

## The Dawn

The scorching heat of the sun bore down upon us. Thunder rumbled off in the distance. Beads of sweat rolled down my neck. Anticipation coursed through my veins. More and more children arrived at the field to watch, bringing with them sweets and hopes for a good match-up. The cheers from the crowd swelled like an ocean wave as the referee came to the center with the ball. All eyes were gazing intently on midfield as the referee blew his whistle and released the ball. Then the game began. The midfielders struggled to get the ball, both desiring the first possession. After much passing back and forth, our opponent's striker broke away and was able to break our defense. The crowd held its breath as the striker drew back his leg and fired the ball straight through the hands of our goalkeeper. All was silent, and then all was thunderous. The spectators went wild as their team scored the first goal and quickly took control of the game.

This contest of wills occurred almost on a daily basis at the Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos Orphanage in Miacatlán, Mexico. Speed soccer on the walled concrete courts called the "Ganchas" was one of my favorite memories from the mission trip that I went on with my church during July 2010. We flew to Mexico City and then traveled two hours south into the mountains until we reached the NPH Orphanage, where we spent a week living in the dorms alongside the children. We taught bible school to about 120 second and third graders during the day, then spent time entertaining the children afterwards, mostly by playing games, swimming in the pool, or playing sports like soccer, kickball, basketball, or volleyball. Although the mission trip lasted only eight short days, I will carry the lessons and values I learned from the journey for the rest of my life. Many of the children were abandoned by their parents at a young age or were forced to run away in order to escape physical or sexual abuse from family members. Some of the older

orphans became the heads of their families after their parents died and were forced to take care of younger siblings. The orphans who live at NPH come from extreme poverty and troubled households, but despite their difficult upbringing, they are some of the happiest and grateful kids I have ever met. The strength they display every day through such trying circumstances made me discover that one must persevere through all hardships in the hopes of finding a better future, like these orphans found when they arrived at the NPH Orphanage in Miacatlán.

My older sister had participated on the same mission trip to the Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos Orphanage several years earlier. When my church first announced that it had opened registration, I was intrigued but hesitant to sign up. This trip would be my first time out of the country without my family for a span of an entire week. I was nervous about how the kids would view us, not to mention being forced to utilize my elementary Spanish language skills that I had gained during my first two years of high school. However, through the encouragement of my sister, parents, and friends who had already registered, I finally decided to sign up for the trip.

After school ended in June, the weeks flew by, and soon I was packing my suitcase in anticipation of our departure. When the long-awaited day finally arrived, I woke up at four to catch our early morning flight to Mexico City. By one in the afternoon, we had landed in the capital city, which seemed to stretch out in all directions to the encircling mountain ranges. My group of 30 youth participants and five adult leaders took the two-hour bus drive south to the small town of Miacatlán. As we entered the main gate and were greeted by the staff, I saw curious children peering around the corners of buildings and through fences, evaluating their new playmates for the week. We settled into our dorms, shared our first dinner with the children, and then played basketball on the courts behind the school. At first when I met the children, I was nervous about how they would interact with me. They were soon asking to ride piggyback and to

play soccer once they learned our names. Many church groups came throughout the summer on similar missions as ours, so the children were accustomed to new guests every week. I reflected on how amazing it was that I woke up in Minnesota that morning and was playing basketball in the mountains of central Mexico that same night. I believed that my journey there was over, but, in truth, it was just beginning.

The next day we travelled to Cuernavaca, the “City of Eternal Spring,” to visit the market, eat lunch at a local restaurant, and tour the NPH home there for adolescents in high school. We explored the maze of colorful stalls at the market filled with glazed pottery, woven purses, and wooden carvings. The vendors were very friendly toward us and took great pride in their work. These craftsmen may not have had expensive homes or fancy cars, but they had their families and their passion for their craft. Through my conversations with them, I learned how living simply can help one to focus on the elements of life that truly matter—family and community. When we visited the NPH high school home, we were able to meet some of the youths and ended up playing an intense game of volleyball with them. The staff told us that a large number of the orphans decide to leave once they turn 16 years old, but the ones who lived at the NPH high school home were determined to continue their education on to college. Their drive to achieve a better future than that of their parents demonstrated the perseverance of the human spirit in the face of challenging times.

The main mission of my church group was to teach bible school to a group of about 120 orphans from ages 7-11. For four hours every morning, we would meet up with the children to sing songs, read bible passages, and watch skits. The theme for our bible school program was based off of C.S. Lewis’ *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*. The skits were taken from the story to teach important lessons to the children, and most of the children were very enthusiastic

about them, cheering for the heroes and booing the villains. By the end of the week, I was commonly referred to by my character name, “Mr. Beaver,” who is the talking beaver from the story that helps the Pevensie children to return to their own world. After our performances, we broke into smaller groups, in which the kids ate snacks and made simple crafts. After saying our closing prayer, we would go to lunch and take a siesta while the afternoon sun blazed fiercely.

Each day we grew closer to these joyful children, many of whom were born in extreme poverty, some not ever knowing their families. When we first drove to the orphanage, we passed a large garbage dump carved into the side of a hill. Kelly, the staff member who greeted us at the airport, had us look closer. We realized that there was actually a small town made up of dilapidated shacks in the dump. She informed us that many of the children came from this garbage dump because their parents couldn't support them. The optimism and cheerfulness of these orphans despite their troubled childhoods awakened me. I realized how petty the hardships that most of us complain about every day are, whether they concern our families, friends, or our schoolwork. When we compare our troubles to those of these orphans and witness their strength, we realize how shallow our problems truly are. We can learn to appreciate the comforts that we take for granted every day: a house, a warm bed, food and clean water, an opportunity for education—simple aspects of our life that most of these children never had before arriving at the NPH Orphanage. We can learn to be thankful each day for family, friends, community—life.

Our nights at the orphanage consisted mainly of dinner followed by sports games for the rest of the evening. Every night we were there, there were speed soccer matches at the Ganchas, even if there was a brief rainstorm. Our team was almost always crushed by the talented youths who spent hours every day practicing and improving their skills. The thrill and excitement of playing in the fast-paced games were not tarnished by the multiple goals made by the opposing

team. On one of the last nights, we actually managed to win a game during the speed soccer tournament. Competing against the children led to close bonds between our teams due to the teamwork and sportsmanship displayed on both sides. During our time at the orphanage, many friendships were formed between the children and our mission team. Axel challenged me to a game of marbles every morning before breakfast. Manuel was in my bible study group, and we often played tag and hide and seek. Fernando and I often raced around the grounds. Through playing and eating alongside the children, we formed special bonds that were not soon forgotten.

Following tradition, we threw a fiesta for the kids on the last day of bible school. We spent hours decorating the chapel, blowing up balloons, and constructing piñatas. Our performance of *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* reached its conclusion with the heroes defeating the evil White Witch to a resounding cheer from the children. After that we went outside to have a water balloon war among our small groups, which was very refreshing on such a hot day. The last event was the breaking of the piñatas, which caused a riot of children scrambling for the candy once they broke. As the paper-maché bear was broken, a realization came to me—I would soon have to leave all these children and return back home. The melancholy thought rang through my head. I would miss these children from whom I learned so much from about determination and optimism, but I knew that because of the Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos Orphanage, they had hope for a better future.

As quickly as the day to travel to the Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos Orphanage in Miacatlán, Mexico, had arrived, the day to leave came. With many sad smiles and tearful eyes, we said goodbye to friends whom we knew so briefly but became so close to after spending a week with each other. I know that, for many years to come, I will look back fondly on the friendships and experiences that I had at the NPH Orphanage. I remember racing Fernando in the

swimming pool and to seeing who could dive deeper. I remember carrying around Manuel on my back as he pretended to be a knight with the play sword from our skits. All of these happy memories from my weeklong mission trip to central Mexico remind me of the lessons that I learned from these orphans who lead simple, yet joyful lives at the NPH Orphanage. Whatever hardships or challenges I face in my daily life, I can reflect on the time I spent with these children and find strength and perseverance in the hope that the dawn will be brighter.