Juan Carlos: If I Am Alive

"God has a purpose for me, because I am alive. When I run into challenges, obstacles, when I struggle with my self-esteem, I remember this and say to myself, ‘If I am alive, it is because God has a purpose for me.’” Juan Carlos Aguilar, a shy man, spoke simply, matter-of-factly, humbly.

Juan Carlos was born with a type of dwarfism to a loving family from Esquintla. In 1986, when he was nine years old, his parents brought him to the Obras Sociales del Santo Hermano Pedro in Antigua, praying that the Obras might be able to take him in.

The Obras* had opened its doors only five years earlier. In 1986, it was a struggling home for the ‘incapacitated and abandoned’ as the Franciscan brothers would say. There were not even sufficient beds for those who already found shelter there. There was simply no room for another little boy.

Prosthetic Limb and Specialty Wheelchair Matching Grant

Help us meet the $25,750 challenge. Many thanks to the SG Foundation!
Read more.

Splattered Paint

Dr. Tecúm picked up a paintbrush between patients, his smile broader than his face. Jeff Early, a US volunteer, danced and sang with Edgar Lux, Guatemalan volunteer director as they traded places...
Read more.
Juan Carlos speaks of the moment when he and his mother were leaving the Obras, having been turned away. At the door, they ran into Brother Guillermo, the Obras’ founder. In that moment, Juan Carlos’ life was changed forever. Brother Guillermo told Juan Carlos’ mother that God would provide; they would find a place for her son.

By the end of the day, Juan Carlos had a new home and his mother was on her way back to Esquintla. It was hard, Juan Carlos says, to be left, but he adds, they were in agreement; this was his only chance for an education, a full life. I imagine this little boy, acting like a little man, as so many Guatemalan children do, discussing the options with his parents, agreeing as a family: it was for the best.

In my mind’s eye, I see Juan Carlos in his wheelchair bravely watching his mother leave from the yellow door of the Obras. But the image fades when Juan Carlos tells me that he received his first wheelchair while living at the Obras. Before that time, he crawled and dragged himself upon the floor. That is why he could not go to school. Wherever he went until he was 9 years old, a family member carried him.

Juan Carlos never reveals the full picture as he tells his story. The details hover around the edges, as if his daily struggles are not central to his life’s story. I am struck by the contrast. This man who leaves out so many of the challenges of his life, because he simply sees them as reality in Guatemala, hardly worth mentioning. I, who assume a better life than I know to be true for those living in Guatemala, because it is hard for me to accept that truth for my friend. And, therefore, Juan Carlos accidently drops little bits of harsh reality and I find my assumptions laid bare and left behind as we go along.

For the next twelve years, Juan Carlos lived at the Obras. He graduated as an associate accountant, learned to live outside of the institution, married, and has two children. He speaks proudly of his home, two rooms that he and his wife Brinda built on the land her parents left them. This happy story is sprinkled with discrimination, difficulties in obtaining employment, poverty. He does not speak of the early years at the Obras and I choose not to ask. These struggles are not the central theme. The central theme remains, “Because I am alive, God has a purpose for my life.”

Juan Carlos now works for Faith In Practice in our wheelchair and mobility program. He says his heart is in this work and he sees his
God-given purpose as showing others who may have lost hope, who have ‘different abilities’, as he would say, that anything is possible. He is living proof that anything is possible, because if you are alive, God has a purpose for you.

As the past melts into the present, Juan Carlos and I sit and talk about the wheelchair clinic, the mothers and fathers who carry their children, seeking a wheelchair, just as Juan Carlos’ mother and father had carried him. We speak of the tears of joy that every family sheds as they receive this gift, this miracle of a wheelchair that will change their lives. And, we speak of the young man who came to the wheelchair clinic with pressure sores that penetrated to the bone. At twenty-one years old, the young man with spina bifida was dying. Needless. We speak of what might have been had he received a wheelchair fit for him, with training to prevent those sores. And, then we sit for a moment in silence. I ask Juan Carlos what he thought his life would have been like if he had never received a wheelchair, and his answer, yet once again, surprises me. He says simply, “I would not be alive.”

As he speaks these words, I see God’s purpose realized before me. God’s love made manifest before my eyes in this man who is dedicating himself to serving others. Others who are waiting for a wheelchair, who one day will say, “I am alive because God has a purpose for me.”

— Rev. Linda L. McCarty

*Currently the Obras is home to nearly 300 and provides medical and surgical care to thousands each year. Learn more at
www.obrashermanopedro.org

Copyright © 2016 Faith In Practice, All rights reserved.

Our mailing address is:
7500 Beechnut St., Suite 208 - Houston, Texas 77074