



Winter 2024

To the many who have cared,

I first met Erick nearly 10 years ago. His father had begun a conversation with our staff psychologist, Luis Alfredo, hoping to secure a place for his son at Only A Child. Initial contact with a candidate's family is channeled through Luis Alfredo. All conversation had taken place by phone, as Erick and his father lived 8 hours away from Guatemala City. The dialogue had progressed satisfactorily and, at Luis Alfredo's recommendation, we agreed to meet with Erick and his father in person.

The meeting was held at a convenience store servicing a gas station a short distance from our shelter. The store offered a variety of snacks and simple meals, and provided a small dining area. I was surprised to see that Erick's father had not made the journey, as he had been persistent in his efforts on his son's behalf. A conflict at work had kept him away. Erick's older brother Tomas had come in their father's place to serve as a proxy of sorts.

After brief introductions, I purchased a beverage and light snack for everyone, and chose a table somewhat removed from the others, to offer us privacy. Luis Alfredo began the conversation by providing a concise summary of Erick's background. Most of what was shared was not new to me, as I had come to the meeting well informed. New details did emerge however, not all of them to Erick's advantage. I nodded from time to time to show interest, while waiting to hear what Erick had to say. His observations would provide me with my first impressions of the person who reportedly wanted to improve his life with the assistance of Only A Child.

Luis Alfredo finished and I turned to Erick to give him my full attention. Much to my surprise it was Tomas who spoke next, making a case for Erick on his behalf. Tomas was focused and articulate and I was impressed with how he expressed himself. Nevertheless, I remained unconvinced, believing it was ultimately Erick's responsibility to persuade me that he warranted a place within our program.

"I'd like to hear from Erick now," was all I said. Erick had shown little interest in being there up until that moment. He had sat slouched in his chair, arms crossed, apparently bored. I waited to see if Erick would perk up. He did not. He spoke as if obligated to do so, seemingly wanting to end the meeting as quickly as possible and be on his way. Luis Alfredo shot me a knowing look conveying displeasure. Tomas was also aware that Erick had not helped his own cause, and tried to compensate for his brother's underwhelming effort by picking up where Erick had left off, but it was to no avail.

Luis Alfredo and I spoke at the meeting's conclusion. I routinely give a candidate the benefit of the doubt, but felt that taking in Erick would prove to be a waste of time for everyone involved. It seemed he had been pressured to come against his will and shown little interest in joining us. Luis Alfredo concurred and promised to let Erick's father know of our decision.

I continued to think of Erick for a time, believing that his father had undoubtedly felt that it was in his son's best interest to live at Only A Child, wondering why Erick had apparently not been of the same opinion.

In time my thoughts drifted to other matters. I was, therefore, caught off guard when Luis Alfredo asked if he might speak to me of Erick. I reluctantly agreed to hear him out. Erick's father had resumed communication, once again persistently petitioning that we grant Erick a place within our program. "What?" I exclaimed, shaking my head in disbelief. "I was thoroughly unimpressed with Erick during our first meeting. Why meet with him again." Without going into detail, Luis Alfredo explained that he sensed that Erick's situation might have changed. Trusting his judgement, I agreed to a second meeting.

We met at the same location, roughly a year after our first gathering. This time Erick's father was present. Luis Alfredo invited him to speak. Many years later, the details elude me, but I do remember that I felt he spoke well. Nevertheless, his efforts failed to change my mind. Erick alone could accomplish that. I asked Erick to speak, wondering what he would have to say.

From the moment he began to speak, it was clear that he had returned with a different take on the situation. He was engaged and enthused and had come very well prepared to make his case, leaving me to conclude that he was far more intelligent than I had assumed, when we first met. Erick had recently graduated high school and wanted to continue his studies at The University of San Carlos (USAC), Guatemala's foremost public university. I granted him that opportunity and several weeks later, Erick moved into our home.

Erick's initial desire was to study medicine, but the rigorous demands of that field conflicted with the function of our program. I asked if there was another option that interested him. With little thought, he replied that psychology did. Upon investigating, we learned that the requirements of majoring in psychology better complimented the daily operations at Only A Child, enabling Erick to pursue a career as a psychologist.

It is necessary to take and pass entrance exams before being accepted at USAC. The exams are demanding, as there are many more perspective applicants than there are places available. Our youths largely come from rural, impoverished areas, as did Erick. The vast majority of children and adolescents raised in rural Guatemala study in the public school system, which is widely criticized for the inferior quality of its education. Public school graduates therefore find themselves at a significant disadvantage when seeking to enter USAC, as compared to the more privileged students who attend the country's private schools.

Erick, as do all of our residents pursuing a college education, immediately began to prepare to take and pass the entrance exams. USAC offers courses to assist with the process. Only A Child also provides a Spanish language online program offering an extensive variety of secondary school and university level study. The courses are recorded and always available to take and return to as often as desired.

Our in-house carpentry shop still functioned when Erick joined us in January of 2017. Monday through Friday and Saturday until mid-day, Erick worked at the shop along side his housemates. Nights and the rest of the weekend were given to study for the entrance exams at USAC. The exams are offered twice a year, once in the spring and then again at years end. Erick registered to take the exam for the first time in the April of 2017. He failed. Undaunted, he continued to study and tried again in November of the



same year. Once again he failed. Now discouraged, he spoke with a representative at USAC and learned that his reading skills were deficient, specifically his ability to recall and comprehend what he had read.

At Erick's request, we subscribed to the most highly regarded newspaper in Guatemala. We purchased books and magazines not only for Erick, but also for his housemates. The discipline of reading and enjoying books for its own sake, is rarely taught in the public schools. Due to a lack of resources, books are unavailable. Erick used the stipend he earned in our carpentry shop to purchase books on his own. Much of his free time was spent in his room, reading anything available to him.

Erick tried again in April, 2018, but yet again he failed. He was now disheartened and resigned to try one last time the coming November. If unsuccessful, he would take leave of the program and return home. Discouraged myself, but still trusting that Erick was university material, I encouraged him to remain persistent. He did and on his fourth try, Erick took and passed USAC's entrance exam.

Erick began his studies in January of 2019. He adapted quickly. He enjoyed university life; the classes; the subject matter and the discussions it inspired; the culture and the the chance to be on-campus. The first year of study passed quickly and Erick eagerly began his freshman year in January, 2020. The academic year began well and Erick had high expectations for it until... March 17, the day that the COVID Pandemic invaded Guatemala, effectively shutting down the country and the world.

People everywhere rushed and struggled to adapt. USAC converted to virtual study although they were unprepared to do so. We also adapted on the fly, determined to give our residents every chance to function successfully within the drastically new model they had been handed. Thankfully, our efforts met with success, which is not to say we did not meet numerous challenges along the way.

Erick would not return to on-campus classes until July, 2023, after having completed nearly 2 1/2 years of virtual study. The undergraduate program in Psychology at USAC requires 5 full years of study. This November, Erick completed the undergraduate program, making him the first of our residents to do so.

Erick has known for some time that he planned to find employment in his profession while pursuing a masters degree at USAC, on the weekends. He intended to do so at Only A Child, but recently informed me that he has decided to move on from the program in mid-December. Erick has reached the point where he wants to assume responsibility for his life. He feels that now, after having completed his undergraduate studies, would be a good time to do so.

I recently spoke with Erick in private, over a cup of coffee. I learned that he plans to register for USAC's Masters program in the coming days, and is exploring several options. He hopes to pursue the program closer to home, at one of USAC's satellite campuses outside of the city. He has also begun to research possibilities for employment, reviewing NGO's for openings. Erick looks forward to spending much of the month of December and the holidays with his family, something he has not done since 2016.

Over the years, Erick has hinted at having had a troubled past before coming to Only A Child, but had been unwilling to go into detail. Given his easy-going, reserved nature, I found it difficult to comprehend how it might be so. Curious, I asked him about it. At long last, he was willing to open up and shared the following.

Shortly after turning 15, he had begun to hang out with what he referred to as *bad types*. He had also begun to drink rather heavily. After a year of so, he tired of the lifestyle and decided to move several hours away to live with an uncle, to reconsider what he wanted to do with his life.

His mother had been ill at the time of his departure. Several months later, she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer and Erick returned home. He began his junior year of high school shortly after, but the news of his mother's diagnosis had left him angry and rebellious, both at home and at school. Erick squandered much of his junior year as a consequence, but given his considerable intelligence, still managed to pass his classes. It was at that time that we first met with Erick and his brother Tomas.

Erick's mother passed away at roughly the same time. He returned to high school for his senior year, wanting to see what he was capable of when he applied himself. I asked him what had served as his motivation. Erick answered by telling me that he had spoken with his mother one last time before her death. Her last words to him came in the form of a request, asking that he give up alcohol and the self-destructive lifestyle he had previously pursued. Erick agreed to do so. One year later, Erick came to our second meeting a changed young man. At long last I understood why I had witnessed two drastically different Erick's at our first and second meetings with him all those years ago.

I asked Erick how he felt his time at Only A Child had helped and changed him. He considered my question for a moment then shared that he had learned to take his life and studies more seriously, that he had grown up and become a man during his 8 years living in our home. He also stated that he had learned to better organize his time, as well as prioritize and set goals for himself by having watched and learned from his older housemates during his initial years in the program. Lowering his head, he then expressed his gratitude for our assistance and support throughout his time at Only A Child. Fighting back tears, I told Erick he was entirely welcome.

Thinking back to that moment, I understand that I not only personally affirmed to Erick that the gratitude he had expressed was welcomed and embraced, I did so also on behalf of our staff, our U.S. and Guatemalan Boards of Directors and, needless to say, on behalf of you. For it is only with your kindness and support that we are able to restore young lives while encouraging them to move beyond their past hurts, freeing them to reach their full potential. Thank you for seeing us through another year, our 30<sup>th</sup>! May this letter serve to properly express my immeasurable gratitude to one and all.

Merry Christmas. Happy Hanukkah. God bless us everyone.

*George*

George

PS - Our 2024 Christmas wish list is a simple one. This year Erick was not our only resident to complete all undergraduate requirements at USAC. His housemate, Giovany, did so as well, and also will begin a masters program in the coming year (not the same Giovany who was the subject of our recent fall letter). At the urging of our U.S. Board of Directors, we will give both Erick and Giovany a laptop of their own, to honor their accomplishments and assist them with future studies. The cost of each laptop will be roughly \$400. Please consider contributing to any part of these purchases. Thank you. George