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To the many who have cared,

Ours is a conventional family in more ways than one would likely imagine. What most sets us apart from other families is the fact that our kids come and go with greater frequency than what is considered usual. The make up of our family tends to be a work in progress. This is not to say that our time together, however long it may be, is not well spent and meaningful. The relationships we form while sharing a home are genuinely caring and might even be the envy of other, more traditional families.

At present we have five youngsters who are new to our program. Each of them came to us before completing his nineteenth birthday. Two of them joined us earlier last year and three in December. All of them came to us having known a level of poverty which those of us from more privileged backgrounds would struggle to comprehend.

Most of them have also suffered additional hardship. Agustin's father was murdered early one morning not far from their home, shortly after leaving for work, leaving his widowed mother to raise five small children alone. Agustin, who was twelve at the time, was the oldest child. His youngest brother was four. Pablo was orphaned before he and his older brother and younger sister reached adolescence. An elderly grandmother assumed responsibility for watching over Pablo and his siblings at the time of their parents' death and, since then, has been aided by a caring extended family. Even so, theirs was a bare bones way of life. Eric's mother died of ovarian cancer at 47. Eric's father has carried on to the best of his ability, but has struggled as a single parent providing for seven children with meager resources.

The poverty and losses that these youngsters suffered, and the harsh realities that routinely follow such hardship, all but guaranteed that their lives would offer considerable obstacles and little opportunity. As the oldest child, Agustin was called on to help provide for his younger siblings, reducing his schooling to hit and miss status. Pablo continued to study at the public school in the rural community he called home, but the academic standards of such institutions is abysmal by any definition, leaving Pablo's education badly lacking. Eric managed to graduate from high school and wanted to go on to university but could not for lack of needed funds. The premature death of Eric's mother has compelled him to pursue a career in medicine. He hopes to one day become a doctor.

Another of our new arrivals, José, also saw his academic career cut short after completing seventh grade. Like Agustin, he is the oldest child in his home, and like Agustin, he was called on to help provide for his family. At just fifteen years of age, José went to work in the sugar cane fields common to Guatemala, from sun up to sun down, managing tropical heat and insufficient

sustenance. His meager lunch routinely consisted of a few corn tortillas and his mother's home made chili sauce.

Their other house mates have also known hardship. Antonio comes from Nebaj, an area known for having been decimated by Guatemala's decades long civil war. Antonio's father survived the war but was unable to live with the memory of the atrocities he witnessed and, as a consequence, died not long after the war's conclusion. Antonio was 5 at the time of his father's passing.

Rudy has never known his father, and his mother died when he was a toddler, leaving Rudy to be raised in a Catholic orphanage. Marvin's mother abandoned him and his older sister when he was in grade school. Two years later, Marvin's father passed way, his death a consequence of acute alcoholism. Both Marvin and Rudy eventually wound up in the street and succumbed to drugs, as was the norm with most of their peers, futilely seeking a way to escape the unrelenting despair that accompanies being homeless at such a young age.

Marvin's fifteen year old son Bryan was also living in the street with his mother, and just four years old when we brought him home to live with us.

Given their histories, one could reasonably assume that the young men currently under our care arrived at our door angry and hardened, feeling sorry for themselves if not sporting considerable chips on their shoulders. But such conclusions would be unfounded. Although they understand that life, especially as they have known it, can be an agent of great trial and suffering, these young men have taken their setbacks in remarkable stride and with amazing grace. Not one of them plays the victim in any form of its varied manifestations. Their consistent good cheer is infectious, if not inspiring, and belies the disproportionate grief their relatively short lives have known. The gratitude they show for the blessings we can afford them, both large and small, is readily apparent and profoundly moving. Despite their many setbacks, each of our young men remains determined to better his lot in life and make the most of opportunity, on the rare occasion that it comes his way.

More admirable yet, they have managed to transform their collective hardship into an asset. My *adopted sons* display a level of empathy for the suffering of each other specifically and all others in general which is only possessed by those who have known considerable pain. Willingly and effortlessly, they have each others backs in most any situation. Perhaps this is another way in which our family differs from the more commonly known variety.

Statistics have never served Only A Child that well. Our numbers have been and remain small. Our shelter has just 4 bedrooms, including one for our live-in house parents, and a capacity for 9 residents at any given time. But our small numbers work to our advantage in ways that simple statistics cannot convey. We are able to create a welcoming and personal environment for those who, for a time, call our house home. Everyone has a place where he can belong and take up roots; a place where he is encouraged to reconsider dreams and careers that had previously been put on hold or abandoned. By focusing our attention on a handful of lives at

any given time, Only A Child possesses the ability to back them financially, as well. Such accomplishments are all but impossible to replicate in larger, institutional settings.

It gives me pause to consider the level of shared past suffering currently under our roof. You have chosen to care about the young men that Only A Child serves despite the fact that, in all likelihood, most of you will never meet them face-to-face. Thanks to your kind hearts and generous nature, these young lives are back on track, studying in a variety of educational institutions, pursuing goals that, not long ago, seemed unattainable. Your willingness to join us in our effort to offer renewed promise and hope to young men living in a land far from your own is admirable, to say the least. We, all of us who call Only A Child home, are grateful beyond words. May the goodwill you have shown us return to you many times over.

May God bless.

George

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P.S. Our annual spring fundraiser will be held Saturday, April 8th at 7pm. If memory serves me well, our first fundraiser took place in 1997, which means that we have been hosting these events for 20 years. From the beginning, they have been well attended and supported - great successes without exception.

Only A Child continues to host these events because, simply put, we still depend on the support they generate to maintain our program. In Guatemala at present, the exchange rate for the dollar is the lowest it has been in a decade. This represents a significant loss of income for us when changing currency - U.S. dollars for the Guatemalan quetzal. Therefore, I ask that you please support this year's event with continued generosity. I hope to see you there! For more information, or to purchase tickets in advance, please visit our web site at www.onlyachild.org