uncertainty of life in an orphanage doesn’t zap him of his zest for life.

Manuel appears to have been zapped already. He’s part of a trio identified as “the bullies,” not so much because they prey on smaller children, but because they project callous indifference. A scar down the back of his head indicates Manuel is acquainted with pain and possibly violence, in addition to neglect.

Manuel attracted my attention early and often. The more I watched him, the more I saw new dimensions to his personality. Like how he always said “thank you”—in English—for kindnesses, and the way he and William and Jeffrey looked after each other, and how he made eye contact when he talked. I saw a lonely little boy underneath that tough-guy façade.

“Manuel,” I called to him one afternoon. “Habla Ingles?”

“Poquito,” he replied, holding his thumb and forefinger close and smiling for the first time.

We stood there, discussing English words he knows and Spanish words I know. I noticed his arm around my waist, and I put mine over his shoulders. No more Mr. Tough Guy; no more Gringo Americano. Just a little boy and an older friend whose heart remains in that orphanage.

I can’t pray without recalling the children of Zacapa.

-Marv Knox

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