The Life Cycle of a Volunteer

Authentic Reflections From Senegal

Despite all the problems, deficits, trials and tribulations of living in Dakar, Senegal in 2006, my life has been enriched by a long list of wonderful Senegalese, African people.

By Carole Zemont
CRS Volunteer, Senegal

Bless me Father, for I have sinned! More critically, Lord, forgive me because I did not recognize my sins.

Contrary to everything we were told in the three-week Volunteer Program Orientation, I was hell bent on fixing things here in Senegal—completing those projects and fixing those things that needed it. I was working hard at it, too, and my lack of progress and resultant frustrations were making me a very, very angry missioner—so angry in fact that last month I even had dreams of quitting the NGO partner altogether and traveling Senegal instead.

By the middle of August, I felt like I was sitting in the bottom of a dry well, looking up and not knowing what was happening at ground level—where I should be! I was agitated every waking hour, dreadfully unhappy and completely exhausted most days. In the heat, I couldn’t think. So I began desperately, unendingly and passionately searching for something ‘normal’ to hang on to—‘normal things’ that to me seemed simple: like routine promptness; knowing that water would appear when I turned on the tap; enjoying a highly convoluted, deep, rich conversation in English, or just fully understanding the nuances of any conversation in this French-speaking country; caressing an aromatic café latte from Starbucks; shuddering as chills travel down my spine because of cold weather; the unique, delightful crispiness of a fresh salad with a dozen different ingredients; relaxing in front of my favorite television journal, “Sunday Morning”, with my daughter, Alison.

While I knew that what I wanted was impossible to find in Senegal, West Africa, I apparently had a subconscious plan for also ‘fixing’ my piece of the world in Dakar. If I was unable to find something normal, I was bound and determined then to create normalcy by imposing systems and orderliness at both work places; purchasing a nauseatingly expensive electric coffee maker which consumes expensive ground Columbian coffee; designing and leading...
Many good things are happening in the Catholic Relief Services Volunteer Program. Following three weeks of Cross-Cultural and CRS Orientation, the second group of Volunteers was sent overseas to Africa, Asia and Latin America at the end of August to begin their 18-month international assignment.

They will return in March 2008 to a diocesan or other partner placement, or to a CRS Regional Office to tell their stories in the six-month U.S. component.

The first group of Volunteers is in the last six months of their overseas commitment and will return to the U.S. this March.

In addition, a new two-part Volunteer Program video is soon to be released after more than a year in the making. It consists of a humble walk, a story of faith serving the poor in Africa (20 minutes) and As The People Live, Volunteering in Madagascar (6 minutes).

The Volunteer video strives to give those interested in learning more about the Volunteer Program, a better, more tangible and vivid sense of what the Volunteer Program is like for our pioneer group of Volunteers.

What is the DVD, a humble walk, narrated by CRS President Ken Hackett, about?

A middle-aged couple, in the prime of their careers, was happy with their lives. But something was missing. Deep inside, in the soul, Ted and Mona Lewis heard a faith calling. They responded. As Catholic Relief Services Volunteers, they were sent for 18 months to a remote village in Africa to learn from, to walk with, and to serve poor people in Zambia. A humble walk is Mona and Ted’s inspiring overseas story of faith and courage.

As The People Live, Volunteering in Madagascar, is a compelling account of a young Volunteer, Celeste Gregory, who learns the local language, navigates flooded streets on bicycle, befriends Catholic seminarians, shops as locals do in city markets, supports a children’s feeding program, and learns a lot about herself along the way.

Just as through the pages of this publication we invite readers to join the Volunteers on their exciting journeys, so too do we encourage people through viewing the Volunteer video to find out what it’s like to be a CRS Volunteer.

As Ken Hackett said, “Mona and Ted Lewis exemplify the finest characteristics we look for in our CRS Volunteers. They are compassionate. They are passionate. They are devout Catholic. They are filled with faith, spirit and fun, too.” The same holds true for our other Volunteers.

To order a copy of the DVD, contact CRS at volunteer@crs.org; call 410-951-7269; or visit the CRS web site: www.crs.org/volunteer.

Enjoy the journey.
The Faces of ART and A Return To Life

By Ted Lewis, CRS Volunteer, Zambia

Anti-Retroviral Therapy (ART) is a drug regime for people infected with HIV. The drugs must be taken everyday, never a miss, for life.

The storyline that follows, which I gathered in my role as a CRS Volunteer for the Catholic Diocese of Solwezi, Zambia, is a progression of the transforming effects of this drug therapy.

In short, it is a return to life.

Maggie left the clinic with the new knowledge that she was HIV positive. Sick for some time she feared HIV but hoped for something other. She says that she has had relations with only one man, her husband, and that he left some time ago. Next for her is a test to determine if she can begin ART. She will become weaker and sicker before the test and other procedures are complete. No family support and little means, the face of ART, is one of Worry and Fear for Maggie and her three children.

Lying on a mat outside her small rented hut, Catherine Inambao displays a face of ART that is Anxious and Concerned. She began taking the drugs a few months ago but improvement is slow to come. Her four children struggle alongside. Three are of school age but only one attends because there are no funds for the others. Her husband, Gilbert, ran away some time back, but has since returned.

Twenty-eight-year-old Judith Kaumba is moving about more comfortably now. Thinking back to last December she recalls lying in bed barely able to move. With body pains all over and fever, and feeling very weak, emotionally as HIV is physically, through Judith, we see the face of ART for Stigma.

Judith is too weak to move. Neither parents nor siblings, living directly next door, spoke to Judith or assisted to pick up the food available through the Home-Based Care program. Noticeable improvement was quick to come once ART began and now the family is confused, wondering just how such a turnaround can happen.

ART transforms the ill effects of stigma surrounding HIV. With Judith’s return to life, she will see many more years alongside her daughter Kapy.

Amazement is the expression on the many faces of ART now that they are back leading a normal life. Consider the hopeful situations of others.

Joyce is knitting to earn income. Linna is building a home with the funds she has earned selling produce in the market.

Daniel opened a shoe repair stand and Sam is training in preparation for the physical exam necessary to become a security guard.

Nothing in the appearance of Joyce, Linna, Daniel or Sam implies HIV. That’s the amazing transformation experienced through ART.

For all those that have experienced a return to life there are many more waiting to meet ART. It’s not fair to paint those waiting for ART with the face of patience. Dying and patience somehow do not link together.

Those living outside rural centers have transport and distance issues that greatly compound a life with HIV. Poverty always reaches for food first and with no funds remaining, medicine is moved down the line.

Maybe the face of ART for all these people is Solidarity. After all, one’s support for Catholic Relief Services is helping ART find the way to:

Mary, Elizabeth, son Maseka, and older sister Catherine, Melody, Roda, Kasazhi, Catherine, 5-year-old Kelvin, and the Chipoya Sisters

Finally, are the friends of ART; the faces of volunteer caregivers that fan out across the province, traveling by foot or bicycle, helping the sick.

Most compelling about volunteer caregivers is that they too are poor. In most cases they are supporting a family. Some are living with HIV and none receive financial support. Oddly the transforming effect by ART on this group of caregivers is similar to the effect felt by clients taking the drugs. ART is a motivating force that has transformed this group to do great things based solely on realizing the day when their country completely returns to life. ☀
Volunteer’s Accompaniment of Struggling Seminarian Provides Meaning in Madagascar

This experience with Thierry reinforced for me that a journey of accompaniment means meeting someone where he or she is and walking with him . . . in the struggles of everyday life.

By Celeste Gregory
CRS Volunteer, Madagascar

IN COMMUNITY WITH SEMINARIANS: Celeste Gregory joins in singing a Malagasy song with the Catholic seminarians at St. Paul Seminary where she lives in Toamasina, Madagascar. Thierry, the subject in the story, is in the back row, far right. Photo by Gerard Lambert

A journey of sorts ended this month and when it did, I realized I had learned what it means to accompany another person, which is one of the things this volunteer program is based on.

Several months ago, I started working with the Catholic seminarians in my community to help prepare them for their Baccalaureate exam in several subjects, but mostly in English. I helped Thierry the most.

A lot was riding on this exam for Thierry. Last school year, he did not pass. If the same thing happened again, he would have to leave the seminary. As he often told me, his personal reputation, as well as the reputations of his school, the seminary, his parish, and his family was riding on this exam.

I told him with increasing frequency as the exam approached that I was confident he would pass, which I truthfully believed. I could tell at times he needed his confidence and spirits lifted. At the same time, I was terrified that he wouldn’t do well enough.

I was helping to welcome pilgrims who would be staying at Collège Stella Maris during the Journées Mondiale de Jeunesse Madagascar (World Youth Day Madagascar) celebrations, which were held in Toamasina, where I serve as a Volunteer, when I saw vehicles arriving from the city of Vatomandry, where Thierry is from.

We saw each other at about the same time and walked towards each other to say hello. I asked if he knew the results of the Baccalaureate exam. He said he didn’t know and I told him that I had heard that results had been posted on a bulletin board on the school grounds. (In Madagascar, whenever an important exam takes place, the names of those who pass are published publicly.)

His face took on a look of both interest and fear. He started walking off to look and realizing I wasn’t walking with him, turned around and said, “No, we’re going to look together. You have to come with me.”

Thierry and I started scanning sheets on both sides of the board and I found his name, but didn’t say anything, hoping he would find it himself. He finally said that he had not found his name and wondered if I had. I smiled and pointed to the sheet with his name on it. He found his name and turned to me saying, “I passed.”

We were both so happy, we gave each other a hug, which was unexpected, but seemed appropriate. As we started walking away he looked at me and said quietly, “You were right all along.”

What was my role on this particular journey of accompaniment? I was a listening ear, a hand on the shoulder offering encouragement, a bringer of worksheets, a corrector of English grammar and other related question answerer, even if it was midnight on Friday. When the electricity was out, I provided extra candles. I asked him how he was REALLY doing and I meant it.

What did I learn/experience on this journey of accompaniment? Much more than I gave, I’m confident of that. I certainly got a refresher course in English grammar as I sometimes had to look rules up to make sure I was telling him the right information. I received a glimpse of how hard the Malagasy education system can be (which is based on the French system).

I watched how Thierry dealt with varying levels of stress and frustration. Yet, through it all, he had such a fierce determination that he was going to take the exam and he was going to pass it this time. He trusted me enough to allow me to see him in his moments of weakness, when he doubted his abilities. I learned about his family as he lamented about how embarrassed and shamed he and they would be if he didn’t pass.

This experience with Thierry reinforced for me that a journey of accompaniment means meeting someone where he or she is and walking with and supporting him or her in the simple and sometimes mundane activities and in the struggles of everyday life.
Another Funeral, Another Tragedy and Forgiveness

With a large crowd expected, there were TV monitors and a sound system set up so people outside could participate in the service. People kept coming and coming, and it was standing room only. The largest funeral I have ever been to.

The emotional barrage started immediately as members of the family shared their memories and grief and paid tribute to Ms. Mais, who was obviously well loved and active in her church and community. It was heart breaking to hear her children tell how she was their best friend and how they miss their 'mummy.'

One of the daughters read a message from her husband, Mr. Mais, that expressed his love and pain. What was most incredible was how he told about her devotion to prison ministry and her depth of compassion and forgiveness, saying that she would love the man who killed her.

Mr. Mais expressed his belief that as a Christian, he did not believe in vengeance or eye-for-eye retribution. He spoke of the sacredness of life and forgiveness and opposition to the death penalty. He pleaded for the killer to come forward to receive healing and rehabilitation.

My reaction to such a crime would be to be angry and demand justice and punishment. I felt shamed and humbled that her husband, in the depths of his pain and grief and anger, would be able to express such compassion and forgiveness.

I wondered, could I?

As the Archbishop later said in his remarks, the family ministered to him and to all of us by teaching us how to be forgiving. It was incredibly moving. I am not one to cry so easily, but I wanted to cry for this woman that I had never met.

The funeral was a typical Catholic funeral Mass, familiar and comforting. In Jamaican style there was much singing, and obviously many of the selections were favorites of Vilma and expressed the facets of her faith.

The homily was delivered by Father Ho Lung, a Kingston priest who is well known in Jamaica for his work. He is member of the Missionaries of the Poor, one of the ministries supported by Peter and Vilma Mais, and he was close to them.

I was surprised at the beginning of his remarks, that Father did not speak of Vilma, but started by decrying the violence and corruption within the country that he felt was the root of such tragedy. He likened the problems in Jamaica to cancers that attack the body. He pointed to corruption in the government and politicians and the media. He blamed the politicians for caving in to pressure 30 years ago when they allowed guns to come in to Jamaica. Now politicians are so involved in the drug trade and payoffs. The media feed the public’s sick appetite for violence and sex and dehumanizing behaviors. Until it is stopped, Jamaica cannot begin to heal.

After that, Fr. Lung continued to speak of Vilma, her life of faith and service to her family and community, her goodness and dedication to the poor and imprisoned. It was very impassioned and moving.

I was taken aback at the political condemnation at a funeral, but thinking about it later, I realized it may be appropriate. Just prior, two members of the Missionaries of the Poor were killed while doing dishes at their community. I imagine Father Ho Lung is stricken to lose another person close to him to violence, and has spent much time thinking about the causes and where to start to reverse the violence.

Later in the service, Archbishop Clarke added his remarks and condolences. He added that much responsibility lies in the home,
Saturday was my final day in Baltimore. The next day I was departing at 6:00 a.m. to Honduras, Central America, which would be my home for the next year and a half as a Volunteer with Catholic Relief Services.

It was a hazy morning and I was enjoying a cup of coffee at an outside table at a local coffee shop not far from the hotel where I was staying for the CRS Orientation.

Along came an African-American man in his mid-forties carrying a plastic grocery bag filled with some items and wearing a baseball cap. “Can you spare 20 cents?,” he asked. I pondered my options briefly and then responded that I could.

Soon afterwards, he asked if he could have a seat at my table. I continued reading and from time to time, we would talk a bit. He told me that he was one of many homeless people in the Baltimore area. As other patrons entered the shop, he would occasionally ask them for spare change, without success.

He told me that the “higher power” was going to look out for me. I asked him what he learned from his time on the streets and he responded that, “life is good.”

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After a few minutes, he said goodbye and shuffled off. His name was Gene.

I reflected, do I have any obligation to the poor that I encounter on the street? What is my responsibility to the needy in far off countries? If sharing is truly a central part of my Catholic faith, what must I do?

My first impressions of Tegucigalpa, which is the capital of Honduras, and a city of about one million people, were dominated by the multitude of U.S. fast food franchises and other U.S. businesses, which were located in the downtown area–all sorts of chains from Wendy’s to McDonald’s to Ace Hardware. I was told that a law had been passed which allowed these franchises to establish themselves in the country without paying certain taxes.

After a week of orientation at the Catholic Relief Services Honduras offices, I was off to Candelaria, a seven-hour trip by car from the capital. Candelaria, my new home where I will be serving at the CRS partner, COCEPRADIL, is a small town of about 1,000 people. It is located one hour by car from the El Salvador border.

Candelaria is a rustic setting surrounded by rolling hills. The streets, made of dirt and rock, are interrupted by frequent gaping holes. Transport by horse outnumbers cars by a ratio of 10 to one. I no longer have a radio, television or phone. This setting should facilitate integration of the “simple living” Volunteer Program pillar in my life as a Volunteer.

My first visit to a community was to attend a ceremony commemorating the construction of new housing in a village. Many houses in this town needed to be destroyed due to a blood-sucking bug which causes a heart disease called “Chagas.” The bug generally infiltrates the house through poorly constructed thatched roofs or through the mud and adobe portions of the structure. This disease currently has no cure and affects 16 to 18 million people, most of them in Central and South America. It claims the life of about 50,000 annually.

The first month here has given me a glimpse of the lifestyle and challenges facing this small country of seven million people. The warm smiles and innocence of the many young school children that I have met have inspired me.

I have been saddened by the “maquilas,” or “sweat shops,” substandard housing, horrible roads, lack of access to dentists or trained doctors, and the lack of job opportunity.

I am going to borrow a statement by the Bolivian President Morales regarding his country and use it in reference to Honduras. Hondurans “deserve to live well, not better.”
seminars on communication skills and long range/goal oriented planning; critically picking and pecking and poking at everything at home to ensure an immaculate house (I want clean windows and I want them now!); daily, running to my secure, private retreat/bedroom to work or rest, alone; or working weekends writing job descriptions for everybody.

I was here in Senegal to DO something, and come hell or high water, I was going to DO something. Yes, I saw the incongruities of my desires ~ after all I live in a city that doesn’t even have a Sunday newspaper, no mail delivery ever, or electricity much of the time, for goodness sakes; not to mention, on a continent that has been successfully populated since the beginning of humanity, and which will probably never recover from the insanity of colonialism and the resultant irrelevant geo-political borders.

The people closest to me, with utter kindness and respect not at all well deserved, tried to soothe the wild beast with advice and platitudes about the difficulties of adapting to a new culture ~ about accepting things as they are because this is the rhythm and nature of life here in Senegal, West Africa.

“If you accept, you will see the life we have here is a good one, full of texture, tradition and the warmth of family and friends.” Ah, bon? “If you accept, then you cannot judge. If you accept, you will have time only to love,” said Mother Teresa years ago. Ah, bon?

I have spent a lifetime in careers, causes and avocations specifically designed not to accept something that doesn’t work well without judgment, and that encouraged the subsequent desire, need or mandate to make change…. Ah, bon?

The Revelation

Then, the Revelation. It descended on me one evening as I sat among friends in our living room. As is often the case, the conversation ranged through English, French and Serer with the result that I sort of understood what was being said. The laughter flowed and sparkled like quicksilver. We were together, sharing the humanness of our lives, not posturing, not adjusting our masks. “So, what do you do for a living? How many bedrooms? I just love the barrier islands in September, too!” Despite all the problems, deficits, trials and tribulations of living in Dakar, Senegal in 2006, my life has been enriched by a long list of wonderful Senegalese, African people. Dakar in 2006 is not Chicago, Illinois in 2006: it’s not even Chicago, Illinois in 1906. Senegal is not the US ~ and despite some very good croissants, it is not France. Dakar is not now and will never mirror or transform itself into a city like those found in “The West”. It would be a great tragedy if that did happen.

The seeds of culture in the United States were planted by people from all over the world--people who were and are motivated to uproot themselves and their families in their search for something defined as ‘freedom.’ Americans are still and perhaps will always be on the move, always searching for something! We are curious, forward-looking, independent thinkers, planful.

African culture is a rock, a constant, an anchor, a treasure. Trees here live a thousand years and more ~ and African tradition holds that life on earth actually began in the center of the Baobab tree. Africa gave birth to, and still revolves around the very essence of humanity with its deep-rooted, highly respected traditions, values, mores and beliefs and its strong, complicated family life.

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From Rejection to Hugs
Volunteer Participates in Groundbreaking HIV and AIDS Work in Jamaica

By Frances Berns
CRS Volunteer, Jamaica

One Sunday, a man answered Sister Maryanne’s question, “Would you welcome a person with HIV in your home?” with a firm, “No, I would not touch him.” After mass and Joseph’s talk, the same man gave Joseph a big hug.

On Sunday morning, Sr. Maryanne Njeri Kamau, drives the HIV and AIDS education team on a rutted, mountainous road to church in Milk River, Jamaica. The terrain is new to Joseph and to me. Joseph rarely leaves his village of Goshen. Dawn points out houses and areas where members of her family or acquaintances live.

Sr. Maryanne, a Kenya native with the Assumption Sisters of Nairobi, has been a missionary in Jamaica for six years. She is the HIV Education Director for the Mandeville Diocese and has been working with people living with AIDS for more than five years. I began working with her to give presentations on HIV prevention last October. Since then she has invited Joseph and Dawn, Jamaicans from rural communities, to share their story.

We have given talks after Sunday mass at churches in the diocese and at clinics as patients wait to see the doctor or nurse practitioner. This Sunday we are going to a small mission church in the parish of Clarendon.

Sister Maryanne gives a comprehensive, exuberant talk about the HIV crisis in Jamaica. The congregations are unusually attentive; even the children are captivated by her obvious conviction. I follow her with my talk on how HIV is transmitted and how it is prevented. However, what captures the emotions, resonates with people, and imparts true understanding of the problem are the revelations of the Jamaican team members, Dawn and Joseph.

Dawn’s Story

Dawn is a single mother in her thirties. She is a trained teacher, presently unemployed. Several years ago her younger brother, Denny returned to Jamaica after working abroad. He returned home because he was sick. He was dying of AIDS. When other members of the family learned this, Denny was ostracized. His mother would not allow him in her house; she would not wash his clothes. The family home, which was usually often filled with visitors in the past, became a lonely place. People shunned the small family business. Dawn cared for him alone. She nursed him. She drove him to medical appointments. At age 32, Denny died.

This Sunday Dawn breaks down and cries as she tells her story. Now Dawn works as a volunteer caregiver for other AIDS patients. She is dedicated to helping dispel the stigma surrounding HIV and AIDS in Jamaica.

Joseph’s Story

Joseph is a single father in his thirties as well. He is trying to support himself and his four children by planting and harvesting peanuts. He is HIV positive. Unemployment is very high in Jamaica and discrimination is widespread so Joseph is unable to find other work. Joseph has received support and encouragement from Sister Maryanne’s support group but getting a farm started and sending children to school is expensive.

Joseph is slim yet looks healthy and has not yet needed antiretroviral drugs. He talks calmly as he reveals his HIV status and tells the congregation about the difficulties he encounters in his small community.

When we are finished with the presentation, people go to Joseph and Dawn. Consistent with the warm emotional temperament of the Jamaican people, they are embraced, comforted and given words of understanding.

Talks like those of Dawn and Joseph may eventually lessen the terrible fear and stigma,
which are prevalent here and make the fight against AIDS difficult.

**Dispelling Myths and Spreading Truth**

I was told that one family would not bury another member who died of AIDS on their property because they were afraid that the mango trees would die.

A seventeen year old girl I met was put out of her house and left to live in the streets.

There are verified reports of people stoning homes where a person living with HIV resides, of students who are HIV positive not allowed to attend school or parents pulling their children out of school where students with HIV attend.

On the eve of World AIDS day in 2005, a well known AIDS activist was shot and killed.

The Ministries of Health and Education in Jamaica are conducting programs to educate the public regarding myths of HIV and AIDS but it is a daunting task. The message does not reach many adults and youngsters who are not in school. Due to economic circumstances, thousands of children are kept home to help with housework and avoid school fees. And funding for such programs quickly gets depleted.

Churches are an integral part of the social fabric of Jamaica. Our team goes to Sunday masses in the sixteen churches of the Mandeville diocese. We encourage those who attend the presentations to spread the truth to their family and friends.

One Sunday, a man answered Sister Maryanne’s question, “Would you welcome a person with HIV in your home?” with a firm, “No, I would not touch him.”

After mass and Joseph’s talk, the same man gave Joseph a big hug.

Dawn and Joseph are brave pioneers in sharing their story. They are spreading truth and dispelling myths. I am proud to be a part of this team of pioneers in Jamaica in the effort to break down barriers and build solidarity in the struggle against HIV and AIDS.

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**Jamaica from page 8**

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**a humble walk: a story of faith serving the poor in Africa**

(20 minutes)

A middle-aged couple, in the prime of their careers, was happy with their lives. But something was missing. Deep inside, in the soul, Ted and Mona Lewis heard a faith calling. They responded. As Catholic Relief Services Volunteers, the Lewises were sent for 18 months to a remote village in Africa to learn from, to walk with, and to serve poor people in Zambia. *A humble walk* is Mona and Ted’s inspiring overseas story of faith and courage.

**Also included,**

*As the People Live, Volunteering In Madagascar*

(6 minutes)

*As The People Live, Volunteering In Madagascar*, is a compelling account of a young Volunteer, Celeste Gregory, who learns the local language, navigates flooded streets on bicycle, befriends Catholic seminarians, shops as locals do in city markets, supports a children’s feeding program, and learns a lot about herself along the way.

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Sometimes I feel caught between a rock and a hard place.

I serve at CARECEN, which focuses on the human rights of Salvadorans who migrate to the United States. CARECEN had a meeting with family members who are forming a group of Families of the Disappeared and Deceased.

This one family came to the meeting. And with this family was a little girl in a white dress. She was cute and chubby. I have a special place in my heart for chubby kids.

There was something I recognized about this little girl that was familiar but I had never seen her before.

Well, I ended up sitting down with this little girl and her adults for lunch. She was so smart. She was two years old and could eat by herself. She could drink out of a cup with no problem. She did not leave a mess. She was articulate. I was amazed.

In talking with this family I found out about their situation. And two seconds into the conversation I figured things out really clearly.

This little girl was the product of Salvador and Carolina Hernandez, who left El Salvador when their little girl, Jesenia, was 8 months old. As soon as I knew this, I remembered exactly who they were. That made all the difference because suddenly I remembered how I knew this little girl. She looked just like her parents. I had never met her before but the pictures of her parents from a file at work are permanently etched in my head.

And now I met Jesenia.

The story goes on.

The grandmother, Rosa, was talking about what happened. Jesenia’s parents left El Salvador to find work in the United States about a year and a half ago. Now no one knows where they are. Their last known location was Nuevo Laredo, Mexico.

Jesenia remembers her parents. On her little toy cell phone she calls her dad and talks to him. She tells him to come back. She tells her grandmother that her parents are coming back to her, that her dad said so.

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Clinging to hope, I explained to them that there is a detention center near Laredo, Texas, the other side of the U.S.-Mexico border from Nuevo Laredo and that maybe they are there.

I know their case well. There have been stings of hope in knowing where they are, little strings of information that later mean nothing. There are police who are trained detectives and then there is me.

I keep replaying these stories in my mind. And today at work I am relooking for people whose whereabouts is unknown, retracing steps because I now have these personal encounters to compel me.

The memories linger—Rosa seeking answers, Angel wiping away his tears, and Jesenia talking to her dad on her toy cell phone, asking him to come home.