

“A Heritage Restored” Spring 2005 Update

Sooner or later, the questions start coming: Why did my mom abandon me? Why did my dad beat me? Why did I have to suffer so much when other kids had normal childhoods? These questions are an inevitable part of each boy's process here at the Micah Project.

God created the institution of the family and gave it the responsibility of raising children, of teaching them the ways of their Heavenly Father and encouraging them to love Him. Alas, human sin and rebellion created a situation in which no family does this job perfectly—and some families don't even begin to undertake it. In fact, many of our boys became well-acquainted with the dark things of this world before they were even old enough to start school. Before I reached the age of eight, the most terrifying thing that I had to confront was the occasional bad thunderstorm in the middle of the night. At a time in their lives in which children still have the right to run into the protective embrace of their mother's arms when danger approaches, most of our boys were already having to figure out how to face a cruel world alone.

So along about the age of sixteen, sometimes earlier, sometimes later, the questions start coming. Usually, they precede a period of depression, sometimes of doubt as well. The questions may cause the boys to wonder if they are truly loved by us, and truly loved by God. Philip Yancey, in his book “Where is God when it Hurts?” speaks to this: “The search for meaning in suffering will always be a lonely search. No one but I can discern the meaning of my suffering. And yet by embracing grief and standing beside the hurting person, we can indeed aid another's search for meaning” (Philip Yancey, pages 201-202).

One of the hardest things about working at the Micah Project is standing alongside our boys while they ask these questions. The painful experiences of their pasts have convinced many of them that they are unlovable. Others are so scared that their hearts will be trampled on that they never fully open up to love. We can love them, and share God's love with them, but somewhere deep inside, they wait for the axe to drop. They're sure that, based on vivid experience, all love must have its limits. Yet we are called to love them, even when they push us away with all their defensive might.

Anyone who has worked with the Micah Project can attest to a time when this or that boy has done his best to coax us into rejecting him—to prove himself unlovable. He will occasionally work hard to set his expectations low enough that he will not be subject to the disappointment that seemed to define his young life. That desperate isolation makes me ache for these broken children even while it makes me angry at the destruction that sin wrought in their lives. It is also those times when I feel the most helpless; the only thing that I can do is to continue to love and continue to hope that God will break through their thick armor.

Even so, the Holy Spirit often uses their questions—be they about the certainty of God’s love or the durability of ours—to start a new work in their lives. It is often during those dark, lonely times that the boys break into tears that dissolve the walls of resentment that they have constructed around their hearts.

Often people who come visit the Micah Project ask us what makes us unique. I’m always tempted to answer that it is our tremendously talented staff or our clearly presented mission and goals. I’ve become increasingly convinced, however, that the best and only answer to that question is that the Holy Spirit is at work within the hearts and lives of our boys. How can we even dare to hope that these boys will be able to find healing and wholeness after the forces that worked to destroy them at such a young age? It is only through the grace of God and the work of his Holy Spirit in their lives!

The third chapter of Titus says that, having been justified by grace, God poured out the Holy Spirit so that “we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.” As their earthly inheritance, our boys received nothing but generations of bondage. Now, their promised inheritance is hope eternal. And truly, it is only the Spirit’s work in their lives that this hope comes alive to them!

I’ve been amazed at some of the ways that He has chosen to bring that hope alive in the last few months! Take Edwin, for instance. His deepest pain resided in the fact that he had been completely cut off from his family. You can imagine the questions that total abandonment raises. Not only “Why was I abandoned?” but also another critical question that arises is “Who am I really?” It is very difficult to answer questions about one’s identity when one has no heritage.

Then, after years of wondering, God led Edwin back into the arms of his family. A while back, we came across a ten-year old report that told us the general region where Edwin’s grandmother lived. Just before Christmas, on a trip to that region, we ran into a pastor who had worked there for many years. We asked him if he knew Edwin’s grandmother. He indicated that he did not, but that he had heard of the little mountain village that the old paperwork mentioned. He rode with us into the market area of the cowtown which we were visiting and started asking around the buses that brought people into town from the surrounding villages.

We approached a bus that had only one passenger; a young woman holding a baby, ready to take the goods she had purchased at the market back to her mountain village. The pastor asked her if she knew Gloria Fugon, and she said “of course, I’m her neighbor!” The young lady got off the bus and agreed to accompany us to her village. We started the bumpy ride up the long and twisted mountain road. As the young woman held on to her baby, she gave us the entire history of the village. When Edwin told her his story, she said that if he was indeed Gloria Fugon’s grandson, that meant that she was his cousin!

We wound our way up and up, surrounded by pine forests. Finally, a pristine village came into view, clinging to the side of a mountain. As we bounced through the coffee groves and sugar cane fields beyond the town, we finally came to a stop in a remote spot surrounded by the forest.. We pushed our way through a tattered barbed wire fence; a small, grey-haired woman came out of her little wooden home to see what rare visitor was coming. We walked up to her and I asked “Are you Gloria Fugon?” When she answered in the affirmative I pointed to a very nervous-looking Edwin and said, “This is your grandson, Edwin Fugon!”

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph!” she shouted as she ran up to Edwin and hugged him. She held on tight to him as she exclaimed over and over again how devastated she was when his mother took him away when he was just a toddler and how often and how long she had searched for him. She took him by the hand and showed him her humble home, her animals (chickens, pigs, dogs) and all of her fruit trees. Over and over she exclaimed “The Heavenly Father has brought you back to me!”



(Above: Edwin meets his grandmother for the first time!)

That day, a good portion of that wall of resentment came crashing down, exposing Edwin's heart to a love that he had not allowed himself to experience before. Not only did Edwin meet his grandmother; it turns out that he was related to half the village! He went from being a boy without a heritage to being the long-lost hero for an entire village!

The Holy Spirit used that amazing moment of restoration to begin a new work in Edwin's heart. Time and time again, we've seen the Holy Spirit do this in our boys' lives, whether it be through momentous events like Edwin meeting his grandmother, or smaller, yet equally important moments of healing.

Last Friday we had another of those moments. We had a spiritual retreat with all the boys that focused on forgiveness and healing resentment. A moment came near the end of the retreat in which the boys were encouraged to share with the group about people they needed to forgive. There was a moment of initial nervousness before the floodgates burst open. The boys were honest with each other as they had never have been. Many wept openly as they confessed resentment and sought forgiveness. A couple had no words; their tears were a sufficient symbol for the resentment they were releasing. One boy who is normally extremely reserved about opening up unabashedly asked forgiveness of several other boys whom he had hurt. It was a blessed time of healing, planned by the Holy Spirit when no one else was expecting it.

Moments like that begin to answer some of the hard questions the boys ask about their lives. It draws them closer to the point of understanding how much God loves them. At the same time, however, asking those questions usually leads them to a certain conclusion: the Micah Project is only the second best place for them to grow up. The best place would have been their family! Not their family as they existed in their childhood; rather, their family as it would have been had sin not wrought its destructive work. The hard truth is that some of them may never enjoy a restored relationship with their family. And while the Micah Project may be a distant second, the Holy Spirit has knit us together, and has created a place where He can do His healing work.

Psalms 61:5 says, "You have given me the heritage of those who fear your name." The Lord has called us to create a heritage for these boys. It is a daunting task. But, as we introduce the boys to their heavenly Father and his awesome love, it is also a holy task. When you pray for these boys, you become a part of their heritage—a part they so desperately need. And as that happens, those hard, brutally honest questions that our boys start to ask come to rest in their awareness that they have been adopted into the family of God.

We appreciate and need those prayers!

Your brother in Christ,
Michael Miller

Summer 2005 Update

The Micah Project's oldest participant, Marvin, has had two radically different travel experiences lately. The first was a trip into the past...to be reunited with his mom after nineteen years of absence. The next was a trip into his future, as he packed his bags in order to begin his college studies in the United States. Both trips were enormous answers to prayer for this young man who has been through so much in his short life! While the first trip brought healing from past wounds, the second brought hope for a bright future.

The trip to his mom's house was amazing for several reasons. The first is that, ever since I met Marvin in 1993 when he was nine years old, it was assumed that he just didn't have a mother. He was raised by his alcoholic father and his hard-working grandmother for most of his young life until leaving his home for the streets of Tegucigalpa. Marvin's mother abandoned the home when he was just a baby, escaping the same alcoholism and abuse that Marvin would later flee from several years later. Marvin and his four brothers and sisters lost track of their mom and eventually assumed that they would never see her again.

When Marvin's grandmother died this January, it was really like losing a mother. Coronada was a courageous Christian lady who raised her grandkids (and great-grandkids!) by selling little packs of peanuts on the streets of downtown Tegucigalpa. When she was 83, she finally got too old to make her way down the mountain every day to the downtown streets. I think most of her grandkids felt orphaned all over again when she passed away this January after several months in the hospital. But God, in His gracious timing, had other plans! He chose this moment to reintroduce Marvin and his siblings to their mother.

A few weeks after Coronada's death, one of Marvin's distant cousins showed up saying that he knew where Marvin's mom lived! Marvin went with him the following day, deep into the eastern mountains of Honduras, in order to meet his mom. When he got back, he was filled with stories and excitement! He decided that, before he left on his second journey to the States, he wanted me to meet his mom.

In June, I accompanied Marvin and his brothers and sisters to one of the most remote spots in Honduras in order to finally meet his mom. It was a trip that required four hours on the lone highway that leads into eastern Honduras and then another three hours of precipitous mountain tracks! As we drove on and on, our bright red pick-up bounced farther and farther away from Catacamas, the cowtown that is the last spot of civilization before heading into the mountains. The truck (with Marvin driving) almost got stuck several times in the muddy mountain streams that flowed over the road, effectively blocking the path. Each time we reached one of these streams, a cloud of yellow butterflies lifted up from the water and surrounded our car, dancing out of the way as we prepared to cross the stream. That more than anything demonstrated both the beauty and the remoteness of the spot!

It was a relief when the adobe and tile roof ranch of Marvin's mom finally appeared over the horizon. It was a single house, surrounded by the green hills and separated from its nearest neighbor by several miles of trackless land. As we pulled our mud-covered car up to the fence that kept their cows in, Marvin's mother, stepfather and half brothers and sisters came out to see what rare visitor had come to their ranch. Marvin's sister Sandra, who accompanied us on the journey, wept as she hugged her mom for the first time in almost twenty years. His mother Maria looked at her sons and daughter with a wonderful expression, nervous and excited and moved to be seeing her kids after such a long absence.

As darkness fell that evening, Marvin's half brothers lit a fire on the dirt floor of their patio while Marvin's mom and sister got reacquainted by preparing dinner over an earthen stove. After dinner, as we sat around the fire talking, Marvin sat by the kitchen stove with his mom for several hours, telling stories about his brothers and sisters from their youth. His mom, a shy and humble mountain woman, would smile every once in a while at one or another of the stories they told, but mostly she just took everything in with a silent look of wonderment. After a couple of hours of listening to the night sounds around us, Marvin's stepfather took off into the woods with his two dogs at bay. After about an hour, he came back holding an armadillo by the tail. As we sat around the dying embers, one of Marvin's half brothers began to skin the armadillo in order to prepare the next day's dinner!

The following day, the entire family was up with the sun at 5 a.m. Marvin trooped off with his step brothers to cut some sugar cane for breakfast while his sister and mom re-started the fire for breakfast. After breakfast was finished and the cows were milked, it was time to start back up the track for the long trip back to Tegucigalpa. Each of Marvin's brothers and his sister took turns hugging their mom and posing with her for a picture. Marvin was the last to take leave of his mom, knowing that it would probably be a long time before he would see her again.

Again, God's timing for this blessed reunion was absolutely perfect. Not only did it happen just after losing his beloved grandmother, but it also happened just before he was to make a huge decision regarding his future! Before making definitive plans about possibly leaving Honduras for his studies, it was absolutely necessary to answer some of his lingering and painful questions about the past. The few days that he spent with his mom, while not sufficient to erase a childhood apart, were still able to answer many of those questions and to provide a peace that he would not otherwise have had.



(Above: Marvin and his Mom...)

A few weeks after his journey to meet his mother, it was time for Marvin to begin his other great journey. On a Wednesday early July, I took Marvin, Olvin and Tino to the U.S. embassy here in Tegucigalpa to attempt to get their visas to travel to the U.S. All three had been accepted as freshman into Missouri Baptist University, which was a huge and exciting opportunity for them! However, before they could go up to study, they had to get their student visas—no easy task! Hundreds of Hondurans line up outside the U.S. embassy every day, hoping for a chance to go to the U.S.; most, however, are rejected. It had been almost a year since our guys had decided that they wanted to try to study in the States, but in all that time they had no way of knowing if that dream would come true or not. They began making plans in faith, hoping that they would be granted their visas.

Frighteningly, the guys' visa applications were rejected at their first interview with the embassy because of some paperwork that we were missing. They gave us a week to collect the rest of the paperwork to take to our new appointment. What a long week that was! While we trusted that God's hand was firmly on the process, it was hard to escape the feeling that their entire future was hanging on one up-or-down decision made at the embassy! It was an exciting day the following Wednesday when the embassy official congratulated the three guys and granted them the visas! As they left, she encouraged them by saying that she hoped they

would use their education to come back to transform Honduras one day. With those words, the door to the next stage in their lives had been thrown wide open!

After being in a holding pattern since their graduation in November, suddenly the young men only had a month to pack up their lives in Honduras and prepare for their studies at Missouri Baptist! That month flew by as the guys said good-bye to family and friends, packed up their things and began the mental transition to life and study in the U.S. Before they knew it, the day of their departure was upon them!

Marvin left a few days before Olvin and Cristino in order to start soccer practice at Missouri Baptist last week. His father, sister and brothers accompanied him to the airport, as did most of the other guys from the Micah Project. It was a bittersweet moment when our friend and brother went through security and boarded the plane!

Going off to college is a momentous event in the life of any young person, but the significance of Marvin, Tino and Olvin's departure was even more remarkable. From the world's perspective, these young men were destined to failure from a very young age. By this stage in their lives, they should have been in gangs, in jail, or starting a life of alcoholism and drug use. That is how so many kids who spend time on the streets end up! To watch each of these three step onto the plane and head off to college was to know how firmly God has had His hand upon their lives. No worldly barrier was able to stand in their way because their heavenly Father had already ordained the path that they would take.

While getting on that plane and heading off to college was the end of a long planning process for these young men, in the same way it is the beginning of another stage of preparation in their lives. As I read through the essay Marvin wrote for his application to Missouri Baptist, it helped me to know what this time of preparation is truly about. He wrote:

"Because of my time on the street, I know what the true meaning of the word to "suffer" really is. So like God used other people to help me, I would like to prepare myself in a good university like Missouri Baptist and let God use me with the street kids from Honduras. Gaining this education will help change my world by allowing me to better help other Hondurans."

Reading these words helps me to remember that this journey that Marvin has been on for these last five years at the Micah Project, even so recently meeting his mother and finding healing in that relationship, is a journey that has a definite purpose. Not even Marvin knows in what manner God will choose to use his life to bless others. But, looking at all the ways God has acted in his life up to this moment, we can be sure that His purposes will be victorious in the life of this young man.

I want to take this moment to thank each one of you for keeping the faith through these last five years as well. Your continued support and commitment to

these guys, and your prayers for them, played a HUGE role in getting them to where they are today. It is an honor for me to be a part of this ministry with you! I look forward to writing you as God continues lead these young men through this next stage in their journey in the next four years.

As Marvin, Tino and Olvin begin their classes at Missouri Baptist on August 22, we would appreciate your continued prayers for them. University classes in English will be a shock to their system! I talked to Marvin last night on the phone, and he excitedly told me that he has made the varsity soccer squad at Missouri Baptist. Pray that he will successfully juggle athletics and academics this year! Also, pray that God would raise up good Christian friends at the university who will be a support base for these guys. We also ask for your prayers for David, who will be going to study in Costa Rica in January, and for Jarvin who will begin his studies at a college here in Honduras in September. Finally, pray for Oscar, Danilo, Miguel and Edwin as they graduate from high school this November and begin to seek guidance for their future as well!

May our God, who is the restorer of hope and the great guide on this journey, continue to bless you just as you all continue to bless others!

Your brother in Christ,

Michael Miller



(Above: Marvin's mom's house...)

The Micah Project Fall 2005 Update

One thing we do well at the Micah Project is celebrate the big turning points in the lives of our young men. The reason for this is one of balance: for most of their young lives they were told that they were street trash, no more worthy of love and support than the dogs and rats that scavenge through Tegucigalpa's refuse. To counteract that mentality, we loudly trumpet their achievements and milestones, teaching these beloved children of God that their lives are worth celebrating.

Lately, we have had a lot to celebrate! On one magical weekend in mid-November, five of our young men graduated from the sixth grade and four became our second group to graduate from high school! This occasion of double blessing called for double celebration. Fortunately, we weren't the only celebrators around! Many of our friends from the U.S. as well as members of our board of directors made the trek from Houston, Washington and St. Louis to join us in this special weekend. Thankfully, those who came are expert partiers! Can you imagine what must have been running through the heads of our graduates? "Wow, these people came from another country just to celebrate my graduation!" Certainly, these beloved friends helped our guys to feel loved and highly esteemed!



To put the magnitude of these events in perspective, allow me to give you an illustration from both graduations. Darwin Matute was one of our sixth grade graduates. For those of you who have looked at the "street kid" page on our website, you've seen pictures of Darwin's previous life. He spent seven years completely immersed in street life, getting high on yellow glue on a daily basis and living his life completely outside the parameters of society. It seemed that, when we first began

to have contact with him on the streets in 2001, his humanity had receded so far in into the interior of himself that it had become entirely irretrievable. For the first few months after entering the Micah House, Darwin was coming down off his drugs so hard that he could barely open his eyes. The few times he did open them, we wondered what was really going on behind them.

Fast forward to November 12, 2005. Darwin stood up before our crowd of partiers, not as someone who was able to squeak by in his education, but as the best student of his sixth grade class! This young man, who didn't even know how to hold a pencil in 2001, held an average of ninety-five percent or higher in every single one of his classes this year. Those previously dead eyes now held the pride of accomplishment in them.

As the sixth grade graduation ceremony wound down, Erick's sister rose to sing a song in their honor. The song she chose was called "Hombres de Valor." The chorus went, "Men of honor are men who need God, men who keep their promises, who open paths for God's love. They are men of commitment, faithful to their calling for the Lord's cause." Who would have thought that these words could have applied to Darwin Matute, the street waif? Yet as Darwin rose to receive his diploma and as he stood before the crowd and shared words of gratitude to them, we realized that these words are especially powerful when applied to this young man that God rescued from the pit.

The night after our sixth grade graduation, Danilo, Edwin, Miguel and Oscar celebrated their high school graduation. As one of the biggest landmarks in these young lives, this particular celebration required more planning! Renting a hall in a hotel for the service, purchasing new suits, choosing a cake for a hundred people, arranging for flowers...all of the details spoke of a GRAND EVENT. Yet the import of this night was not in the details, but in the lives that were celebrated.

The significance of this event can best be expressed in Miguel's own words. In accordance with our tradition of celebrating lives, we consider all of our guys to be valedictorians. Thus, they all give a valedictory address at their graduation! When Miguel got up to the microphone, I think many people wondered what was going to come out of his mouth. Of all of our guys, Miguel is the one most likely to hold his own counsel. When groups come to work with us throughout the year, he tends to stay in the shadows a bit. He has not been one to open his heart to others until he can be sure of their trustworthiness.

That is why many people were taken by surprise when Miguel stood behind the microphone in that hall and spoke for twenty minutes (in perfect English) of his greatest sorrows and greatest hopes! He started by saying "I really wanted my dad to be here tonight, but it's not possible. He's an alcoholic, and I never lived with him; didn't even ever talk with him. I feel sad for him." Miguel went on to talk about how he was raised by his grandmother, but ended up on the streets when she died in 1998. He explained that when he was on the street, he did not think he would have

a future. The question he would ask himself was: "Am I going to live like this forever?"



At the end of his speech, Miguel said, "Here I am in my graduation, thanks to God and to all the people that have been used by God. Now I have goals for my future. I just want to finish my race full of happiness, so that other people can feel the same way that I do through what I do, through my actions."

Little does Miguel know, for those of us who have prayed for him and invested in his life for the past six years, just hearing him open his heart in public thanksgiving to God brought us tremendous joy and happiness. May he continue to be a bearer of God's joy far into the future!

As Miguel spoke the night of his graduation, a few children from the city dump sat in the audience. These are kids who have been a part of our educational program at the city dump for the last two years. Though they are just beginning the same process that Darwin and Miguel went through, our ministry coordinator Jeony wanted to bring them to the graduation to begin to plant the seeds for their future. Five years from now, we may be gathering to celebrate the graduation of twenty or thirty young people whose lives seemed destined to be lived out among the trash of the city dump!

And perhaps that's another purpose of our extravagant celebrations. It's not just to celebrate achievements of the recent past, it's really to spur on hope for a

coming future. As more and more of our young men graduate, we hope that it will begin to seem almost routine. "Sure, street kids and children of the dump are graduating from high school! Why not? It happens all the time at the Micah Project!" That's the attitude that we would love to create. Although it will never be anything short of a miracle, we hope that it's a miracle that becomes overwhelmingly redundant in the years to come!

Even now, just a couple of weeks after their graduation, we are already busily helping our young men to plan for their future. Just as our first group of graduates ended up in universities in Honduras, Missouri, and (soon to be) Costa Rica, this current group is also looking at various options. Please pray for discernment for them! As we work with them in this great time of transition, we pray that you would also consider supporting our college scholarship fund to help make their big goals a reality. At the same time, we ask that you would continue to support our operational budget as we continue to bring the light of God's hope to young lives here in Honduras!

Even as we speak of the miracles that God is working in the lives of our young men, we also consider each one of you to be miracles! God has used your prayers and support in remarkable ways to do the (humanly) impossible in these young lives. I hope that the testimony of their lives will be cause for you to celebrate as well!

Just as we celebrate these incredible lives in the here and now, we know that there is even a bigger party going on in heaven because of what God is doing in each of them!

Your fellow party-goer,

Michael Miller