

A young boy with dark hair, wearing a green and blue striped t-shirt, is climbing a chain-link fence. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. His hands are gripping the top of the fence, and his body is pressed against it. The background is a blurred green, suggesting an outdoor setting.

FIGHT or FLIGHT

The Micah Project Spring 2019 News

Three minutes after midnight:

The boy desperately tries to scale the tall, brick wall that encloses Micah's seven acres. I tiptoe toward him and whisper his name as gently as I can. His one-word response repeats on a loop, "No-No-No-No-No," so soaked in panic and horror that it scares me too and elevates my already-pounding heart.

As I take one step closer to the boy, he stops climbing and looks at me—looks, but doesn't see. Eyes wide in panic, he retreats into a corner to make himself invisible.

"Everything is OK. You're safe here. No one is going to hurt you. We all love you," I assure him in soothing tones. He realizes that he is cornered, spots a glass soda bottle a few feet away, and runs toward it. Before I can process what is happening, he breaks the bottle against the wall and cuts his hand in the process. Grasping the neck of the bottle, he charges at me with the jagged edge.

I run.

He chases me with the broken bottle, but stops when he sees me flee. The boy drops the bottle, returns to the wall, and grasps the uneven bricks to gain a foothold with his bare feet. Finally, he boosts himself to the top, leaps to the other side, and disappears into the night. Standing alone in the Honduran darkness, the only sound I hear is my rapidly beating heart. Suddenly, I am exhausted from the emotional marathon.

Rewind: three hours back, bedtime at the Micah House.

The boy and I chat on the front porch. At age 15, he has been a part of the Micah Project for over a year and has a lot going for him. Intelligent, thoughtful, and caring, he is one of the first boys to connect to Micah House visitors with a winning smile and a warm embrace. As we wrap up our conversation so that he can get to bed, he gives me one of those bear hugs and says, "Te amo, Mike. I love you. I'm so glad I have a dad like you!" I hug him back before heading to my cabin.

Hearing his words of genuine affection warms my heart. It's these moments that remind me why I have spent the last 20 years of my life in Honduras. A kid abandoned by his family and victimized by the violent streets now experiences love, healing, and growth through the warmth of the Micah Family. A beautiful story, one filled with themes we love to hear: darkness to light, despair to joy, brokenness to healing.



[Left] Selvin sleeps on the streets of Tegucigalpa in 2016. Today, he experiences God's love every day at the Micah House. [Right] Selvin smiles on a hike in 2018.

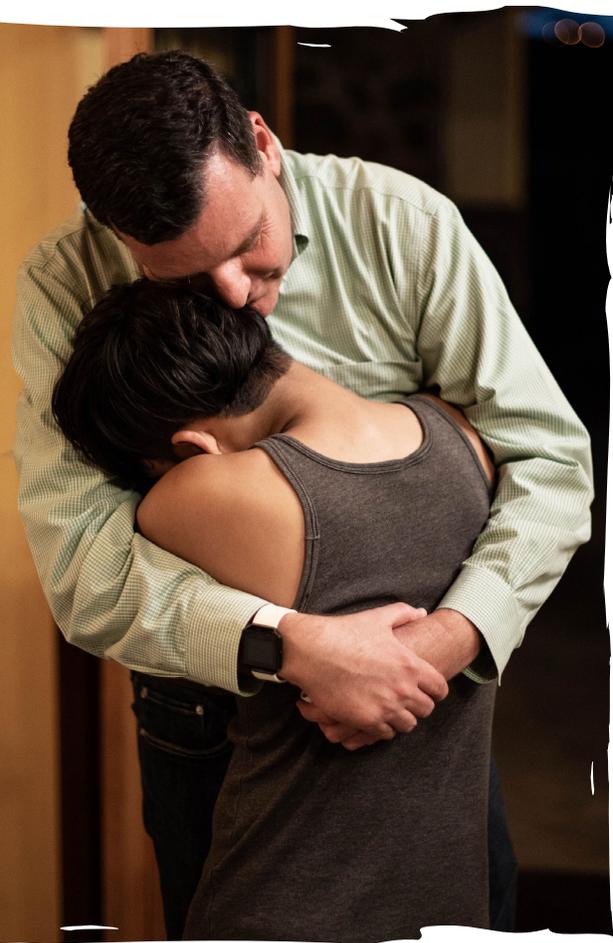


It's a story that makes so much sense, until the boy who hugs me at nine o'clock attacks me with a broken bottle at three minutes past midnight. That's not how this heartwarming tale is supposed to end.

Fast-forward: it is now a little after 3:00 a.m.

I get a call from the guard who patrols our property at night. The boy is at our gate and asks to be let back in. I am relieved. Although I lay down after he fled, I have not slept because worry and prayer have fought a back-and-forth battle in my soul. I run to the gate and motion for the guard to open it. The boy staggers in, his bare feet, like his hands, are bloody. He moves toward me a couple of paces before collapsing in a dead faint. I run to him and call his name, but he is out cold. The guard and I carry him to his bed where he will sleep until the following afternoon. When he finally awakens, he will not remember anything that happened to him after our good-night hug.

When these terrifying episodes first began, we had no vocabulary, no previous experience, and no diagnosis with which to interpret them. They were terrifying because we didn't understand what was happening to the boy and worse, we didn't know how to keep him safe.



That, however, has changed. We now have the words to describe these incidents: dissociative episodes brought on by Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). We also understand why it happens (in layperson's terms, anyway). The part of the brain responsible for survival gets triggered by a traumatic memory and then takes hostage the part of the brain that is in charge of rational thought. In other words, it puts the boy into fight-or-flight mode. This is normally a good thing: In God's perfect design, our brain has the ability to trigger an automated response that keeps us out of harm's way. But for a kid who has been victimized by evil, the brain's survival response can get out of whack and signal **danger** even when none is present.

Although I have written specifically about "the boy," PTSD is a plural problem at Micah. Another 14-year-old boy entered Micah this January after spending almost six years on the streets. Through years of persistent relationship-building, this boy had come to trust us, and we were thrilled when he finally asked for a spot at Micah. But for the first several weeks in our home, he kept his jacket and shoes on 24 hours a day and kept a satchel slung over his shoulder at all times, filled with food and his few, precious possessions. Obvious traits of a kid still in survival mode, right? Unfortunately, I forgot about



[Left] Our caregiver Lucy hugs Axelito in 2017, after many relapses and returns to the streets. Now, he's been in the Micah House consistently for over a year! [Right] Michael hugs him in March 2019.



that and accidentally triggered his flight response one afternoon. Walking into the house after a meeting, I found this boy engrossed in a computer game. I came up behind him and laid my hand on his shoulder in a friendly greeting. Startled by my unexpected touch, he jumped out of his chair, ready to run.

Fight or flight:

These are the choices for kids who have had to find ways to survive while living on the streets of downtown Tegucigalpa. As a matter of fact, they can save a kid's life, but over the long haul, living this way is a roadblock to health. But for a kid who has suffered severe trauma, it takes time, and lots of it, for the part of his brain in charge of survival to return to its correct functions within his system. For that to happen, the kid needs months, if not years, in an environment where he feels safe, loved and accepted.

Imagine that you are a Micah Project caregiver, and you realize that one of your most talented, bright, loving kids can go into crisis mode and turn on you at any moment. How do you react to the jagged edge of that broken bottle? Maybe you think, "This is *not* what I signed up for! I got into missions so that I could love on kids (and get loved back by them, too). I never expected it to be this hard: I definitely never thought I'd be in danger!" And let me confess: Even though we have a courageous group of caregivers, at some point each one has reached this place of desperation.

When choosing to work with marginalized kids who have been victims of every kind of violence, your motivation cannot be, "If I just love these kids enough, eventually, they will love me back." Though that sounds noble, it's not fair to expect brokenhearted and traumatized kids to respond in healthy, well-adjusted ways. Instead, we are called to a greater love, an unshakable commitment to love them come what may: ***no conditions, no exceptions, no strings attached.***

That's the kind of love we see in an ancient story, the story of a Man who was despised and rejected by a world that He loved perfectly, purely. What must have it been like to hear people for whom He would give everything shout "***CRUCIFY HIM***" as their response to His love? And yet, that's what it took to show them the extent to which He was willing to go so that they would accept His love. Though we humans will never get it totally right, Christ's example is all we need to extend that same love to a kid who is terrified by the lies that his brain is telling him. It is a love that says, "Don't worry little one. The cross was big enough for all the brokenness you carry. Nothing you can do will take that away from you."

When you make a life commitment to brokenhearted people, you commit to the whole thing, not just to the happy parts. For the last 20 years, the Micah Project has done exactly that. We've had many times of incredible joy, watching young men leave the streets behind and become the men God created them to be. We've had times of sorrow, when kids lost the battle against the demons of their past. But mostly, we've had lots of in-between times, in which we are called to love a group of kids even though we have no idea what the outcome of our love will be. And do you know what? That is a beautiful, blessed thing, because over and over it forces us to entrust the final outcome to our Lord.

On behalf of our caregivers who have shed blood, sweat, and tears over these boys, I want you to know that your commitment to these kids emboldens us. Your faithfulness, love and unwavering support of the Micah Project gives us the courage to take these kids in our arms and say with complete confidence, "Nothing, absolutely nothing that has been done to you can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." How amazing that these boys, once living day-to-day never knowing when they would need to fight or to flee, now have a family around the world that is committed to showing them a love that will bind their wounds and heal their traumatic memories. We thank you for being a part of the Micah family!

Sincerely,
Michael Miller

Micah Project Updates . . .

- Our "Heart for Micah" tour in February was a wonderful opportunity to share about what God is doing through the Micah Project. For two weeks, Micah House graduates Miguel and Hector traveled with our founding director Micah Miller and the Bell family (who lived at Micah for many years and now work for the ministry in the US) across several states to see people who have loved and prayed for them, meet new friends, and tell stories of God's transforming work. It was such an encouraging time, and we were glad to see many of you along the way! Currently Hector and Miguel are in the US for several more months studying English with Youth With a Mission (YWAM) in Virginia. We pray they will grow closer to God and continue to develop their language skills during this time.
- If you'd like to have us visit your church or are interested in planning a local gathering to share about the Micah Project, please email us at micahprojectbells@gmail.com. We love sharing about what God is doing in the Micah Family!
- We ask for your continued prayers for Micah missionary (and Isaiah House founder) Stephen Kusmer as he goes through treatment for colon cancer in Indiana. He is greatly missed in Honduras every day, and we know it is also challenging for him to be so far away from the work and community that he loves, even though God has been very close during this time. His email is stephen.kusmer@gmail.com if you'd like to contact him or be added to his update list.
- Even as you read this letter highlighting the effects of trauma, please continue to pray for the Micah Family in Honduras: the young men in our three homes, our many graduates, our staff, and our friends who continue to spend time on the streets.

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