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WORKING WITH TEENAGE GANGS IN NEW YORK

I LEFT OHIO FOR NEW YORK CITY TO WRITE A BOOK ABOUT AKITA DOGS. I volunteered as a Vista worker, the domestic version of the Peace Corps, and worked with the Sisters of St. Joseph caring for teenagers who had been in trouble with the law.

My first evening at the center I heard some young Puerto Ricans planning a rumble. They were confident I didn't understand Spanish, so they went into detail about time and place. When they finished, I spoke to them in Spanish. There was no gang fight that night.

I was surprised to learn that many of the young people carried guns or knives. If we saw a weapon, we were to keep it until the young man or woman left, then we returned it to them. "Why don't we just keep the weapons?" I asked. One of the sisters answered, "If we did, none of them would return. If they didn't come here they would be out fighting." Although I felt uncomfortable with weapons, I reminded myself that Mother Teresa would call each of the youngsters Jesus in his most distressing disguise. How could I be afraid of Jesus?

On my second evening at the center, I discovered a young man using a hammer to pull nails out of benches. I said, "I'm sorry but you have to give me that hammer until you are ready to leave."

He said, “This hammer is my protection. I need it.”

“Then you have to leave the center. I will walk you to the door.”

He noticed my necklace, a gold heart on a chain. “If you let me hold your chain,” he said, “I will give you my hammer.”

“My baby’s father gave me that heart. It is precious to me,” I said.

“It can’t mean more to you than the hammer does to me,” he insisted. “It is my protection.” Impulsively, I handed him the chain and took the hammer. All evening I wondered if I had made a mistake, but when it was time to go home, the young man handed me my gold chain and I returned his hammer.

Later I learned that this young man—I will call him José—led one of the largest gangs in Brooklyn. Though he never spoke kindly to me, he may have saved my life several times. Just as Mother Teresa’s sisters live in the community they serve, Vista volunteers live in the area they serve. So Raphael and I lived in a rough Brooklyn neighborhood. There were frequent gang fights, and sometimes participants or passersby got killed. I worked until 9:00 PM and, although I had only a few blocks to walk, I never felt safe until I was home.

One evening as we were leaving, José complained about something that had happened that day. He followed me all the way home shouting that I had messed him up. The next morning I learned there had been a shooting near my home. And almost every time there was a rumble, one of José’s friends would walk home behind me telling me what a terrible person I was, but staying with me until I was safely inside.

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MEETING MOTHER TERESA THE FIRST TIME

ONE DAY I RECEIVED A POSTCARD FROM HAWAII: “YOU HAVE A GOOD friend in Brooklyn. My girlfriend, Sister Frances [I have changed her name here], and I were engaged when she fell in love with Jesus. She became one of Mother Teresa’s nuns. Find her, tell her you and Raphael are our adopted family and she will welcome you.”

Right away I wrote to Sister Frances: “Sister Frances, Missionary of Charity Working with Mother Teresa in Brooklyn.” I put the envelope in the mail and forgot about it. Two months later I received a phone call. “Hello, this is Sister Frances. I got your letter even though I no longer live in New York. I am here right now and would like you to come this weekend when I make my vows.”

I told her, “I am working with some Catholic nuns caring for troubled teens, and I don’t know if I can get away.”

“Tell the sisters you are going to meet Mother Teresa,” she said. “They will make arrangements for you to come.” So I was going to meet Mother Teresa. Miracle of miracles.

That was in June 1982. On the morning of the ceremony Raphael and I took the train uptown to the Bronx. When we left the subway, the scene looked like a war zone. One building after another had been demolished. St. Rita’s church was large, and a

huge crowd had gathered to catch a glimpse of Mother Teresa. We attended a Mass where eight sisters took their vows.

When Mother Teresa walked up to the altar, I was astonished to see how short she was, yet her energy was so powerful she might have been eight feet tall. Her smile and her loving eyes blessed each of us. She told anecdotes about how beautiful the poor are. “I took rice to a large Muslim family. Before they took a bite, the mother carefully divided the food and took half to her Hindu neighbors. ‘They are hungry too, Mother,’ she said.”

I was to hear her tell that story many times and it always sounded fresh and touching. It meant so much to Mother Teresa. She was comfortable with English but had a strong Indian accent. Her voice was soft, yet she mesmerized her audience. I felt she was confiding in me alone and everyone I talked with felt the same. Mother always spoke of Jesus. She saw him in the Blessed Sacrament, the poor, the dying—everyone—and her all consuming love touched us deeply.

After Mass everyone lined up to shake Mother’s hand. “God bless you,” she told each of us. There was a reception for the new sisters and their families. Raphael and I were Sister Frances’s family. When I told Sister Frances I was writing a book about Mother Teresa for young adults, she rushed me over to Mother. Mother reached out her hand, shook mine, smiled and said, “God bless you.” I said I was working with young Puerto Rican gang members. “They read biographies of musicians, famous athletes, movie stars or politicians and many of those people had lived sad tragic lives. I want to write books about people who lived joyful, meaningful lives. That’s why I want to write about you, Mother Teresa.”

“Write about the work,” she said.

I told her that when I was young, my favorite books were about famous people when they were children. Each became my playmate because they remained a child until the last chapter. At the end of

the book I was proud of my friends' accomplishments when they grew up. I asked, "Mother, would you tell me a little about your childhood?"

"Write about the work," Mother said again with a big smile. Our conversation was interrupted many times. Everyone was eager to speak with Mother Teresa. She smiled at everyone.

Sister Frances wanted me to meet the other nuns. She told them about my book. Each sister brought me back to Mother Teresa, and once more Mother squeezed my hand, smiled and we resumed our conversation. I continued my questions, and each time, Mother replied, "Write about the work."

"Mother, what was your favorite color when you were a child?" She reached for my hand. "Don't write about me."

"But Mother, young people need to read about people who have found their paths," I protested. Finally Mother said, "We'll see."

My research led me to Michael Gomes, the man in whose upper room Mother Teresa first began her Missionaries of Charity. I was overjoyed when I received a letter from him, with a return address of 14 Creek Lane, Calcutta, the locale now famous in Mother's history.

From the beginning Michael was excited about my book. He answered every letter giving me wonderful information and encouragement. He gladly answered all my questions and offered many beautiful stories about the happy days when Mother Teresa and her first Missionaries of Charity sisters lived in his house. Whenever he or anyone in his family was ill, he would ask me to pray for them, and he prayed for my family and the success of the book. We soon became close friends.

When Michael and his wife Agnes came to the United States to visit their daughter Mabel and her son Patrick, he phoned me hoping we could get together. But he was in Alabama, and I was in California, and neither of us was able to make the trip. Nevertheless, we remained friends and faithful pen pals.

Michael and Agnes stayed close to Mother Teresa, and in each letter Michael would tell me about the last time he had seen her. After Mother died, Michael wrote me that Mother Teresa had asked him to take her to the Catholic cemetery in Calcutta the day before she died so she could pray for her nuns buried there.

Michael continued to write to me until the month he died. His letters were always informative, inspiring and supportive.

Mabel Gomes, the child who went to the slums with Mother Teresa, wrote me her father had died. Agnes sent me a prayer card from Michael's funeral. I wrote Agnes a sympathy card and she answered with a long letter telling me how much I had meant to her husband. She and I became pen pals, writing letters back and forth the way Michael and I had done.

Another lifetime friend of mine is Jacqueline de Decker. My first letter to Jacqueline was in French, but she insisted I write her in English because I spelled God *Dieux* in French, which means more than one god. "I hope you aren't writing your book in French," she begged. Jacqueline answered all my letters and gave me wonderful information. I sent her pictures of Raphael and me, and she began signing her letters "Aunt Jacqueline."

Not long after we met Mother Teresa, our friends Fred and Taia Chard invited Raphael and me to return to Hawaii and live with them. We flew to California and stopped in San Rafael. Raphael and I went to Mass at the old mission and visited the bookshop. A young girl asked me, "Have you seen any books about Saint Clare?" I pointed to an entire shelf.

"Have you seen any books about Mother Teresa?" I asked. "Yes, there, against the wall," she said. "When Mother Teresa opened a house in San Francisco, I went to the press conference because I write for my school paper. I got some papers about Mother Teresa's childhood."

I asked if I could see them. “When my priest finishes reading them,” she told me.

I gave her my Hawaiian address. Two months later, settled in Hawaii, I received a package from Karen Marie Kitterman in San Rafael with information about Mother’s childhood that I had been unable to find elsewhere. I was convinced this was a sign that God wanted me to write about Mother’s childhood.

Mother Teresa said we must never let our work with the poor interfere with our family. I was determined to spend time with my son, Raphael, to enjoy his presence before he was grown and on his own, but each time he came to me eager to talk or share some insight, I found myself in the middle of a sentence I’d struggled to write or cooking something that demanded my undivided attention. I realized I was only half listening, offering half of myself. By watching Mother Teresa, who was one of the busiest people in the world, I learned to spend precious time with my son.

Mother encouraged family prayer. Raphael and I began saying grace aloud together and sharing nightly prayers, in which we prayed from the heart about whatever mattered most to us at the moment.

By chance I met a nun who had recently heard Mother Teresa speak on natural birth control in Mexico. Although Mother Teresa did not believe in artificial birth control, she believed that natural family planning should be taught to any married woman who was interested. The sister told me, “Mother Teresa and her sisters are teaching natural family planning to the poor in Calcutta.”

A few months later I went to New York where I worked in the soup kitchen run by Mother’s sisters. It was located in the same building in the South Bronx on 145th street where I first met Mother.

I was staying with friends on the Lower East Side. To arrive at 6:00 AM for Mass, I had to leave home at 4:30 AM. It was still dark and

I was alone on the New York subway. I thought about how the sisters usually traveled by two's and wished I had a partner. I looked at my watch when I came out of the subway. It was 5:30 AM. Strange shadows and crumbling ruins looked menacing as I walked down the deserted street. From behind a hand touched my arm. I was frightened. A man asked, "Are you lost, lady?" I was relieved when I looked into the kind face of a small, elderly, dark man. I said, "I'm looking for Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity." He told me his name was Angel Rafael Rodriguez, and he was delivering newspapers. He said proudly, "I know Mother Teresa's sisters well. I will take you there when I finish my route."

Angel Rodriguez and I finished his rounds. He had a smile and a word for everyone. He walked me to the convent and waited until the sisters answered the door. "Hello, Angel," the young sister said.

"I can't stay this morning, sister, but I brought you a young lady."

"That was kind of you, Angel."

I was glad to take part in the work that happened where I first met Mother Teresa. The sister led me into the chapel. A crucifix hung over the altar with the words, "I Thirst." A few wooden chairs were in the back for visitors who could not kneel or sit on the floor. I asked God to keep me from spoiling the work and to let me be an instrument of his peace, love and healing. Then the sister led me to a large room full of used clothing. "Could you help us sort these so they are ready for our poor people who need them? God bless you," she said and left me alone in the musty room. I looked around, realizing that I didn't know what she wanted me to do. How was I to prepare the clothing?

"Lord, I asked you not to let me spoil the work," I prayed. "Please tell me what to do."

I decided to sort the clothing, putting all the men's clothes together, the women's clothes in their place and the children's in

another. Then I separated the clothing by seasons. Usually whenever I had been doing work of this kind, I had lots of Coworkers to help me know what to do. It was a good chance to pray while doing the work. I felt especially close to God there and I prayed that Mother Teresa would give me written permission to write the book so her people would help me. I remembered to ask, "If it is your will, God."

After the clothing project I was invited to cut up vegetables in the soup kitchen. A bell rang and everyone stopped working to pray. At first it seemed strange to see everyone stopping their work in the middle of an action. We managed to get the food ready, and quite a crowd gathered for the meal. The majority were single men but there were some women alone and some with a child or two.

Before I left the convent, I gave the sisters a copy of the first three chapters of my book.

I returned home to the Big Island of Hawaii where I continued to write. One month later I received a letter saying: "Mother Teresa has given you permission to write and publish a book about her work."