

STOP GIVING UP!

The Micah Project | Spring 2022



Michael and Julio

"Mike, it's time for me to go back to Honduras and make things right. I need to fix my mistakes so I can move on with my life."

"Julio, you know that danger waits for you there. I understand that you were just looking for justice for your brother, Axel, when you tried to find his killers. But how is justice served if they end up killing you, too?"

"I've thought about that. But if I want to move on, I've got to confront the people who have threatened me for so long. I'm ready to face them no matter what happens so I can put it behind me."

Weeks before, we had sent Julio to El Salvador to get him away from the violence that followed him since birth. But when I flew to El Salvador to talk with him, I knew that he was determined to return to Honduras.

When Julio was only 13, armed gangsters showed up at the door of the seedy motel where he lived with his mom and brothers. Although the intruders were looking for Axel, one of them said to Julio's mom: "If we can't find Axel, we'll come back and kill Julio." That same day, she brought him to the Micah Project and begged us to take him in.

As Julio and I talked that night in El Salvador, I reminded myself he was an old soul forged by suffering. As soon as he learned to walk, he visited bakeries in his slum to beg for stale bread that they threw out. When he was in elementary school, he got off a public bus and then realized that he had left his backpack on the seat. As he turned to retrieve it, the driver sped off and crushed Julio's left foot under the bus's front tire. Suffering through many reconstructive surgeries, Julio spent six months in the hospital. His foot never healed properly and though he was in constant pain, he refused to let it stop him. During Julio's first months of recovery, his older brother, Yoel, walked him piggy-back to school, sat him at his desk, and returned at the end of the day to pick him up.

This kid would not give up. My paternal protective instincts wanted to keep him safely tucked away in El Salvador, but I also realized that if he wanted to move forward in life, he couldn't keep looking over his shoulder to see who was after him.



Axel and Julio after his bus accident

Julio and I shared a strong father-son bond that was formed through joy and tragedy. In 2015, less than a year after Julio joined the Micah House, Axel was gunned down just blocks from his motel room. When Axel left the streets in 2008, he became a part of the Micah Project. Though only 12 when he entered Micah, he was deeply involved in gang life. He did well for a couple of years, but ultimately lost his battle with violence and addiction and ended up back on the streets. He was the first Micah boy we ever lost, and our shared grief strengthened my bond with Julio.

Even with that support, Axel's death sent Julio into a dark place. He told me, *"After what happened to Axel, I wanted something that would fill me, but I couldn't find what it was. I was so desperate that I started using drugs again. I felt completely destroyed."* Consumed with grief, Julio looked for ways to avenge his brother's death. Eventually, however, he applied the steely perseverance that he learned as a child to pull himself out of despair. One outlet was painting. He used his artistic skills not only to express his grief but also to share light, color and beauty. One of his paintings was an impressionistic view of a sunset over the ocean. On the back, he wrote:

*Imagining a little bit of paradise.
The meaning of creation & perfection
makes me see that there is an
adventure, among many millions.
But we can undertake them
only if we let ourselves be guided
by the true Lord of the tour.*



Although Julio's hope contained undertones of sorrow, he encouraged others to see beauty instead of ashes.

At the end of 2019, Julio returned from El Salvador, and I didn't hear from him for several weeks. Every day, I checked the crime section of our local paper; I was terrified that I would read a story about Julio's murder just as I had read about Axel's. But one day I saw Julio walking up the long path to the Micah House.

"Mike, I went to the headquarters of the gang that was following me. I told them that I wasn't doing drugs anymore and that I wanted to go back to school and get my life right with God."

"Julio, I really don't understand the rules that these people play by. Will they let you alone?"

"Yeah," he said. "That part of my life is over." Julio gave me a big hug.



Chefs Arle and Julio with apprentice David

When the pandemic shut the world's door, Arle, Julio's friend, returned to Honduras after a stint as a chef on a Mediterranean cruise ship. Arle took over Micah's kitchen. Julio became his assistant and although we didn't realize it then, they launched what would become the Micah Cooks Culinary School.

Delicious aromas weren't the only things wafting out of Arle and Julio's kitchen. During the dismal lockdown, you could hear laughter roaring out of it as well. Mostly because of Julio, it became the most popular spot in the Micah House. Even the youngest Micah boys suddenly wanted to be chefs, not because they loved chopping onions or grilling meat, but because joy drew them to the kitchen.

Over the next few months, Arle and Julio launched culinary classes, which were the favorite part of the Micah boys' day. Julio assumed the role of culinary teacher for David, Walter, and Misael, three new boys. Though these whirlwinds could barely sit still, Julio commanded their attention during his culinary classes. One morning, the diminutive David bounded into my office. Carrying a tray, he proudly announced, *"Julio taught me how to make sushi! I want to give it to you!"* By far, it was the best 9:00 a.m. sushi I've ever tasted.

In 2021, Julio graduated from our culinary program and that November, he got a job as a chef's assistant at a fine restaurant and bakery. Julio lived just down the road from the Micah Project, and he rode his motorcycle into the city every morning to work. On his way home each night, he stopped by to visit. One evening, he knocked on the door of my cabin. He'd had a long day, and he still had flour dust on his jeans from making pizza crusts. Though exhausted from being on his feet, he was enthusiastic about a holiday "special" that he and his chef had planned. They wanted to prepare 2000 plates of food for the homeless and to distribute them on Christmas Eve. Julio asked if the Micah boys could help. When the boys found out that it was Julio who asked, every one signed up.

On December 23rd, they got to the restaurant at 8:00 a.m. and worked with the kitchen team for ten hours to prepare the meals. I arrived at lunchtime to check on them and found our miniature chefs chopping, shredding, and slicing like pros. Julio had stepped away to help fill orders for the restaurant's lunch rush, and I waved at him from across the kitchen. Lifting his hand out of the pizza dough, he gave me a thumbs-up. His smile radiated joy and strength.

I didn't see Julio for a couple of weeks after the Christmas holidays were over. On January 20th I dozed in my recliner when I heard a knock on my cabin door. *"Hey viejo, te traigo algo."* *"Hey old man, I brought you something,"* he said, using his favorite term of endearment for me. He dropped his motorcycle helmet on the recliner in order to open his backpack. *"I finished this painting a couple of weeks ago, and I wanted to bring it over tonight."* He handed me a painting of mountains with the sun radiating over them. Around the scene, he had painted the words from the first verse of Psalm 27: "The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?"

"Julio, I love it!"

"Do you really?" He was self-conscious about his art.

"Absolutely! But you forgot to sign it."

"Yeah," he giggled. *"I ran out of black ink."*

I gave him a permanent marker, and he signed his name. We chatted for a bit and then he went to find his brother, Yoel, who runs the evening caregiving shift at the Micah House.

As I got ready for bed, I heard another knock. Upon entering, Julio said, *"I forgot my motorcycle helmet."*

"Julio, you always forget something when you come to visit." We laughed. Giving me one last hug, he headed down the street to his apartment.



Julio prepares food at Micah

The next morning around 7:00, I received a text: “Michael, someone saw Julio’s motorcycle crashed against a pole on the side of the highway. Have you been in touch with him?” Racing to the Micah House, I found Yoel to see if he knew anything. We called Julio’s number and a nurse at the public hospital answered. *“I’m so sorry to tell you this, but Julio had a catastrophic motorcycle accident. He probably won’t live through the day.”* Although Julio was unconscious, the nurses let us see him for short shifts throughout the day.

At 6:00 the next morning, Yoel called. *“Julio passed away a few minutes ago,”* he said between sobs. *“Our beautiful brother has left us.”* In the hours that followed, hundreds of people showed up at Micah and later at the funeral home to mourn Julio’s death. I lost count of the number of people who told me stories about Julio. Most of them were about the way that he encouraged them through tough times—the way that he was there for them when they needed support.



Julio in his favorite shirt

Although Julio left us that day, his joyous spirit did not. In fact, he started a “Psalm 27 Revolution.” The verse that he painted showed up everywhere: on t-shirts, on bulletin boards, even as tattoos on the arms of his closest friends. “The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?”

A few days after Julio’s funeral, Yoel gave me a gift. *“Mike, this was Julio’s favorite shirt, and he would want you to have it.”* Yoel handed me a shirt that I had seen Julio wear many times. **“STOP GIVING UP”** was emblazoned in large white letters on the front. These strong words summed up Julio’s life story. Along with Psalm 27, he left a challenge for those who loved him:

“The Lord is indeed your light and your salvation, Micah family. You have nothing to fear. So, STOP—GIVING—UP!” Julio, we won’t give up. Inspired by your memory, we promise that we won’t.

P.S. We remodeled our kitchen to turn it into a professional space for our culinary school. On March 17th, we inaugurated the new kitchen. Its name: “La Cocina Julio Cesar Ortiz.” When you come to visit, you will see Julio’s chef’s uniform framed and hanging on the wall of this beautiful new space.



KEEP UP WITH US ONLINE

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