

# Cranky Feet and Lost Sheep

The Micah Project Spring 2018 News

“I’m leaving.”

The boy who speaks these words is Axel, a 13-year-old who has already lived an old man’s lifetime of tragedy. He is undersized for his age and baby-faced, which make his gruff, barroom-brawler’s voice almost comical. But there is no smile attached to this declaration, and hearing him say this ties my stomach in knots.

Axel’s favorite thing about Micah is his bike. When he’s not riding it, he’s tinkering with it. He’s added lights, a speaker, a police siren and at least five different paint jobs. When he rides it, he is every little boy, a happy-go-lucky smile on his face as he races at breakneck speed.

Sometimes, he rides so fast that the blue smudge on his shirtless left shoulder looks like dirt, but it is really a tattoo. Not colorful and artistic like ones currently in vogue, it’s more of a prison-yard scrawl. It says “Jessica”—his mom’s name, and it is out of place on his narrow, little-boy shoulders.

Every once in a while, Axel sits next to me at my desk and draws. One day, he says in a monotone that barely cracks open the door of his broken heart, “Michael, my mom was killed by the gangs a few months ago.” I stutter words of sorrow to him, unsure of how to engage his grief. He finishes his drawing quickly and heads out to find his next distraction.

A few days later, he draws a car with fancy flames on its doors. He asks me how to spell my name and then hands me his drawing; he has written “Axel and Michael” on it. Hugging me he says “Michael, you’re like the dad I never had.” Though I have done this work for almost 20 years, these words bore a straight-line path into my heart, filling it with love and a dangerous amount of hope.





## “I’m leaving.”

I shouldn’t be surprised—shouldn’t be, but I am. I’ve let his declaration of son-ship get my hopes up. But throughout 2017, Axel has rarely stayed more than two weeks at Micah before returning to the streets. When we start classes on a Monday morning, someone will realize that we haven’t heard Axel’s voice in the last ten minutes or so. He will have climbed over our wall, again, and a heavy silence will overlay our normally raucous morning routine.

A couple of weeks later, he will reappear at our front gate, bedraggled and dirty, smelling like the yellow glue he has been inhaling non-stop. His head hangs low as his eyes plead for yet another chance. This is his cycle of death and resurrection, repeated on an endless loop. Every addict knows this story.

Ironically, the fact that Axel tells me that he is leaving this time is a sign of growing strength. Rather than just going over the wall, he has embedded a plea for help in his announcement. He knows what comes next: our staff and a handful of boys will surround him with their versions of “You can do it.” He sits there silently as we encourage him to fight, but we can see in his eyes that he is already gone from this place—planning where to buy his next bottle of yellow glue.

This time, though, he concedes to watch a movie with me. It buys two hours of hope; maybe this time he will be strong enough to fight through temptation’s waves. As soon as the final credits start to roll, however, he repeats:

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It isn’t a threat or a bargaining chip; it’s more passive than that, as if he is describing something that is happening to him rather than something that he is choosing to do. As we walk toward the front gate with our arms linked, I frantically search for anything that I can do or say to change his mind. I accompany him to the road that will take him downtown. After hugging me, he walks away. Although I have lived some version of this story many times, it still breaks me to pieces.

One week later, I sit in Denny’s and enjoy lunch. My plan is to see a movie in the mall afterwards, a much-needed breather. Halfway through lunch, however, I am overwhelmed with such a sense of urgency that I drop my fork. I suddenly know that I am to change my Saturday plans and head into the red-light district to look for Axel. Not to save him or to cajole him into returning to Micah, but to show him that our love doesn’t end at Micah’s gate.

Because it’s Saturday, there’s a fair amount of foot traffic flowing past run-down buildings to get to the sprawling, vibrant outdoor market. Anyone not on the move has become trapped in this broken-down part of town by a toxic mix of drugs, alcohol and prostitution.

As I walk, I ask the Lord to lead me to Axel. Up one block and down the next—no sign of him. It gets hotter, and

I get thirstier, but I am determined not to drink any water (a tip for travelers: avoid bathrooms in Tegucigalpa’s red-light district AT ALL COSTS). Two hours pass—no Axel. I feel myself getting angry. Did I really think that God had spoken to me over a Cobb salad at Denny’s? Or am I simply inventing this little melodrama out of the sadness I feel for this lost kid?

I decide to pack it in, get off my aching feet, and go back to my original Saturday plans. Headed down a final street, I see a bar on the opposite end of the block. I walk over and peer into the darkness, and there is Axel, leaning against a wall and watching a group of drunken men shoot pool.

Finally, he glances in my direction and does a double-take. “*What are you doing here?*” he asks. While we stand outside the bar and talk, a group of prostitutes who ply their trade on this street corner approach me suspiciously. They assume that this tall foreigner has come to harm the little boy. Axel backs them off, explaining that I work for the Micah Project and am here to help him.

We decide to buy lunch and walk into the market district to a storefront that sells fried chicken. After he eats, though, he is anxious to resume his day. He wants to beg for a few hours to earn enough money to get a room for the night in a “motel” that rents by the hour. Before he goes, I wrap him in a big hug and say what I have come to say: “Axel, I want you to know that you are one of my most favorite people in the entire world.” “*Gracias,*” he replies in his gravelly man-boy voice as he hugs me back. He turns away and disappears into the crowd.

Axel reappeared at our gate the first week of December 2017. And, at the time I write this in mid-April 2018, he has not yet left—over four months of stability! Several weeks ago, he posted a picture of himself on Facebook in which he relaxed in his bed, his baseball cap collection lined up above his head and his beloved bike by his side. He appeared to have found his place after a lifetime of wandering.

Will he still be at Micah by the time you read this article? We pray that the answer is yes, but, often, our hopeful optimism collides with the grim reality of these boys’ brokenness. Axel’s story reminds us of how weak we are, completely unable to save another human being. We desperately want him to follow the path of the many other young men who have called Micah home: leave the streets, get an education, become a godly man, live a successful life. But we are not the ones to determine Axel’s future.



In the midst of uncertainty, this we know: Axel has a God who pursues, who goes after him when he runs. Not a God who gets cranky and loses faith after two hours of pounding the pavement in search of his lost sheep, but a Father who will go to “the uttermost parts of the sea” in pursuit of him. A God who has gone all the way to the cross for him, and who, as He hangs there dying, looks out at the world that put him there and proclaims, “Behold, I make all things new.” Even you, broken, lost little Axel. Even you.

It is an honor to be a part of Axel’s life, and yes, it can be heartbreaking—sometimes crushingly so. But to go after lost sheep is to participate—in our small, imperfect way—in our Father’s unbounded, ever-pursuing love.

We at the Micah Project are humbled and deeply grateful that you have chosen to join us in this pursuit. Every prayer you say, every word of encouragement you send, and every dollar you give connect you to Axel and to his Father’s pursuit of him. And when our Father lifts Axel onto his shoulders and exclaims, “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep,” we pray that His joy will be yours as well.

Your brother in Christ,  
**Michael Miller**

## Micah Project Updates

- We have a new Micah guy! Please keep 11-year-old Marco in your prayers.
- Another young man has just started a process with the Isaiah house! Please keep 17-year-old Junior in your prayers.

Help Micah grads live out God's calling to take the Gospel across the globe by visiting the link on our "Donate" page on our website!

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