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An act of kindness, a fulfillment of the Gospel

Life is full of surprises. Lives that started on one path are abruptly thrust onto new, unexpected journeys. Even acts of kindness can seem surprising.

Sometimes the world is altered because of a single, simple act of kindness.

Such was the case for Father William B. Wasson. Because of his life's work, the lives of more than 18,000 orphaned, neglect-

ed and at-risk children in Latin America and the Caribbean have been changed for the better. Through an organization called

Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos (NPH), all of these children have been given the opportunity to walk along a newer, brighter path than before.

If not for divine providence, Father Wasson might not have become a priest. Declined for ordination in the United States because of poor health, Father Wasson was spending time in Mexico when the bishop of Cuernavaca, Mexico, took notice of this man who always came to daily Mass. The bishop and the Holy Spirit interceded and Father Wasson was ordained in 1953.

In 1954, Father Wasson's spiritual path changed when a young boy stole money from the donation box in his parish. The boy, who claimed he was hungry and needed money for food, was sent to court. Instead of pressing charges, Father Wasson asked the judge for custody of the boy. His reason

was profoundly simple: Putting the boy in jail would not solve his problems and would only further embed him in the cycle of poverty. By the end of the following week, the judge sent Father Wasson eight more boys, and NPH was born.

The boys initially lived in the parish rectory. However, the number of children kept growing and Father Wasson quickly ran out of space. He then rented a defunct brewery and, with the help of his dedicated staff, converted it into a home. In time, NPH Mexico grew to its present arrangement, which now includes facilities in five different cities.

Father Wasson derived the NPH name from the Gospels. *Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos*, which means "our little brothers and sisters" in English, is drawn from the parable of the judgment of the nations. (Matthew 25:31-46) The name comes from verse

40, “And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me,” or “*alguno de los más pequeños de estos mis hermanos*” in Spanish.

Over the years, Father Wasson expanded NPH and founded eight more homes in Honduras, Haiti, Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Peru and Bolivia. Though each home has its own unique creation story, they all are bound by the same foundational thread: need. Extreme poverty, among many other mitigating factors, has brought children to the NPH homes. However, not every child at NPH is a true orphan; many children may have at least one living parent who is unable to adequately support and take care of his or her children.

Regardless of their backgrounds, the children come to NPH and are received with welcoming arms. It is important to note that NPH is more than just an orphanage, and is quite the opposite of the Oliver Twist-inspired image of a desolate institution. It is, instead, a family, evidenced by children who are not biologically related who refer to each other as siblings. All are lovingly cared for by care-givers called Tío and Tía, which means uncle and aunt in English, respectively. These care-givers take the role of parents, making sure that traditional parental duties such as clothing, feeding, homework supervision, and having fun are done.

Tía Maritza Ruballos has been working with NPH El Salvador for 10 years as a care-giver and is currently the sub-director of Casa Santa María, which is the girls house. When asked about her experiences in caring for the children, she said, “Being in the *Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos* family is a great blessing. Aside from being an employee, it is an unforgettable experience to live with so many children, to know that you can help them and, at

the same time, learn from them. I thank God for the blessing to have lived and worked for 10 years for this great family.”

NPH operates under five guiding principles: work, responsibility, sharing, security and love. Work takes the form of personal and household chores, as every child has his or her own task to complete. *Pequeños* are asked to give, at minimum, one year of service back to the home upon completing their schooling. It is not only a form of thanksgiving, but also a way to help the home. Year-of-service youths work in multiple areas: cooking in the kitchen, assisting in the clinic, caring for a section of younger children or even working in the fields or with the farm animals. Sharing is a big component of NPH in that the children not only share their time and abilities with the home, but also share their material things with one another. Security is the knowledge the children have upon arriving at NPH that they are welcome and that they will never be asked to leave – nor are they made available for adoption. NPH becomes their new family, and every effort is made to keep siblings together. *Pequeños* leave NPH only after completing their education, and each child has the opportunity to study to as high a level as he or she desires. Some earn certificates in various vocational trades, while others continue on to university. Some even do both.

At the heart of it all is Father Wasson’s principle, guiding element and philosophy: unconditional love. The children are accepted for who they are, as they are. In this loving environment, they are welcomed and nurtured, and are able to grow. Children are taken out of dire situations and, with this unconditional love, education, and faith formation, given the tools to break the cycle of poverty into which they were born. The ultimate goal of NPH is to raise responsible citizens who



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Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos: ‘Being here is like breathing’

When I first considered post-college plans, it didn’t take much time to decide what I wanted to do. Since I first visited the *Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos* home in El Salvador in 2008 as part of a mission trip through my parish, St. Thomas the Apostle in Lenoir City, I knew I was meant to return and serve. I was being pulled back.

I made two more trips in 2009 and 2010, and as enjoyable as they were, I knew it was not enough. This feeling only solidified my idea of returning as a volunteer. There is something very captivating about *Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos*. Even after living here for 13 months, I struggle to put it into words, and I always will.

Maybe it is the NPH mission. Maybe it is the opportunity to work in such a unique environment. Maybe it is the beauty and blessing of being immersed in another culture. Maybe, just maybe, it is the unconditional love that seeps out of every child, every employee and each act of kindness that I witness on a daily basis.

I cannot even begin to count the number of “cup runneth over” days I have had. There are moments when I pinch my cheeks because of the

excitement, happiness and love that threatens to explode within me. It is not just the babies and toddlers being cute because of their age, but rather that the youngest to the oldest of the *pequeños* constantly perform acts of kindness that just melt my heart.

For example, one of our girls recently broke her ankle and was still getting accustomed to the crutches when we all went out for a special excursion. At the end of the day, there was a long walk back to the buses. Nelson (not his real name), a young man who is giving back a year of service to NPH, saw her struggling. He turned around, picked her up, and carried her the rest of the way.

Another example of this unconditional love and kindness happened one night when I helped distribute food at dinner. It just so happened

will help their communities and countries.

In addition to caring for and loving the more than 3,200 children currently residing in the nine NPH homes, this big family also extends its reach into the surrounding communities. In keeping with Christ's teachings, NPH cares for others through various outreach programs and services, helping the poor and the sick. At NPFS Haiti, the St. Damien Pediatric Hospital provides necessary medical care to the NPH children and to Haitians in need. During the Jan. 12, 2010, earthquake, St. Damien became a treatment hub for injured earthquake victims. Another great example of NPH's extensive reach is the Holy Family Surgery Center at NPH Honduras, which provides life-saving surgeries to Hondurans who normally could not afford these special and necessary treatments. Many of the NPH schools also open their doors to children in the community who otherwise would have no access to a quality education.

The beautiful thing about NPH, whether it is taking in orphaned, neglected and at-risk children to give them a family and new chance at life or providing quality outreach programs to those in need, is that it all began with a simple act of kindness.

Surprising most everyone by taking the young thief into his care instead of throwing him in jail, Father Wasson changed this boy's life, as well as those of thousands of other children. What that simple act was, and what it still is, is a fulfillment of the Gospel in a way that can be actively seen today. Child by child, the world is being changed. Each *pequeño* is a testament to the power of an act of kindness. *Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos* is truly fulfilling Christ's call to love one's neighbor, and it is a tangible piece of the kingdom here on earth. ■

to be my favorite meal: *frijoles casamientos*, a fried plantain, tortilla and cinnamon-flavored hot milk. For whatever reason that night, the kitchen did not send out enough milk or plantains. By the time I was done handing out tortillas to the boys and everyone had gone through the line, there were only beans and tortillas left. I made my plate and went to sit with some of the girls from my *hogar* (a group of kids that a volunteer spends time with and serves as a mentor). Lourdes (not her real name), the girl I normally sit next to, knew I love plantains and noticed I had neither a plantain nor a cup of milk. After explaining why I had a smaller plate of food, I began eating. Then Lourdes turned to me and held out her untouched, full cup of milk and said, "Here take mine. Drink it all." I could go on.

In spite of where they have come from and what they have gone through, these kids never cease to amaze me with what they are capable of – and I know they are all capable of doing great things.

Living here at NPH and being a part of this big family has taught me more than I ever dreamed of learning and is the greatest blessing God has given me.

My situation at NPH El Salvador is different than that of volunteers at the other NPH homes. For 11 months, I was the only volunteer here. Another unique aspect is that I live with the kids instead of apart from them in my own quarters. I live in the volunteer/visitor room in Casa Santa María, which



houses around 120 girls from age 8 to young women in their late teens and early 20s who are doing their year of service. There is never a dull moment, and I enjoy waking to the cacophony of life that is our home. Though I live within the confines of our property and have settled into a routine, every weekend has been different. The kids constantly ask me if I am bored because I rarely leave (due to safety concerns, my weekends off are still spent at the NPH home, though I do have the occasional excursion).

There is so much life here though that it is impossible to be bored. There is always something to do or someone to talk to: a toddler to push in the swing, a river to swim in, a teenager to share your stories with, the small mountain to climb and the fields to explore, learning about a care-giver's reason for working here or making breakfast for more than 300 people. The possibilities are endless.

My role as a volunteer is, on paper, simple and straightforward. I work in the

sponsorship office and assist the director. I love witnessing the relationship between sponsors and our children here. However, the unofficial parts of my job are just as fun and fulfilling. I help with my *hogar* and the occasional troubling piece of English homework. Though I'm no professional photographer, I have been the go-to person when the communication and project manager is occupied. I also just love documenting and preserving life and the countless memories here. For a few months after my arrival, I also assisted the religious education teacher at the school with catechesis.

One of my fondest memories is a trip to NPH Guatemala for the seventh annual international soccer tournament between the NPH homes. I went along to not only document the experience for the teams, but to also help look after the girls as their caretaker. It was one of the most exhausting and exciting weeks of my life. Another fond memory is of a trip to the river with the younger girls, hearing them squeal with delight as they played in the water.

I recently skimmed old papers from college and was surprised by the frequency with which I wrote about NPH.

For more information on how you can impact the life of a child at NPH, please visit www.nph.org. For a closer glimpse at Ashley's life with the *pequeños* at NPH El Salvador, visit her blog at ashleysiferd.wordpress.com.



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Knowing I've felt called to serve in this way shouldn't have been a surprise, but the depth of this calling was revealed.

And in recent conversations with some of the high school girls, Argentina (not her real name) asked me why I came here. Was it some sort of required component to finalize my university studies or some social service requirement mandated by the government? I smiled and answered her with the truth, which is that I have felt called here by God ever since my first visit.

A few hours later, Evelyn and Cindy (not their real names) came to my door. I went outside and sat with them for a while, and we talked about a variety of things. At one point, they asked a question similar to that of Argentina's. When I explained why I was here, they both looked at each other thoughtfully, and then they said, "So in a way, have you fulfilled one of your dreams by being here?" I inwardly gushed with delight and answered, "Yes, it's been a dream of mine to come here and be with my family ... with you all."

You see, NPH is not an

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institution. It is a family. I now have more than just my two biological sisters to count as siblings. Though I consider all the kids family, there is one boy in particular who I refer to as my brother. We could not be more different in appearance, which is a thing of amusement for the others here. For whatever reason, we just clicked and share this special connection. That is the beauty of NPH. Though I did leave my home, family, friends and a particular way of life behind, living and serving at NPH felt like I came home. Being here is like breathing. Even on the occasional bad day, someone unknowingly does something that cheers me up.

One evening before bed,

Argentina asked me why I would be leaving after I finished my volunteer time. I told her that even though I love them all and this place very much, I do miss my family and friends and would like to see them. She promptly looked at me and said, "Well, you don't have to go back to the United States for that. Your family and your friends are right here."

Instantly, I was reminded yet again of God's great and infinite love for us. What we sow here on earth will be repaid to us in ways we cannot fathom. God asks us to love our neighbor and to care for the least of his brothers and sisters. I like to think that, by serving and loving my brothers and sisters here at NPH El Salvador, God

Photos:

1.) The youngest boys and girls of Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos enjoy the question-and-answer portion of a puppet show.

2.) Ashley Siferd, third from left, is joined by girls from Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos before the girls choir performance at the cathedral in Santa Ana, El Salvador. Every year, the bishop invites NPH El Salvador's choir and folkloric dance group to perform at the opening and closing of the city's week-long celebration in honor of its patron saint, Santa Ana (St. Anne).

3.) During their June 2013 visit to the home, Father David Boettner, rector of Sacred Heart Cathedral in Knoxville, and parishioner Lisa Fisher spend time outside of the church with their friends from Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos in Santa Ana, El Salvador.

4.) Megan Fisher and a few of the toddlers from Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos El Salvador have fun trying to sit on the same chair during the children's home's 14th-anniversary celebration in 2013.

5.) Before beginning the celebration for NPH El Salvador's 14th anniversary in 2013, Father Ron Hicks talks about the life and work of the late Father William Wasson (featured in the portrait), founder of Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos.

is already giving something back to me. By answering his call, I have been blessed to witness a piece of the kingdom here on earth. With each hug, every walk to dinner, each failed attempt at playing soccer and every moment in between, I am filled with an indescribable peace.

Paz y bien. ■