

BORN ~~FOR WAR~~ TO SOAR

The Micah Project | Spring 2024

When you're twelve and you live in a war zone, you get drafted to fight. You don't have a choice - twelve-year-old Mario didn't have a choice.

This particular barrio isn't a traditional war zone with opposing armies facing each other on front lines. If you enter this barrio in the hills outside Tegucigalpa, men armed with high powered assault weapons will stop your car and make you roll down your window. If you don't belong there, they will turn your car around. Or worse.

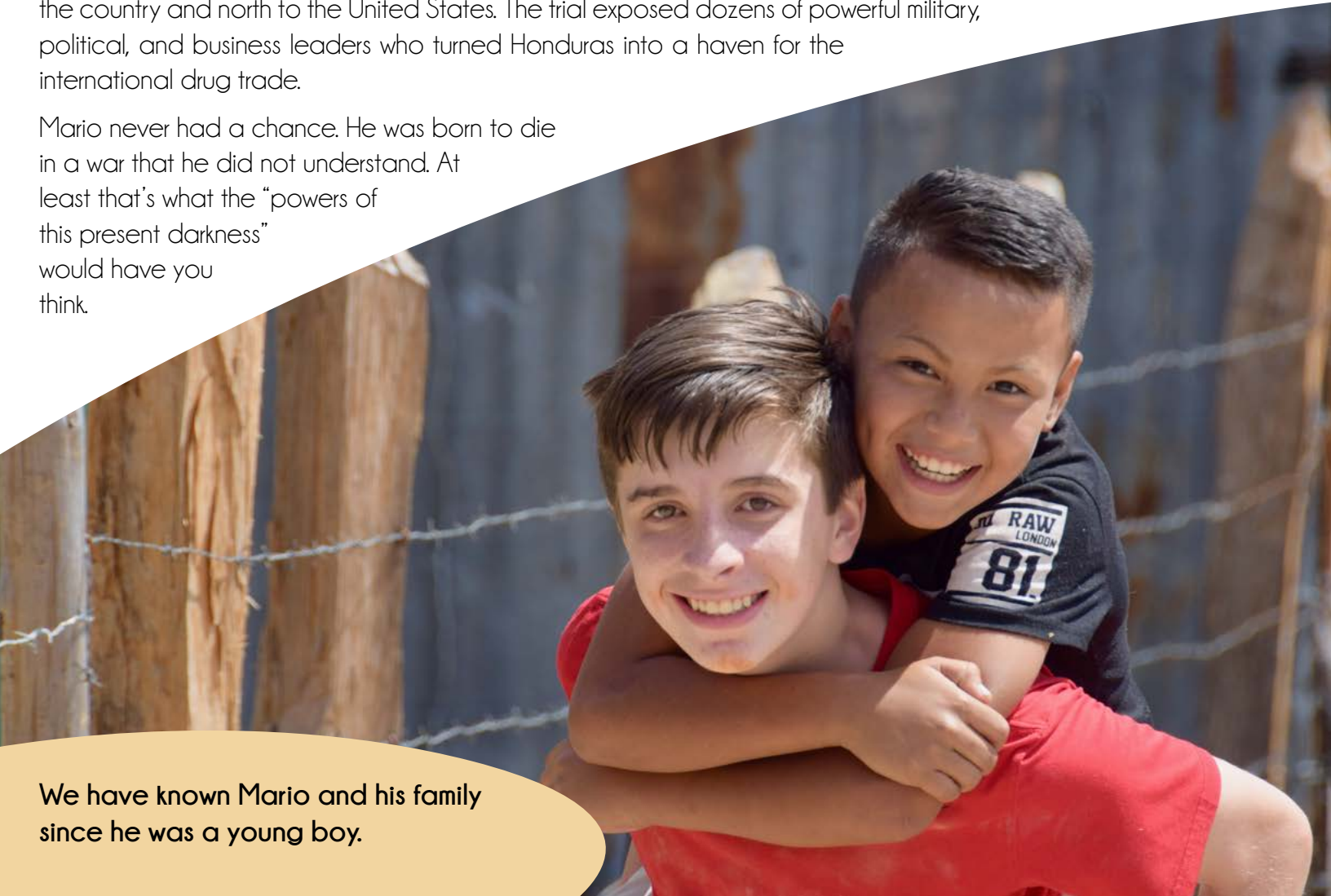
These men are foot soldiers for one of the largest international criminal gangs that control Honduras and Central America. They fight a bloody war for turf. They draft kids to run drugs and to carry out other illegal errands at the street level—because kids are expendable.

Mario was an expendable kid. He didn't have a choice: his job was to visit the small, home-front stores in his neighborhood, called pulperias, and to collect the gang's "war tax." This tax is blood money, which all businesses pay the gang in order to operate safely in their territory. Bottom line: "Pay us or we hurt you."

Mario was a tiny cog in a huge machine. In March of this year, we found out just how huge. Juan Orlando Hernandez, the president of Honduras from 2014 - 2022, was convicted in United States Federal Court of being a large-scale drug trafficker and of using the Honduran police and army to protect drug shipments moving through the country and north to the United States. The trial exposed dozens of powerful military, political, and business leaders who turned Honduras into a haven for the international drug trade.

Mario never had a chance. He was born to die in a war that he did not understand. At least that's what the "powers of this present darkness" would have you think.

We have known Mario and his family since he was a young boy.



Several weeks ago, we put 18-year-old Mario on a plane to Lima, Peru. He was about to start a three-year course of studies at Le Cordon Bleu, one of the most prestigious culinary academies in the world. Founded in Paris in 1895, Le Cordon Bleu graduates some of the world's most famous master chefs. One day, this list will include a young man who was a heartbeat away from becoming yet another nameless victim of a violent Honduran lifestyle.

So, what happened? What plucked this child soldier out of a war zone and placed him in a premier culinary academy? A miracle happened. That's what.

Mario's miracle started with an arrest. Yes, even though many Honduran police officials are involved in the drug trade, occasionally, they do make arrests, especially among the lowest members of the operation. At age 13, Mario was at a neighborhood store to collect the war tax when a group of heavily armed police swooped in and arrested him. They paraded him in front of the media to prove that they were successful in their "fight" against narcotrafficking. Mario was destined for Tegucigalpa's violent juvenile prison—which is a finishing school for those who become career criminals.



The Micah Project has had a long-term relationship with Mario's family. One of our very first grads, Edwin, is his older half-brother. Years before Mario was swept up into the gang wars, we had come to know him as a little boy. After his arrest, we went to court for his arraignment and asked the judge to release him into the custody of the Micah Project. Even though that had never happened in our decades of ministry to street kids, we were desperate to keep Mario out of prison. After much deliberation, the judge turned to us and said: "This boy is released into the custody of the Micah Project until the age of 18!"

Mario never looked back. It is true, however, that the violent vestiges of his childhood stayed with him for a while. And it took him some time to understand that God had plans for his life. But eventually, he knew that he was born to soar.

To pinpoint the exact location where Mario's transformation began, enter the doors of Micah's kitchen. Mario joined Micah three months after our grad, Arle, who had been a chef on a cruise ship, took over our kitchen and began to teach culinary arts to any of our young men, past or present, who wanted to join him. The whole world had just shut down because of COVID, and Arle had many volunteers for his brand-new program: Micah Cooks!

Imagine a kitchen filled with laughter, music, camaraderie, and lots of good smells and tastes. Mario not only found his way into that kitchen, but he also found his way to joy. Just look at the picture of our first culinary apprentices in 2020!



Mario is the one wearing the red cap.

Last year, Mario worked seven days a week to make his dream come true. Besides finishing his senior year in high school, he also took formal culinary classes on the weekends to earn an associate degree in the culinary arts. At times, we cautioned him: "Slow down, Mario. Take a break."

"I can't do that. I have to keep pressing on." During that time, he applied to Le Cordon Bleu in Peru, finished their rigorous application process, and was accepted for the 2024 school year.

The week before Mario left for Peru, he asked to speak to the boys in the Micah House. Looking to him as their role model, they hung on every word:

Micah taught me to put my principles and my goals first and ask myself, "What do you really want to become in this life?" Some might say, "You've forgotten who you were, or you are only thinking about yourself." But to climb out of the hole I was in, it was important to leave all of that life behind. Studying gastronomy at the highest level, if there are people in my life who are holding me back, I have to distance myself from them. It's my future that's on the line, and I have to focus.

Two days later, Mario boarded the plane and flew to Peru.





Powerful forces aligned themselves against Mario, but we know the truth: “The one who is in us is greater than the one who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). You may not have met Mario personally, but if you have supported the Micah Project, God has used you to transform his life. Although the forces of evil tried to destroy him, you belong to the more powerful force for good that helped Mario find his wings.

Because you are so vital to this process, we are launching an individualized prayer partnership to let you accompany a specific young man on his journey. You can select one of the Micah House boys from the attached list and sign up to be on his team; use the QR code or follow his web address. We will send you regular updates about him and tell you how to pray for him. Whether it be Mario, who has already fought through so much, or one of our newer boys who is just beginning to leave the streets behind, you will be an important part of their transformation. You can join Team Mario or Team David or Team Oliver or any of the others and support them through your prayers.

And if you are not already a monthly donor, you can become a **Faithful Friend of Micah**, our new monthly giving program. The Faithful Friends of Micah are generous donors who provide steady financial support to assist us as we help street-connected Honduran youth find freedom, family, and a future in Jesus Christ.

By committing to a monthly gift, you can become a member of one of these groups:

Provision Provider – Provides one day of food for the boys in the Micah house: **up to \$49 a month**

Heart Healer – Provides food and essential services for school-aged children of street-connected families that Micah supports through our outreach programs: **\$50 to \$99 a month**

Skill Supplier – Provides supplies for students in our vocational programs: **\$100 to \$499 a month**

Future Funder– Changes the trajectory of life for one street-connected boy by providing funding to pay the salaries of our educational and caregiving staff in our Micah House and Timothy House programs: **\$500 and above a month**

We hope that one day you will visit Honduras and see what God is doing through your prayers for an individual boy as well as through your financial support of the Micah Project. And when Mario graduates as a master chef, we invite you to join us for dinner and sample Honduran haute cuisine. Knowing Mario, it will be the best meal you’ve ever eaten!

Thank you for being faithful friends to these courageous young men.

Su hermano en Cristo,

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