

Living  
**SIDE**  
by **SIDE**  
Serving the People  
of Cactus, Texas

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Living  
**SIDE**  
by **SIDE**  
Serving the People  
of Cactus, Texas

by  
JENNI MONTEBLANCO



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# DEDICATION

To Vito—my husband, copastor, codirector, and friend—thank you for your help with telling the story of Cactus. I wouldn't want to live this crazy life with anyone else.

To Olivia and Elias, I am so proud of both of you and how you listen to and follow God wholeheartedly. The ministry in Cactus is definitely a family affair. I am blessed to be your mom.



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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jenni Montebianco is the codirector at Cactus Nazarene Ministry Center in Cactus, Texas, sharing the responsibility with her husband, Vito. She is also a pastor, wife, mom, homeschool teacher,...and the list goes on. Jenni's passions are refugee/immigrant ministry, discipleship, and coffee. She received her call to full-time ministry at age 10 and always knew that it would be in a cross-cultural setting. However, she never imagined the mission field would be in "her own backyard," just an hour from her hometown. Jenni and Vito have two beautiful children, Olivia and Elias.



# CHAPTER 1

## Trust

We weren't looking to leave. Life was good. The church we pastored was growing. Both of our kids had been accepted into new charter schools. There was no reason to flee. No, "flee" isn't the right word; not in this case. Not like those who would soon become our neighbors.

They had to flee. Many left not because they wanted to, but because to stay was to die. They traveled for days, sometimes months,...usually on foot, taking only what they could carry. They hoped to have food or decent water along the way. They traveled through trials and tears. They suffered loss of home, possessions, identity, and sometimes even life.

Others chose to flee. They chose to leave their homes, their countries, and their support systems because the life they were living was so poor that they were willing to try *anything* to find something better. Some came without family members. Some paid thousands of dollars. Some

endured every hardship possible. They also traveled through trial, tears, and loss.

But not us, why should we leave? Life was good. Life was stable. Life was comfortable.

It was early 2013. My husband, Vito [VEE-toh], and I were pastoring Taylor Avenue Church of the Nazarene in Racine [ray-SEEN], Wisconsin, USA, preparing for the first Faith Promise service in years. It was our first pastorate, Vito as senior pastor and me as discipleship pastor.

Things in Racine were going well, very well as far as “church talk” is concerned. Numbers were up, people were growing spiritually, and we were even taking on additional financial commitments for others. We were three years into serving the small church and were feeling quite content.

The church had functioned as two separate congregations when we had first arrived, one Anglo and one Hispanic. Given our call to multicultural ministries, we had been brought on to merge the two congregations. Gone were the days of “us” and “them.” This church had learned to embrace their differences as they worshiped and served God as a bilingual, united congregation.

Faith Promise weekend came, and everyone was excited. We had a great worship team of students coming from Olivet [aw-LI-vet] Nazarene University in Bourbonnais [buhr-boh-NAY], Illinois, USA, to provide music and to assist in the activities of the weekend. We had many exciting things scheduled: a youth service, an international dinner, and a well-known missionary speaker.

Vito and I had discussed what our Faith Promise commitment (pledge) would be. We decided we could probably squeeze out an extra \$25<sup>1</sup> a month. For our young family of four, that was only giving up one meal at a restaurant each month; we could do that. And considering the church budget, our \$300 per year pledge would help tremendously.

That Sunday morning, our six-year-old daughter, Olivia, wasn't feeling well, so I stayed home with her. Throughout the morning, I prayed and waited to hear how the service had gone, especially to hear how God had challenged people to give above and beyond. Would we reach our goal? Would we be blown away by the Spirit's moving? Or would it be a huge flop? Would we be disappointed that all of our hard work had fallen on deaf ears and closed hearts?

Immediately after the service, Vito texted me, "We have \$7,000 pledged!" We were thrilled! A pledge of \$7,000 was huge for our small congregation. I couldn't wait for Vito to get home so I could hear all the details.

Not long after Vito returned home, he dropped the bomb. "Jenni, I think I made a mistake. I think I marked 'weekly' instead of 'monthly' on our pledge card."

What? Surely he hadn't. This had to be a mistake. Surely he was remembering incorrectly. That was four times as much as our planned \$25 a month. There was no way we could make that happen. Suddenly the excitement of a great Faith Promise weekend disappeared. How were we going to make this large commitment work? Should we find a way to change our pledge?

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, currency is in US dollars.

Ultimately, we gave \$25 a week. I'd love to tell you that we made the decision to give \$25 a week because we trusted God; but actually, we made the decision to give the extra amount simply because we were too embarrassed to change our commitment. Yes, we gave our \$25 a week. And do you know what? We never felt it.

I don't tell you this story to share how awesome Vito and Jenni Montebianco [mohn-TAY-blawn-koh] are, because we're not. Nor am I trying to guilt you into calling your church treasurer to quadruple your financial commitments. I've included this as an illustration to show you that this was just the beginning of what God was about to do in our lives, a huge lesson in the game of trust.

# CHAPTER 2

## “The Least of These”<sup>2</sup>

by SUSAN DOWNS

A hot, dry October day in the Texas Panhandle. My husband, David, and I drove through parched, flat sagebrush desert until suddenly we came to a small town on State Highway 287. *Cactus, Texas*, the roadside sign announced.

This was our destination. A dusty main street cut through town, with a few stores, a water tower, some mobile homes. Nothing surprising there. But the people! Women in vibrant Burmese wraps hauled groceries along the sidewalk. Tall, slender Sudanese men clustered on corners, talking and laughing. Asian children played soccer on a dirt lot while their mothers watched nearby. Everywhere, in cars and in the stores and on the streets, Central American families bustled about, some dressed in brightly dyed Guatemalan ponchos and plastic sandals.

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<sup>2</sup> “The Least of These” by Susan Downs is reproduced with permission from Guideposts. Copyright © 2014 by Guideposts. All rights reserved.



David and I had known about the Guatemalans. That's why we were there. David is a district superintendent for our denomination, the Church of the Nazarene. He'd recently been appointed to oversee the 100 churches of a roughly 100,000-square-mile area in West Texas. We were driving around the district visiting churches, including Cactus's tiny Spanish-speaking congregation, which was comprised largely of Guatemalans.

But what was this virtual United Nations of immigrants doing in a remote Texas town? The whole scene took me aback. It wasn't so much the diversity. In fact, I embrace that. It was the poverty. Many of the mobile homes were rusted and collapsed, their roofs anchored by spare tires. Tumbleweeds blew down the streets. Men slumped in front of a gas station, drinking from bottles in brown paper bags. The only spruced-up building on the main drag was a gold-domed mosque.



Cactus Nazarene Ministry Center property.

The worst part was the smell. The air reeked of methane and heaven knew what else. I could hardly breathe as we pulled up to the tiny, rented cinderblock building where our Hispanic congregation met. We'd brought our five-year-old grandson along on this trip. He dubbed the odor "the Cactus smell."

Yet when we got inside, the small sanctuary was packed, every wooden pew filled, with just six inches between pews. The praise band played for nearly an hour. The pastor, a woman named Elda whom my husband had coaxed out of retirement, preached in Spanish to an eager sea of faces. Our grandson found other kids his age and settled in.

After the service, we joined the congregation for a traditional Guatemalan meal, in our honor. David and I talked with a number of the English-speaking church members. I was bursting with questions but didn't want to sound rude.

"You're probably wondering what all these different people are doing here in the middle of the Panhandle, aren't you?" a woman said, smiling. I nodded.

"It's the meatpacking plant," she said. "Just outside town. One of the biggest in Texas. They process something like four to five thousand cattle a day. Almost everyone works there. A few years ago, authorities raided the place and found the plant was employing huge numbers of illegal immigrants. After that, the company switched to recruiting refugees who have legal permission to live in the United States. We have folks from Guatemala, Myanmar, Somalia, Sudan. Just about every war-torn country. Most of the Somalis are

Muslim, as are the Burmese. But there are some Christians too, particularly among the Sudanese and Guatemalans. They come here for worship, to one of several Protestant congregations that rent this building, or to the Catholic parish. That's about it for churches."

David and I had served as missionaries in South Korea for five years. I'd also traveled extensively working for an international adoption agency in Fort Worth. I was comfortable around different cultures. And I knew in my heart the church exists to serve those in need. But Cactus overwhelmed me. The need seemed so huge. And immigration is such a hot-button issue in Texas. Was it really a good idea to get involved?

David finished visiting and we got back in the car. We prayed as we headed toward our next destination.

"Lord, this town, this church, needs you in a big way," David said. "Show us how to bring the resources of our denomination to serve this place. We remember your words in Scripture: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'"<sup>3</sup>

A short time later, David returned to Cactus along with Sam, a fellow Nazarene from Amarillo, to talk with residents and community leaders and get a feel for how the church could help. The main priority was a building, both for worship and to house community-service projects such as ESL<sup>4</sup> classes, free legal aid, and health clinics.

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 5:3

<sup>4</sup> English as a Second Language



Cactus Nazarene Ministry Center building.

David wanted to include everyone in Cactus, so he visited with Rasheed [rah-SHEED], a Muslim leader of the Somali community. Rasheed told him he'd be pleased to see the church expand its offerings. He suggested not putting the word *church* on the sign, so no one felt inadvertently excluded.

"What if we call it a ministry center?" David asked.

"Perfect," said Rasheed.

A plan took shape. We'd solicit donations and buy one of those warehouse-style building kits, then ask church volunteers to help put it up. David and Sam filmed video footage of Cactus and made a short movie to show at the Nazarene district convention the following spring.

It seemed like everyone we told about Cactus wanted to donate.

Soon we were fielding offers from volunteer work teams to help erect the 9,000-square-foot steel building—they raised walls, welded, installed electricity. Vito and Jenni [Monteblanco] moved to Cactus and immediately set about partnering with the local school district to serve free lunches to kids who go hungry during the summer when the school cafeteria is closed. Elda retired (again) and Vito took over as interim pastor of the Guatemalan congregation.

The African congregation meets at the YMCA while everyone waits for the finishing touches on the ministry center, which still needs heating and air-conditioning. Already we've been using the building for occasional "free-market" days, when we turn the main hall into a bazaar of donated food, clothing and other household items. When it's finished, the beige-and-green metal-sided Cactus Nazarene Ministry Center will have worship space for a number of different ethnic congregations, ESL classrooms, legal-aid meeting rooms, and even temporary housing for Nazarene missionaries who are serving short-term stints in Cactus.

Recently, David and I stood under a rare shade tree at the site of our new ministry center, surrounded by Africans. We shared in their excited conversation about the ministry center's progress and potential. I thought back to my first day in Cactus, that shell-shocked feeling as I gazed around at the seemingly desolate town.

Now Cactus seemed anything but desolate. Everywhere I looked I saw evidence of God at work.

Yes, I thought, *America has changed*. But when Jesus tells us to serve “the least of these,”<sup>5</sup> He doesn’t distinguish between languages or nationalities. “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger, and you took me in,”<sup>6</sup> our Lord says. It’s that simple. So in Cactus, Texas, that’s what we do.

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 25:40, NKJV

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 25:30, NKJV



# CHAPTER 3

## ‘Do You See These People?’

A few weeks after the Faith Promise service, my dad, Sam McPherson, posted a simple, homemade video on our family Facebook page, saying, “Look what I did today.”

Dr. Downs invited Dad, a lay leader, to help make a video presentation for the April 2013 West Texas District Assembly for the Church of the Nazarene. On Facebook, Dad described an exciting day in the unique town of Cactus, filming the video, and eating delicious Somali food.

Wanting to share in Dad’s enthusiasm, we watched the video. In it, Dr. Downs called the West Texas District to action, stating that he didn’t know what the future held, but it was clear that the people of Cactus needed the Church of the Nazarene.

As we watched, God began to stir something within us, “Do you see these people, this place? Can you sense the need?”

*“But, God, things are going so well here in Wisconsin. And surely, the West Texas District already has a plan in place.”*



Days went by. As we went about our daily routines, Cactus was all that Vito and I could talk about. We couldn't shake the feeling that God had something great to do there. So Vito emailed Dr. Downs, sharing our interest and ideas.

I am writing today regarding the ministry that is happening in Cactus, Texas. As you can imagine, Jenni's parents shared Sam's experience of going to Cactus with you, and the video about the ministry and vision for Cactus. As we heard about the vision, plan, and desire for engaging in ministry there, our heartstrings were pulled. Either by the Holy Spirit's prompting or our passion for ministering cross-culturally, Cactus has been on our hearts and minds ever since our first conversation with Sam. Due to our inability to let this go, I am writing today.

We are aware that you and the District Advisory Board are well into making plans for the work in Cactus. I am not writing with any assumption about those plans. However, we did want to share what has been laid on our hearts and what we see as possible. We envision that, with the Lord's help and the right leadership, Cactus could have a self-sufficient Compassionate Ministry Center as a vital part of the community. We honestly see it becoming the community center and the prominent leader of the community and its future development. We see it impacting the community through offering social services, such as everything from English as a Second

Language (ESL), legal assistance, General Educational Development (GED) exam prep/testing, financial planning, employment assistance, immigration/refugee transition assistance/education, child, youth, and family development, and more. In addition to providing social services, we foresee it partnering with the Church of the Nazarene already in Cactus to be a place of worship, evangelism, and discipleship for not only the Hispanics, but for the Africans and other cultures represented in Cactus. In other words, we envision the work of the Church of the Nazarene in Cactus to be a Christ-centered community center offering the message of hope in Christ through services that empower people to live successful lives and to reach their full potential.

Never once did it cross our minds that we would be the ones to implement those ideas. We knew that we would pray for the ministry efforts; and, as the children of the videographer, we had some ideas, should Dr. Downs wish to hear them. In our naïveté, we were certain that our experience—limited though it was—would prove beneficial.

Vito and I had both grown up in the Church of the Nazarene in the USA—Vito in Lewiston, Idaho, and I was raised in Amarillo, Texas. We both received calls to ministry as preteens, and each of us knew that we would one day be serving in a cross-cultural setting. We met at Northwest Nazarene University (NNU) in Nampa, Idaho, where Vito

majored in international studies and I studied mathematics and natural science. After getting married and graduating from college, we spent seven months as Nazarene volunteer missionaries in Guatemala.

We then moved to Kansas City where Vito attended Nazarene Theological Seminary and I attended NNU's on-line master's program. We took our time working on our degrees while serving in various places as children's pastor, youth pastor, several positions at the Global Ministries Center, and various non-profit organizations.

Our time in Kansas City seemed like a hodgepodge of jobs and experiences. However, in light of what was happening in Cactus, Texas, we began to see how all those experiences fit together. We began to realize that perhaps we did have something to offer the West Texas District as they began to look at what the Church of the Nazarene might do in Cactus.

Our email was met with a courteous, short response, "How nice to hear from you. Your vision sounds almost identical to mine. I would enjoy, very much, visiting with you further about your ideas...."

Phew! We did it. We did what God had asked us to do, we wrote the district superintendent. Now back to our real life.

A few weeks later, we received another email from Dr. Downs asking if we could videoconference with him. The West Texas District had just finished district assembly, and God had done amazing things. In a matter of days, the Church of the Nazarene had rallied behind this call

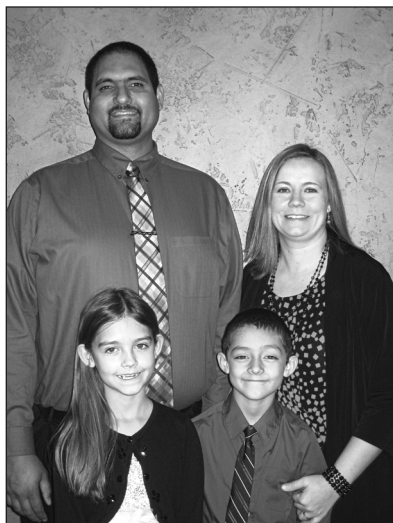
to action. Thousands of dollars were raised at assembly, Alabaster funds had been released by the district, and land had been purchased.

Suddenly the dream of doing something in Cactus was becoming a reality. The West Texas District was going to start a Compassionate Ministry Center there. Dr. Downs wanted to share all of this with us; oh, and “Could you please send me your resumes?”

*“Wait a minute, God. You asked us to share what **they** could do in Cactus, not what we could do in Cactus.”*

In April 2013, we videoconferenced with Dr. Downs, sharing dreams and asking “what ifs?” What if the West Texas District opened a Compassionate Ministry Center? What if the West Texas District called the Monteblanco family to Cactus? If we went, how would we afford it? Where would we live? What would we do? There were so many unanswered questions.

So we waited. At the time, it felt like those many questions just encircled us, unanswered. I remember telling Vito that the days of no answers must mean that it wasn't meant to be.



Monteblanco Family, 2014

Vito, being the more patient one in our marriage, suggested that we “lay out a fleece” like Gideon did in the book of Judges. So together in prayer, we asked God to give us some sort of answer by May 1.

Exactly on May 1, the phone rang. It was Dr. Downs. He just had lunch with a pastor on the district who felt called to help the Cactus project in some way. The pastor wasn’t sure exactly what that would look like, but he wanted to take the project to his next board meeting. Dr. Downs told the pastor about our family and mentioned that maybe it would be best to bring on a director for the ministry center. Would the pastor’s church perhaps consider helping provide the salary for a director?

As someone who was born and raised in the church, I was no stranger to answered prayers. But for the first time in my life, it was as if God had spoken directly to me. God answered our prayers in a very specific way on the exact day we had named.

One week later, we received a call late in the evening from an ecstatic Dr. Downs. He had just received a phone call from the pastor and his church board, committing to completely support the Monteblando family for one year as West Texas District “missionaries” in Cactus, Texas. While our mission field was not in a faraway country, we were called by the district to serve cross-culturally in a city more than 1,000 miles from Racine.

*“What? Wait a minute! God, what are you doing here? We haven’t agreed to this. Things are good here in Racine. Preparations for Pentecost Sunday are being made. We have plans for*

*the summer ministries. What about our kids? Where will they go to school? Where will we live?"*

Two weeks later, on Pentecost Sunday, Taylor Avenue Church of the Nazarene had the most amazing service in the three and a half years we had served there. We had six baptisms, brought in nine new members and four transfers, had two baby dedications, and an altar full of people seeking prayer and healing.

Sure, God had answered our prayers about Cactus. The doors were opening, and we couldn't deny that God was at work in all of this. Yet we still questioned. Could God really be calling us to leave—to leave all that was comfortable, to leave our successes, to leave our kids' new schools, and to leave our friends?

*"God, you are blessing us and using us right here in Wisconsin. We've given our lives to You. We've given you our tithe. We've even given you quadruple our Faith Promise. Isn't that enough? Certainly we've missed something. You want us to do what? You want us to..."*

*Go to a poor, dirty, smelly town in need of the light of Christ. Love on people, engage in the lives of people, discover their needs, and meet those needs.*

*You're calling us to live out the gospel. Literally be Christ in the midst of peoples' lives so that they might see Him and be redeemed, transformed, and sanctified."*

Yes, God was calling us to do exactly that.

The very next week, Memorial Day Weekend 2013, we knelt at the altars at First Church of the Nazarene in Amarillo, Texas, during their Faith Promise service and

signed the contract to become the directors of Cactus Nazarene Ministry Center (CNMC) in Texas. That afternoon, we visited Cactus for the ground-breaking service of CNMC. As we looked around the property, Olivia gazed up at Vito and me and, with faith much greater than her six years, said, “These people need to know about Jesus. We need to tell them.”

These words were exactly what Vito had been preaching for three years at Taylor Avenue Church. Time after time, he had preached about “being” the Church. Surrounded by love and support from the church members, it was time for us to take a leap of faith and to practice what we had been preaching. It was time to step outside the walls of the church building—even though no one was quite sure what that might look like—and be the hands and feet of Jesus in Cactus, Texas.

# CHAPTER 4

## Cactus

On August 4, 2013, Vito, Jenni, Olivia, and Elias [ee-LIE-uhs] Montebianco pulled onto a virtually empty 1.2-acre lot in Cactus. The moving truck held everything that remained in our lives. Just two days before, we pulled out of the driveway in Racine, leaving behind a spacious parsonage. We had sold more than half our belongings so we could move what was left into a single-wide mobile home.<sup>7</sup> The trailer was all that sat on this just-more-than-an-acre, soon to become Cactus Nazarene Ministry Center.

By the end of the month, building the foundation for the center would begin, and the steel for the center itself had already been purchased. However, right then, all that existed was the land and the single-wide.

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<sup>7</sup> A single-wide mobile home is a building generally 15 feet (4.5 meters) by 72 feet (22 meters). It is built in a factory, then transported to a permanent or semi-permanent location. It may also be called a trailer or caravan.



In front of the single-wide was a gaping 20-foot hole where “they” were trying to find the sewage line for our newly placed home. Electricity had not been installed. The sewer line had not been found. There were no steps leading up to the door of the mobile home. So we backed the moving truck up and began to unload straight in the front door.

We had reached the final item in the truck, an upright piano that had been gifted to Olivia by a family in Wisconsin. We looked at the few men who had helped us unload; they were exhausted and so were we. How were we going to get the piano into the trailer?

Suddenly around the corner came five tall African men, dressed in suits for church. Six-foot, six-inch Vito could look the men in the eye, and his Hispanic-American skin was much lighter than the very dark skin of the new arrivals, whom we soon learned were from South Sudan. They took one look at that piano and effortlessly lifted it straight through the front door. As we unpacked our belongings in our new house and began to set up a home, we quickly realized that our world looked entirely different in Cactus.

Cactus, Texas, is a town that surprisingly has very few actual cacti. Rather, Cactus is a town of approximately 4,000 people where English is only one of approximately 40 languages spoken. In the three years we have lived here, we have met people from more than 20 ethnic groups. It is a town where I can’t simply ask, “Where are you from?” Instead, I have to ask, “What tribe, clan, or indigenous ethnicity are you?” Nearly every country represented in Cactus has more

than one people group living here, and in many cases three or four indigenous ethnicities. Although they may be from the same country, each ethnicity may speak a different language and often practice a different religion from the other ethnicities from that country.



Typical housing in Cactus.

Approximately two-thirds of the people in Cactus are refugees—people who have been forced to leave their countries to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster. The refugees in Cactus are second-migration refugees, which means most came to the United States, entering through a major city then moved to Cactus to be near family or to find jobs. Currently the majority of the refugees in Cactus are from Sudan, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Myanmar (Burma).

The other one-third of the people in Cactus are immigrants from Mexico and Guatemala, some documented and some undocumented. Recently we have begun to see immigrants from Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Haiti move into the area as well. While the majority of immigrants chose to leave their home countries rather than being forced out like refugees, the stories of both groups are very similar.

Today, in any major city in the United States, you will find these culture groups and more. The difference in Cactus is that there is no typical white, American presence. There is no typical American economic structure and certainly no typical American luxuries.

The refugees and immigrants came to Cactus to find work. A beef processing and packing plant—owned by one of the top four meat-processing companies in the USA—calls Cactus, Texas, home. It has the capacity to process more than 5,000 head of cattle per day, starting with live cattle all the way through the tannery. The plant employs more than 3,000 hourly employees and more than 500 management-level employees. In 2008, the plant began to hire refugees and is now the single reason that Cactus, Texas, exists. Those who do not work at the meatpacking plant work in nearby cattle feed yards and dairies or are migrant workers at surrounding farms.

Cactus is a town where people come to find others like themselves. To find others who are set apart, on the fringe of society, looked upon as an intrusion, criticized, judged. They are not living the “American Dream” that, I am sure, many thought of when they began their journey to the

United States. They do not understand our culture, our language, our general way of life. For some, a basic kitchen stove is foreign to them, as they are used to cooking in pits in the ground. For others, a bed for each family member is a luxury only the wealthy can afford; they sleep in family groups on the floor.

The very few in Cactus who are native to the United States are also often fleeing from something. Most are fleeing from addictions, poverty, and cycles that have plagued their family for generations. For them, Cactus is “as good as it gets.”

This is a town filled with poverty,<sup>8</sup> where many of the homes would be condemned if they were located almost anywhere else. There is no grocery store, and the only shop resembling the United States is a dollar store that often falls prey to the “culture” of Cactus, closing whenever they want and leaving broken cartons of eggs on the floor for days. There is no health care. There are no after-school or sports programs outside those that CNMC has started.

Cactus is a town that is intentionally skipped, looked down upon, and talked about. Yet it is here the Church of the Nazarene decided it could make a difference. Cactus Nazarene Ministry Center (CNMC) came from a passion to not simply preach the gospel on Sunday mornings, but to live the gospel daily and to meet people where they are, as they are, in the midst of their messy lives.

CNMC is a Christ-centered compassionate ministry center sharing the hope of Christ through social services

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<sup>8</sup> 15.4 percent of the population had incomes below the poverty line—\$23,834 for a family of four—in 2014.

that empower the people and community of Cactus to live successful lives and to reach their full potential.

We strive to be the hands and feet of Jesus as we live side by side with the immigrants and refugees in our midst. We endeavor not to simply give handouts, but to teach people and empower them to live successfully in their new home, with the ultimate goal being that they may meet Jesus. We pour out love, offer mercy, share grace, and give hope.

We have been called to live side by side with the people in Cactus, Texas, to show them love, and to one day lead them to a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ.

We live side by side by showing them how to use a stove and teaching them how to cook foods that are new and different to them.

We live side by side by buying them a trash can, spending time cleaning up the house, and explaining each cleaning supply with more hand signals and body language than ever thought humanly possible.

We live side by side by learning about *their* gardens and how to cook and enjoy those plants we didn't even know existed, let alone were edible.

We live side by side by growing our own gardens and offering fresh produce in this food desert, then by teaching them how to manage the hard, Texas soil.

We live side by side by providing warm blankets and coats for the whole family, while teaching health tips for living in the frigid temperatures so common to Texas Panhandle winters.

We live side by side by helping them fill out immigration paperwork and guiding them to affordable health insurance options.

We live side by side by helping install car seats and explaining traffic laws.

We live side by side by answering tough questions, like “What should I do when I know my husband has a girlfriend?” and the easy questions, like “Why did you choose to be a Christian?”

We have been called to the people of Cactus—multiple religions, no religion, the drunk, the addict, the criminal, the laborer, the divorced, the children of different fathers, the abused—to live among them, share life with them, build friendships with them, get to know them, fall in love with them.

There is no formula; there is no guidebook. In reality, things at CNMC may sometimes look a little backward from “typical” church ministry. Traditionally within the United States, a church functions in a specific role within an organized society. But when the society isn’t organized, the Church has to assume a different role. In our case, it means being patient, loving, willing to learn, and willing to be stretched. It means having our lives stretched through trials and difficulties similar to those faced by the people to whom we minister. It means giving 100 percent toward everything we do. Sometimes we get it right, and it’s a huge success. Other times, it’s a complete flop. *Every* time, we give God the glory, regardless of what happens.

Allow me to introduce you to some of the people of Cactus.

The people who live in Cactus, Texas,  
come from the following countries  
in the Western Hemisphere:  
Mexico, Guatemala, Cuba, Haiti, Puerto Rico, and Guyana.



The people who live in Cactus, Texas,  
come from the following countries  
in the Eastern Hemisphere:  
Sudan, South Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo,  
Somalia, and Myanmar.







# CHAPTER 5

## Kuol

We met Kuol [koo-AWL] on our first day in Cactus, before we even moved here. It was the day of the groundbreaking service, the day we signed our contract, the day we said “yes” to Cactus. That day, we met many South Sudanese men, some from the Dinka [DEEN-kuh] tribe and others from the Nuer [NEW-er] tribe. Many of the men stood tall, several even taller than Vito. The men were introduced to us as some of the “Lost Boys.” We knew this was significant; but at the time, we didn’t know the weight that title carried.

Out of that group, there was something different about Kuol. And while Kuol couldn’t verbalize exactly what God was doing in his life, he knew that God was calling him to something.

We spent a lot of time with Kuol when we first moved to Cactus. He and some of the other South Sudanese helped as we began to pour the cement slab for the ministry center. They knew that one day this building would serve as their church.

As relationships developed, Dr. Downs brought Pastor Michael Gatkek [GAT-kik] to the Texas Panhandle. Pastor Michael would serve as the African church planter on the West Texas District. One of the first churches to be planted was Cactus African Mission Church of the Nazarene. In March 2014, this new church held its first service in a room rented at the local YMCA, since the center was still being built by volunteers. The congregation, consisting mostly of South Sudanese, was led primarily by Kuol, who had become the religious lay leader of the small group.

On Sunday afternoons, Vito and Kuol would drive around town giving many of the men rides to church. When Pastor Michael was unable to make it to Cactus for the service, Vito and Kuol would share the responsibility. Kuol would lead the worship, and Vito would preach. We shared meals together and began to get to know each other well.

Throughout the fall, winter, and into the spring, volunteers helped build the shell of the ministry center and began framing the inside of the building.

As the summer of 2014 approached, several Work & Witness teams were scheduled to come to Cactus. We really wanted the teams to hear a refugee story, but we hadn't heard Kuol's full story yet. One day he mentioned that he wanted to be used in ways to inspire and encourage people. Learning that Kuol had shared his story with others before, Vito invited him to talk to the groups. Kuol accepted, saying he did not mind sharing the story if it inspired changed lives.

Kuol and his friends cooked a traditional Sudanese meal for one of the youth groups who had come to Cactus. The

group of African transplants arrived to start cooking at 4:30 p.m. for a 6:00 p.m. dinner. We ate around 8:00 p.m., as was typical “African time.” After the meal, we gathered for a time of praise and worship. Following music led by the youth leader and a time of prayer, we introduced Kuol. As he was given the microphone, we could tell he was extremely nervous; his first words were barely audible as he warmed to his audience.

Kuol was only four years old when war broke out in Sudan. He didn’t remember his father, a police officer who was killed early during the fighting.

Every day during this time, Kuol’s mom fixed lunch for him and his brothers and sent them out into the tall grasses near the village. There they remained in hiding until late in the day. For months, Kuol and his brothers made the trek to the grasses on the edge of the village. Sometimes, they whiled away the hours by simply playing. At other times, his brothers worked the fields with their cattle. Always, they were vigilant and ready to run should the need arise.

Stories ran rampant of extremist soldiers from the north kidnapping children from Dinka villages. The rumors were that children were brainwashed into becoming soldiers against their own people, against their own families.

One day, five-year-old Kuol hid in the grass with his 11-year-old cousin. His brothers were in the field, taking care of the cattle. The two boys were waiting quietly until sunset, anticipating the time when they could return to their family. Then they heard an unmistakable noise—gun shots rang out.

The older boy grabbed Kuol's hand and began to run. The boys had no destination in mind; their instructions were to simply run east. As gun shots morphed into explosions, the boys glanced back to see a column of smoke rising from what was left of their village. Kuol wanted to yell for his mother, but he did as instructed and kept running.

Shoeless feet soon began to throb, but the boys didn't stop. Naked and running out of food, they came upon another group of people fleeing toward the east. Joining that group, they made plans to travel toward possible safety in Ethiopia.

At times Kuol began to cry, aching for his mother. His cousin gently pushed Kuol on, reassuring the five-year-old that they would find his mother up ahead at the next stop or just around the corner. She was never there.

Starvation and dehydration were realities for the evacuees. Many of those journeying with the boys gave up, but Kuol and his cousin kept going.

After three months of walking, the boys trudged into a refugee camp in Ethiopia. Their feet were covered in sores, their bodies leathery from exposure, and starvation was written all over their faces. Food was placed before the travelers as quickly as it had been taken away during their journey. Many of the refugees got sick, eating too quickly and too much. However, Kuol's cousin instructed the younger boy to pace himself.

Life in the refugee camp may have been easier than on the road, but the conditions were not. Not only that, they still had not found Kuol's mother or any other family members.

Over the next three years, the older boy taught his young cousin to swim, something they had learned was a necessity during their travels. On the way to Ethiopia, the boys had to cross the Nile River. At that point since Kuol couldn't swim, his cousin carried Kuol on his shoulders through the crocodile-infested waters. Many fellow travelers drowned or were eaten, but together Kuol and his cousin made it across. As soon as Kuol learned to swim, Kuol's cousin left to join the rebel forces from the southern part of Sudan.

Shortly afterward, civil war broke out in Ethiopia, and one side of the conflict chose to target refugee camps. Again, the Sudanese fled for their lives. They hurried back across the border into Sudan; however, the conflict soon caught up to the weary travelers.

Swimming across the river into Sudan, Kuol was aware of bullets whizzing by, people drowning as they tried to make their way to safety, and dead bodies floating in the river. On the other side of the river, the exhausted travelers continued to run.

Kuol and the others, looking for a place to stop, discovered a secluded spot close to a body of water with fish ripe for the catching. A number of fruit-bearing trees provided additional sustenance. The location was low; and because the area around them had recently flooded, no vehicle could reach them. For the time being, they felt a reprieve from attacks from the north.

Unfortunately, it didn't take long for the invading army to discover the group of Sudanese, hiding in their makeshift camp in the lowlands. As the weather warmed, the

floodwaters receded. Word reached the refugees that the army was coming for them. It didn't take long for them to pack and dash away yet again.

After many weeks, the group found themselves at yet another refugee camp, this time in Kenya. Kuol registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and began to settle in. He was finally able to attend school after years of running.

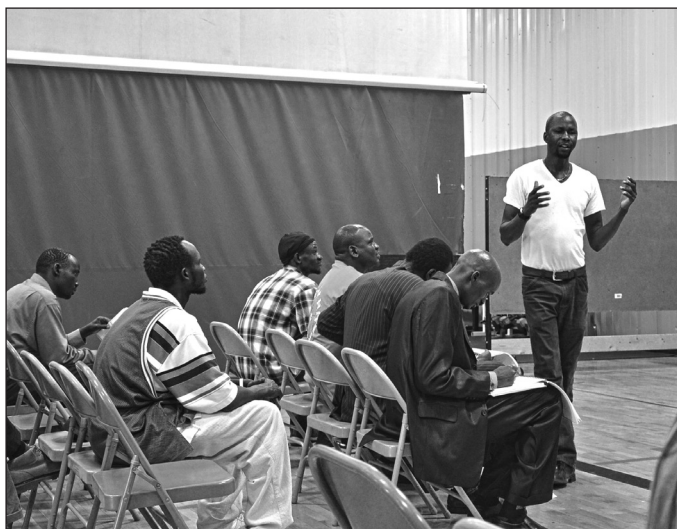
Only a few years later, Kuol, at the age of 14, decided to leave the refugee camp and fight with the rebel army in Sudan. He fought for his country for three years, experiencing war with all of its horrors, violence, and death. During a battle, a bomb went off just a few yards from Kuol, the shock of the blast throwing him to the side. When he was finally able to stand, he realized that he had lost all hearing and many of his friends had been killed.

Kuol was deaf for a year; then one day, his hearing was suddenly restored. Rather than re-enlisting, Kuol returned to the refugee camp in Kenya.

Twelve long years after fleeing from his village, he was selected for resettlement in the United States at the age of 17. In Phoenix, Arizona, Kuol lived with a foster family, allowing him to graduate from high school and to attend a community college.

Kuol never did find his mother. After he had resettled in the United States, he located one of his brothers and learned that his mother had made it out of their village during the first attack. She resettled in another village. Sadly, a bomb landed on her home in that village, and his

mother died holding Kuol's youngest brother. The day she sent him out to hide in the tall grasses was the last time Kuol saw his mother.



Kuol preaching.

As Kuol finished, there was not a dry eye in the room. A young lady, on the edge of her seat and with tears rolling down her cheeks, expressed how embarrassed and guilty she felt about her own situation. She had grown up with great privilege and with a family that loved her, yet she had thrown it all away and had “burnt all bridges.” Kuol encouraged her to try to reconnect with her family, explaining that it was never too late to attempt reconciliation. Though he didn’t realize it at the time, Kuol had just preached his first sermon.



As the months passed, Kuol shared his story many more times, becoming more and more comfortable as he led others to life-changing decisions. He began the Nazarene Course of Study classes, the educational preparation required of those seeking ordination in the Church of the Nazarene. He became a lay pastor under Pastor Michael and Vito's mentoring.

However, one day, Kuol suddenly told us he was leaving. There was too much disappointment in Cactus. The Sudanese men wouldn't change, and working at the meat-packing plant was just too difficult. With tears in our eyes, we said good-bye to Kuol as he fled Cactus, looking for a new job and a new home.

We tried to keep in touch, but soon Kuol's phone number changed so conversations ceased. The last we heard, he was attending the Church of the Nazarene in another town.

For more than 30 years, all Kuol has known is a life on the run. It is our hope and prayer that Kuol will find, in Christ, the peace and strength that it will take to stop running.

# CHAPTER 6

## Patricia

During our first fall in Cactus, I walked to the elementary school each afternoon to pick up Olivia and Elias.

Because the city does not have the economic structure to support its own school district, the elementary school is part of the Dumas (DOO-muhs) School District. (Dumas, Texas, is a city 13 miles [21 kilometers] from Cactus.) Children in Cactus attend Cactus Elementary through fourth grade and are then bussed to the neighboring city for the remainder of their primary and secondary education.

Olivia and Elias started second grade and kindergarten, respectively, just three weeks after we arrived. They quickly made friends and began to excel in ways they had not done before. We learned that all teachers at Cactus Elementary were English as a Second Language (ESL) certified. That being the case, they could implement ESL strategies in the classroom since most of the students were English-language learners, meaning they did not speak English as

their first language. This did wonders not only for the non-English-speaking students, but for our two English-only-speaking children. We had been concerned that Olivia and Elias would struggle in their new school, and we were happily wrong.

Each afternoon on my two-block walk to school, I would cut through the large yard of a run-down green and brown single-wide trailer. One day, a young woman stepped out of the trailer and called out, "Hey! Are you headed to the school?"

"Yes, I am."

"Okay, I'll walk with you."

So began my friendship with Patricia, a 25-year-old who had grown up in Cactus. At the time, she was pregnant with her fourth child. As Patricia and I became better acquainted on our afternoon strolls to and from the school, I learned that her parents had moved to Cactus from Mexico. She had attended Cactus Elementary as a child, and her parents still lived in Cactus. Her husband, the father of her two youngest children, worked as a truck driver for the meatpacking plant.

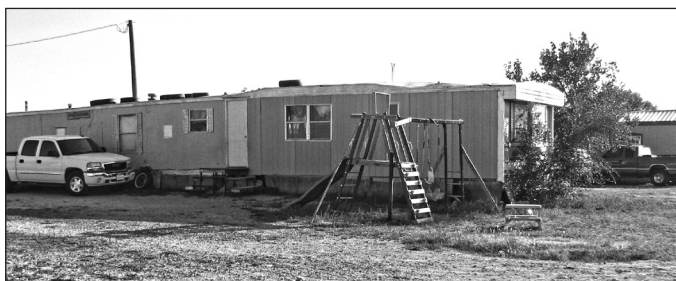
As winter approached, our walks became shorter due to the cold and her pregnancy; and at times, I would pick up Patricia's two oldest from school for her. Occasionally her children would come over to play at our house, begging for snack after snack and crying when it was time to leave because they didn't want to stop playing.

One afternoon as I dropped off her kids, Patricia invited me into her home. I was shocked at what I saw. This soon-to-be family of six had very little furniture, a broken dining

room window, and an auto mechanic's work light strung through the window that provided the only light in the room. The gas stove had all four burners lit to provide what heat there was. She told me she had given their last meat and cheese turnover to her husband when he got home from work, because he had worked all day and needed the food more than she did (this from a pregnant woman).

When Patricia's fourth baby was born, I visited her in the hospital. She was lonely, so I sat with her for hours to keep her company.

A few weeks later in her house, I held her new baby boy and watched as cockroaches made themselves at home, while she cried, telling me her husband had left her for another woman. She told me that she had other options, but didn't want to leave Cactus, because there, she "had it made."



Patricia's home.

That summer in 2014, Patricia, her kids, her mother, and her nephews became permanent fixtures at the ministry center. They hung out with the Work & Witness teams, they cooked meals, they helped with the construction, and they were shown love by Nazarenes from around the country who

had come to serve. Patricia and her family were never officially invited to join the teams. In fact, in all honesty, there were some days when they were more work than help. However, nearly every morning, they were on-site, ready to work and live and laugh alongside the teams. And when a team wasn't there, they wanted to know when the next one would come.

Eventually, Patricia's kids started going to church with us on Wednesday evenings at the Church of the Nazarene in Dumas, Texas. Patricia and I had some tough talks about her walk with Christ. However, Patricia was raised Catholic. While she hadn't been to Mass in a long time, she felt she was "okay." She would go when things got better or if she had time.

As summer turned into fall and fall into winter, I noticed that Patricia wasn't around as much anymore. Admittedly, I was also busy and found myself driving to and from the school more often, rather than walking.

One day I texted Patricia to ask how she was. She told me that she had found employment in Dumas since her husband was no longer sending child support. Not two weeks later, she told me she had met a new man and that she and the children were moving into his apartment in Dumas. Her green and brown single-wide trailer sat empty. Each time I looked at it, I fought a nagging defeat.

*"Why, God? Why did I give so much of myself for her when she just runs off with the first guy she meets? What's the point? What did I do wrong? Could I have done something else to make her stay? How could I have helped her see that You are the One she needs?"*

Following her move, we texted off and on as she shared the ups and downs of her new life. The kids stopped going to church. Patricia was busy working full time and juggling a family. I continued to let her know that I loved her and that I was praying for her, but quickly our friendship grew quieter and quieter.

Fast forward to January 2015 when I sat in Sunday School at Dumas Church of the Nazarene. Class was almost over when I heard a familiar voice calling her children. Was I hearing correctly? Was Patricia *at church*? Sure enough, Patricia walked into class, sat down next to me, and whispered, “What are we doing?”

A few minutes later, we walked into the sanctuary for the service. Halfway through the sermon, Patricia turned to me with tears in her eyes and said, “Jenni, I am so lost.”

I held her as we talked and cried and prayed. Patricia said she knew she needed to stop trying to do everything on her own, that she needed God in control of her life.

That afternoon, I put her kids in my car to spend the afternoon at our house as she drove off to work. As her words rang in my ears, “I am so lost,” God reminded me, “See, Jenni, you are doing exactly what I have called you to do. You are loving Patricia. You are loving her kids. You are loving Cactus.”

I would love to tell you that things got better from there, that Patricia has turned her life around. Unfortunately, that’s not the case. I honestly don’t know what will become of Patricia and her family. I don’t know when she’ll be sitting in the pews at Dumas Church of the Nazarene—or any

church—again. I don't know when she'll truly give God control once and for all.

What I do know is that Patricia and her children, her mother, and her nephews have regularly been a part of the life of CNMC. Whenever a Work & Witness team is in town, Patricia and her kids and her mom are there, many times cooking meals and serving the members of the team. Patricia is still searching for what will fill the void in her life. Because of the relationships she has built with those who have come to serve in Cactus, I have faith that she will one day find love and acceptance from God.

# CHAPTER 7

## Rana

We had seen Kennard [KIN-awrd] a few times while picking up our kids from school, but couldn't place where "home" might be. One day we caught each other's eyes and exchanged greetings. He spoke English, but with a heavy accent. Vito and I joked that he had to be Jamaican, but why would a Jamaican want to move to Cactus? Greetings soon turned into conversations, and we learned that Kennard was from Guyana. Both of his daughters were in the same classes as our children, so an after-school friendship began to form.

A few weeks later we met his wife, Rana [RAW-nuh]. Beautiful. That's what first struck me when I saw Rana. She was striking—tall and slender. She spoke clear English with just a hint of an accent. We assumed that, like Kennard, she was from Guyana as well.

At the time, Pastor Michael Gatkek initiated plans for the Cactus African Mission Church of the Nazarene (now Cactus African Church). Another congregation in the area



was approached about the group borrowing their building for a meeting, and the meeting was announced to the Sudanese community. Pastor Michael asked that we join those in attendance. He particularly wanted us to meet a young family that would be at the meeting. In Cactus, the majority of the Sudanese community consists of single men, those who are considered the “Lost Boys” of Sudan. However, there was a Sudanese woman who Michael had met when she was a child, working with the girl’s mother in the refugee camps.

As we opened the door to the church, we saw Kennard, Rana, and their children sitting in the pews. We chuckled, knowing that Guyana is a South American country, not an African country. Quickly, Michael rushed to introduce us to his Sudanese friend, Rana. With smiles and big hugs, we greeted our “new” friends. Our paths had already crossed



Rana and family at a birthday party.

many times, yet we had not become well acquainted. We learned that day that Rana was not Guyanese as we had assumed, she was from the Dinka tribe of South Sudan.

In March 2014, the Cactus African Church of the Nazarene was officially launched with 27 people in attendance. Kennard, Rana, and their three kids were some of the first ones there. But living in Cactus was hard on Rana's family. Kennard worked at the meatpacking plant in the tannery, using chemicals that burned and scarred his arms. Rana, having moved to Cactus from a large city, had nothing to do. There was no shopping, very few friends, and no jobs for her outside the hard labor at the meatpacking plant. They enjoyed the community forming with the African church; however, since Kennard was not Sudanese, he didn't always fit in.

Our families, however, grew closer as friends. One afternoon, Rana told me that their daughter, whose birthday was coming up, had asked for a birthday party. Rana wasn't sure how to make this happen. Their apartment was small, they didn't have many friends, and money was tight.

Excitement took hold of me immediately. We could give their daughter a birthday party as a gift! The next week, we fired up the grill and cooked hamburgers. The small park on the corner of the CNMC property came to life that evening as more than 20 children played, giggled, and simply enjoyed being children. Joy and peace were reflected on each person's face that evening.

During the meal, we learned that Kennard had grown up in a large Guyanese community in Brooklyn, New York, USA.

He spoke Guyanese Creole (an English-based creole) and English. Life had been rough for him as he found himself in and out of gangs and drugs. He was constantly running from one gang to another, seeking “something better.” Cactus was just another move in his search. Kennard had heard there were good-paying jobs here, but it wasn’t at all what he had expected.

Rana then told a bit of her background. One night, 11-year-old Rana was suddenly shaken awake. Bleary-eyed and half asleep, she finally focused on her mother’s tense face. Immediately she was wide awake; the time had come. Her hand reached for her small bundle of clothes and necessities that had laid in the same spot every night, just for this occasion. Quickly and quietly, Rana’s family left the hut and the village and were on the run.

Rana never remembered meeting her father. But she had heard stories and saw the way people treated her mother, with respect and, yes, with fear. Her father was a general in the rebellion, fighting for the southern armies against the northern invaders. He had a reputation for being a very harsh and violent person. Rana’s mother knew that if the soldiers came to the village they would pay special attention to her and her children.

Rana’s family soon met up with others, walking at night when it was cooler and when the large animals were asleep. The men walked during the day, ahead of the women and children, to scout the way. Walking week upon week toward a refugee camp, Rana and her family learned to survive. Survival sometimes came by way of the generosity of

others, but most often it was simply making do with what was available. Rana described the travelers' thirst and how they quickly learned to examine puddles to determine if the water was safe to drink. When they came upon "good" water, they filled as many containers as each person could carry, knowing that they may not come across another safe puddle for days.

Once the group made it to the refugee camp, life wasn't much easier. Rana's family was given a sheet and four sticks to make a tent, their home for the duration of their stay. Rana's father's reputation gave her family added benefits, but life was still difficult. Some days they received three meals; other days Rana and her friends kept busy so as not to notice how hungry they were.

Rana ached to learn and would sit under the open window of the makeshift school in the camp, listening intently. In her culture, girls were not allowed to attend school.

Rana's father's status allowed their family to be resettled in the United States after only two years in the refugee camp. However, arrival in the United States didn't automatically make everything better. Suddenly, 13-year-old Rana found herself as the only black person in a Nebraska junior high school. She didn't speak English, and she had no education. Life in the United States was not quite what she expected, and Rana struggled in school and was frequently bullied.

Seeking to live the "American Dream," Rana became a model and moved to New York where she met Kennard, who was trying to make a name for himself by mixing music. Rana and Kennard were married and had three children.

But income from the music and modeling jobs did not prove to be enough for their family.

Kennard's cousin told them that he had heard of a great job in Texas that paid well. So, looking for anything to pay the bills, Rana, Kennard, and their family found themselves in Cactus, where Kennard worked at the meatpacking plant.

That evening, as we listened to Kennard and Rana, our hearts were stirred. We rejoiced that CNMC, our friendship, and the growing Cactus African Church of the Nazarene, might be exactly what their family needed.

A few weeks later, Rana told me that she and Kennard had decided that Cactus was just too hard on them; they were moving to Fort Worth, Texas. My heart broke, and I jokingly threatened to chain them to one of the very few trees in Cactus. With tears in our eyes, we watched this family, our first real friends in Cactus, drive away with their few belongings loaded into their battered car.

I felt defeated. Once again, Rana and her family were running. They were seeking something new that might bring happiness and fulfillment. Once again, I watched (now via Facebook and phone calls) as their family, in a new city, battled disappointment and heartache. Vito and I did our best to connect Rana and her family with Nazarene churches in Fort Worth, but nothing seemed to work. Once again, I questioned why.

It seems a bit odd to say, but I am happy to report that Kennard and Rana soon went through extreme financial difficulties and their marriage began to fall apart. I rejoice in this because it was through this time of struggle that

Rana turned to God. The marriage was restored, Rana and Kennard both got well-paying jobs, their children were baptized, and the family is now very active in their church and are growing in their relationships with God. The last time that I spoke with Rana, she reported that moving to Fort Worth was the best thing that they could have ever done.

I disagree. After years of running from war, persecution, drugs, fear, and unhappiness, running into the arms of God was the best thing they ever did.



# CHAPTER 8

## Andrea

“New to Cactus. Looking for a couch” was what the Facebook post read. The post on the “For Sale in Dumas and Cactus” page caught my eye because I rarely saw posts from Cactus written in English. The post was from someone named Andrea, and her profile picture was of a young lady with short, spikey, pink hair. It was obvious that she liked Disney, based on the numerous Mickey Mouse and Tinkerbell tattoos covering her body.

Typically, I would have scrolled past the post and moved on, looking for something to buy that I didn’t really need. However, we had recently been gifted a hand-me-down recliner and had no idea what to do with it. So I responded, “I have a used recliner. It’s clean and comfortable. You can have it if you want it.”

Andrea responded immediately, “Yes, we’d like it. Can you deliver?”



We made arrangements to deliver the recliner sometime the following week. At the time, we had a Work & Witness team visiting and a busy weekend planned. The recliner could wait.

Two days later, we sat around tables at Safari Halaal [HAW-lahl] Meats, the only restaurant in Cactus. This small hole-in-the-wall restaurant is owned and operated by Saahid [saw-EED], a Somali refugee. We take all the Work & Witness teams to Saahid's restaurant, feasting on goat, beef, chicken, curry, rice, and pasta. At Saahid's place, no one leaves hungry.

In typical fashion, Saahid and his family had fixed a buffet-style meal for the team, and everyone was happily enjoying the meal when I heard a voice ask, "Can we see a menu?"

That simple sentence gave away so much. There was no menu at this restaurant; you ate whatever Saahid and his family fixed that day. Also, such clear English was not commonly heard in Cactus, especially in this restaurant. This must be someone new to Cactus. As I turned, I caught a glimpse of short, spikey, pink hair and knew immediately who the person was. Standing at the counter were Andrea and her husband, Shane, pushing their bundled-up two-year-old son in a stroller.

"Vito, I know that lady! She's the one who we're giving the recliner to!" In the next breath, we were standing next to Andrea and Shane, introducing ourselves and inviting them to join our group for dinner.

We watched as the family of three devoured plates of food as if they had not eaten in days, and I marveled at how

God had placed this family in our path. Before leaving for the evening, we confirmed plans for delivering the recliner and laughed together about our chance meeting.

The next day was Saturday. The Work & Witness team had already gone for the evening, and we were relaxing when the phone rang. It was a friend of ours from Amarillo.

“Would you be able to take someone to church with you tomorrow?” the voice on the other end of the line asked.

“Sure,” Vito responded. “Who is it?”

“Well, a friend of mine met someone at the doctor’s office the other day. They have just moved to Cactus and are in need of some friends. My friend mentioned that we knew people in the area, and we asked if they might like to go to church in Dumas. Their names are Andrea and Shane.”

That Sunday, we walked into Dumas Church of the Nazarene with Andrea and Shane, and I watched as the people of the church gathered around the couple and welcomed them, pink hair, tattoos, and all. Over the next few weeks, Andrea and Shane frequently joined us in the pews in Dumas.

As we became better acquainted with the young family, we quickly discovered that they, too, were fleeing, much like our refugee neighbors. However, rather than fleeing from war and famine, Andrea and Shane were fleeing from addiction, mental illness, and a cycle of poverty and self-hurt.

Andrea struggled severely from several mental illnesses, and it wasn’t long before the excitement of living in a new place wore off. One morning, Andrea texted me, saying that she needed to be hospitalized. She had been hospitalized for

mental illness many times before; however, unlike the past, she had no family nearby to take care of two-year-old Bobby. As it stood, Shane would have to quit his job at the meatpacking plant to care for Bobby while Andrea was in the hospital.

The next day at 4:00 a.m., Vito and I woke to welcome Bobby into our family for a week. His momma received much-needed medical care, and his daddy continued to work the long, hard hours at the meatpacking plant.

Andrea came home refreshed and ready to take on normal responsibilities again. The family started attending church again; things were looking up.

Unfortunately, a month later when the medications ran out, Andrea had to be hospitalized once again. Another month went by. This time when the medications ran out, Andrea and Shane decided it was best for them to move back “home” to West Virginia.

The evening before they left, Vito and I went to Andrea and Shane’s apartment to pray with them before leaving. When we walked in, literal mountains of clothes faced us. Heaps of dirty dishes were stacked here and there, and I have never encountered a dirtier carpet.

Sitting in the middle of all the chaos were Andrea, Shane, and little Bobby. They had no desire to pack or clean before leaving. There was no reason to do so; their car couldn’t carry it all. They planned to leave everything behind. They said, “You guys can have it all and give it to people here who might need it.”

So give it away was what we did. We believe it was not a coincidence that a small youth group was visiting that

weekend. The morning after Andrea and Shane drove away, our staff and the teens began to pack everything. Some things, like the table and couch, went to people who needed them. Admittedly, a lot of stuff went into the dumpster.

We cleaned, distributed, hauled away, cried, prayed, and questioned. It seemed we were in a terrible cycle of meeting people and helping their families, only to have them leave again. What would happen to Andrea, Shane, and Bobby now? When they arrived at their destination, would there be someone who would show them the love of Jesus?

Andrea and I stayed in touch after they left Cactus. The first few months were filled with seemingly happy times as they reconnected with friends and family. They tried to put their lives back together again. It wasn't long, however, before alcohol, other "lovers," and mental illness drove Andrea and Shane to lost jobs and talk of divorce. I ached as I read her Facebook statuses. Andrea was in and out of mental hospitals, and Shane struggled to keep a job.

Suddenly things changed. One day in spring 2016, Andrea's status read, "I re-committed my life to God today, and I feel great!" Skeptical, I quickly prayed that God's grip on Andrea would be such that she wouldn't want to let go.



Andrea and her son, Bobby.

What was it that led Andrea back to church? Who invited her? I don't know much about the church she attends; however, I've watched Andrea's life transform from one of poverty, addiction, and depression to one of positivity, praise, and pure joy that can only come from a relationship with Jesus Christ. I am humbled at having been allowed to join in her spiritual journey and trust God to continue His work in her life.

# CHAPTER 9

## Crystal

In May 2014, the walls of the ministry center were framed in. There was rough electrical, but no drywall. In these construction-zone-like surroundings, we held the first event of any kind at Cactus Nazarene Ministry Center—a Free Market. We called it Free Market because that’s exactly what it was: a market where people could get items without having to pay for them.

Volunteers blocked off the majority of the building to prevent injuries in the unfinished portion of the center. Tables were set up in the multipurpose room and piled high with clothes, blankets, knickknacks, and random household items.

It was to Free Market that Crystal and her family came to shop. Anything and everything they could get their hands on was fair game. They were friendly, they were loud, and there were a lot of them! Crystal, speaking only English, and her husband, Leonardo, speaking only Spanish, had four

children with them. It seemed as if the parents and the children had devised a plan before coming in: “Take whatever you can carry. Don’t leave anything behind.”

That strategy was followed in detail. And they weren’t ashamed of it. They did take everything they could carry. And when they couldn’t carry any more, they asked for help carrying it. Vito and I, along with several volunteers, stood back and watched as the group displayed characteristics of a family in flight.

But what did they have to flee from? They weren’t refugees—not in our typical understanding.

Yet, we saw a family in need. A family that perhaps was afraid. A family who saw material possessions as their escape. The more possessions they had, the more power they had.

We didn’t get Crystal’s contact information when the family left. Admittedly, we were somewhat relieved when they walked out the doors with the last load. We wondered if we were enabling them, rather than empowering them. Frankly, we weren’t quite prepared to offer the services they needed.

Later that year, I became better acquainted with Crystal’s daughters. Having begun teaching music at Cactus Elementary School (more about that later), I forged relationships with the children of Cactus and began to build bridges to their families. If the children trusted me and if the school trusted me, then the parents began to trust me and in turn, trust CNMC. As I got to know Crystal’s girls, I continued to see the same behaviors exhibited at the Free Market. The girls were always the center of attention and always looking for a handout.

In November 2014, CNMC held its first “Bundle-Up Cactus” event. The winter before, we had noticed children walking to and from school in light hoodies as their only winter outerwear. The Texas Panhandle sees its fair share of winter weather with bitter cold winds and snow; and, unfortunately, many of the people in Cactus, being refugees and immigrants, are not prepared for such frigid temperatures.

We had a dream for CNMC to provide winter coats for the children and teens of Cactus. Churches from Texas and Oklahoma donated gently used and new coats. Vito and I, along with a small Work & Witness team from Hamlin [HAM-lin], Texas, prepared to give away coats, gloves, and hats to those who weren’t able to provide them for themselves.

The two-day event had gone beautifully. It had been a cold weekend, just perfect for a coat giveaway. We had given away over 300 coats and even more gloves and hats. As we prepared to close the doors on Saturday afternoon and with a few stray coats strewn across the room, Crystal and her family came through the doors. Quickly we saw the same behaviors repeated, and quickly we watched as the family took and took and took.

The following summer, we served free lunches at our summer feeding program, and Crystal’s children were in attendance. In the fall of 2015, we watched as Crystal signed up her children for the new Cactus Soccer League, sponsored by CNMC, promising to “come back later” to pay the small registration fee. Time after time, Crystal and her family returned, taking whatever they could. Time after time,



we questioned what we could do to empower this family, rather than enable.

In January 2016, Crystal's husband, Leonardo, signed up for our English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. The program, meeting four times a week, offered free childcare for children ages 13 and younger. Following the first day of classes, I received a message from Crystal, "Do you need someone to watch the kids? I love to volunteer!"

I thought, the woman who seizes every opportunity to take, wants to give back? I was skeptical and certain that there had to be some ulterior motive involved. Dana Franchetti [DAY-nuh fran-CHET-tee], CNMC Children and Youth Program director, and I agreed that allowing Crystal to serve



Crystal and the ESL nursery.

in the ESL nursery was not the best idea. Neither of us had the emotional energy to take such a “project” on.

Two weeks later, one of our nursery workers quit, and we were in a bind. We consistently had more than 30 children in the ESL childcare, and we needed someone right away. That was when I reconsidered Crystal’s offer. Maybe we should take a chance, just this once. So we offered Crystal the job. And to be honest, the first few weeks I questioned the decision multiple times. But then something changed.

Crystal began to take ownership of her new responsibilities. It brought her joy to leave the nursery spotlessly clean when she left each evening. She delighted in bringing snacks for the children in her care. Crystal began planning crafts and activities for the kids, and she began to volunteer in other ways around the community, coaching her daughter’s soccer team and starting a local Girl Scout troop.

So we took another chance and offered her the position of ESL Early Childhood coordinator. In the new role, she would not only take care of the children in the nursery, but would provide leadership to others working alongside her. That day, after accepting the new title, Crystal wrote on her Facebook status, “God is so good! Today I was offered a promotion at Cactus Nazarene Ministry Center!”

Week after week, Crystal began to fall in love with the kids and the responsibility; and somewhere along the way, Crystal fell in love with Jesus. Her language changed, her attitude changed, and even her clothing choices changed. We literally watched Crystal transform from someone who couldn’t take enough from us, to someone who couldn’t give

enough. She gives of her time, her money, and herself in more ways than we can count.

It wasn't us who led Crystal in praying the sinner's prayer, and she doesn't sit in the pews at a Church of the Nazarene. It was a different church that led her in that ultimate decision, and it is that church she and her family attend every Sunday. But that doesn't matter. What does matter is that Crystal has chosen a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ.

# CHAPTER 10

## Mahad

Before we even moved to Cactus, we knew that English classes would be one of the first ministries that CNMC would offer. We spent the first year in Cactus building relationships with people, getting to know them and trying to understand their needs. The needs were many, and it quickly became apparent that we couldn't do everything ourselves. So, in January 2015, Lucas and Liz Gentry moved to Cactus to serve as volunteers to begin the English as a Second Language (ESL) program at CNMC.

In the summer of 2015, the first ESL class began. During a 5-week period, 10 students attended classes one evening each week. It was a small start, but the energy these classes brought to CNMC every Thursday evening was palpable. Finally, one of our first dreams had come to life.

The momentum of the summer classes led into fall. In September, we offered classes in the morning and evening to accommodate the shift schedule of the meatpacking plant.

Approximately 50 students registered to take 12 weeks of classes. Students met once a week for two hours and were assigned to a class based on their knowledge of English. The majority of the students were Hispanic with a few other ethnicities represented. We were more than thrilled with this response!

Mahad [muh-HAWD], a Somali man, registered as a student. He spoke limited English and was placed in the most basic class offered. Throughout the semester, Lucas and Liz became better acquainted with Mahad. As Lucas and Liz didn't speak Somali and Mahad didn't speak much English, their relationship was built purely on smiles, broken greetings in English, and a lot of hand gestures. Somehow—and I'm not exactly sure how because no one specifically invited him—Mahad began attending Cactus African Mission Church of the Nazarene.

Mahad became a faithful attendee, even though he knew that he could easily be persecuted for attending a Christian church, having previously followed another religion. However, Mahad was no stranger to persecution; he had fled Somalia when he was younger, just barely old enough to be considered a man.

Civil war broke out, and his village became a battlefield. Mahad and his family escaped on foot, only to be separated on the journey. He traveled with others, some extended family and some complete strangers, to find his way to a refugee camp in Kenya. Once there, he was joyously reunited with his family members, and they set up a temporary home.

The camp was home for several years. Mahad and his brothers enrolled in the small, makeshift school that formed in the camp, where they learned to read and write. However, unlike some of the other refugee schools, his small school taught in Arabic and other languages, rather than English.

Several years later, now a young man by everyone's standards, Mahad resettled in the United States. He moved around Minnesota and Missouri, looking for work. He finally settled in Cactus, Texas, where he found a strong Somali presence and a steady job. Once in Cactus, Mahad was able to enroll in free English classes for the first time in his life.

Once again, Mahad found himself fleeing. But this time he was fleeing from the religion he had known his whole life. Just before Christmas 2015, Mahad stopped fleeing and gave his life to the Lord!

One afternoon in the spring 2016 ESL semester, we were working in the CNMC office when Mahad showed up two hours early for his class. His workday had ended, and he didn't want to go home before class.

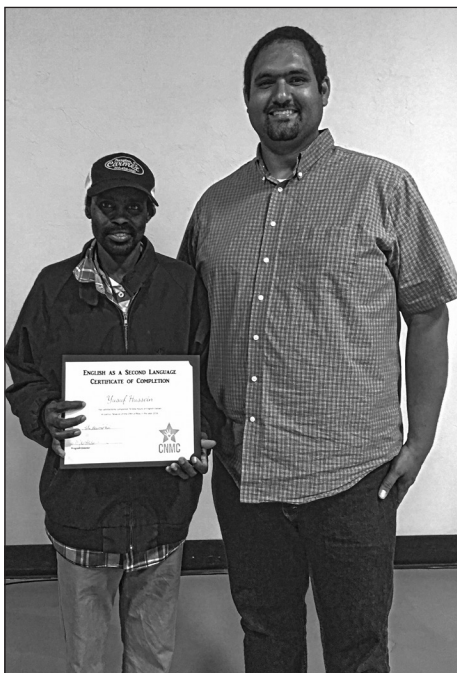
As he entered the office, he began to ask Vito questions about health insurance. Vito attempted to help him, but it was quickly clear that lack of information and the language barrier would be difficulties. Vito told Mahad that he would contact human resources about the situation, and we assumed Mahad would leave and come back later for class. Instead, Mahad sat there and watched as Vito worked.

Feeling guilty, Vito attempted to carry on a conversation with Mahad, asking a few questions. Learning that Mahad

did not have a Bible, Vito quickly found Mahad an online version in Somali, and we watched as Mahad began to read the Word of God in his own language for the first time. He was so grateful and eventually made his way to his classroom to read while he waited for class to begin.

After a while, Vito went into the classroom to prepare for class, and Mahad began to talk with him in broken English. He compared his previous religion with Christianity, finally saying, “My religion. Always trouble, trouble, trouble. Christian. Always happy, happy, happy!”

As a whole, the CNMC staff had fallen in love with Mahad, and we were all privileged to attend his baptismal service. Because we did not have access to a baptistery, another church in town agreed to let us borrow theirs for such occasions. That sunny Sunday evening, we gathered our things and began



Mahad and Vito

walking toward the church where the baptism would be held. A block away from the ministry center, we heard the pounding of feet running behind us. It was Mahad; he had gone to the ministry center, had seen us walking, and wanted to join us.

We greeted him, asking how he was. The glint in his eye and his gleaming teeth in his huge smile said it all. He was so excited! As we walked, he expressed his joy over and over. Sometimes he even hopped up and down or skipped. Here was a man excited about the next step in his Christian journey!

I'm not sure how much Mahad understood of his baptism. The service, like most Sundays, was a mixture of two South Sudanese tribal languages, Arabic, and English. I'm fairly certain there was some confusion when Pastor Michael literally "dunked" Mahad three times in the baptistery, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. But, I knew by the look on Mahad's face when he was greeted and cheered on by his brothers and sisters in Christ, that he was a changed man.

These days, being a Christian still isn't always easy or safe for Mahad. He has to ask for rides to work from others because he is no longer welcome to ride with the other Somalis. By the grace of God, Mahad has only been ostracized by the Cactus Somali community, rather than having his life threatened as would have been the case in his home country. Yet Mahad is not ashamed of his newfound faith. In fact, Mahad always shows up early for church, regularly being the one setting up the chairs and getting the building ready for others to worship.





# CHAPTER 11

May

Strolling out of the ministry center, I glanced at the small park on the northwest corner of the property, complete with two playgrounds containing slides, swings, and monkey bars, five red picnic tables, a basketball court, and a handful of small trees. What a change from the field of dirt and weeds that greeted us when we first arrived.

I had barely stepped out the door when I heard, “Mrs. Monteblanco!” and was greeted with shouts and hugs from May Thu Aye [MAY THU EYE] (we call her “May” for short) and her friends.

May is an eight-year-old Burmese girl, a regular fixture on the CNMC property and whose family follows another religion. May and I became acquainted through Cactus Elementary School.

One hot morning in August 2014, I received a phone call from the Dumas Independent School District. Almost

without preamble, the superintendent of personnel said, “Jenni, you’ve been recommended to us, and we were wondering if you’d like to teach music at Cactus Elementary this year.”

Now, I didn’t have a degree in elementary education, nor even a desire to teach, so I responded, “Well, I’ve never even thought about it.”

However, realizing that maybe this was the next step that God had planned for us, I quickly changed my tune.

Our salary for the first year in Cactus was provided by a sponsoring church on the district. That support would soon run out, and we weren’t sure where our funding would come from. Perhaps this was what God had in store. I didn’t know how that would work, but it was at least worth praying about.

Two days later, I sat in the principal’s office at Cactus Elementary School, introducing myself and explaining why Vito and I were in Cactus. This was the principal’s first year, and he too felt that God had called him to Cactus. We talked for 30 minutes about CNMC, then he asked, “So, do you know anything about music?”

“Well, my parents made me take piano and violin lessons growing up.”

“Then you know more than the kids do. I want the music class to be a place where these kids can come to unwind—not stress about what’s going on in their lives, learn to appreciate music, and know that someone loves them. Can you do that?”

“Yeah, I can do that.”

I walked out of the building that day with keys to my new music classroom. Two weeks later, I opened the door to receive 300 children from Cactus into my classroom and into my life.

That day in August was not only the beginning of a year of teaching, it was yet another way God provided for our family and opened a door to build lasting relationships. Until that point, we struggled with building rapport with the Burmese people in Cactus. The Burmese were much more reserved than other cultures we had encountered. Most of them followed a faith other than Christianity, and their language was very different from ours. However, the Burmese trusted the school. And if you were a school teacher, the Burmese trusted you.

May was a second grader that year. She was quiet, and her big brown eyes were sad and searching.

May was born in a refugee camp in Thailand. Her parents, grandparents, and extended family members fled their home country to avoid religious and political persecution. Over the course of time, many of May's family members ended up in Cactus to be near each other and to work at the meatpacking plant. May's family, like most of the Burmese in Cactus, was extremely close-knit.

May told me that her grandmother was very ill. She was in a hospital in Amarillo and not expected to live much longer. May's grandmother was her best friend and was very proud of May and her accomplishments at school. I felt

compelled to tell May that her grandmother would be in my prayers. Up to that point, I had cautiously avoiding saying such things, due to our religious differences. May graciously accepted my words and hugs and continued to update me daily on her grandmother's condition.

One morning, May came to me with tears in her eyes. I held her as she told me that her grandmother had passed away. That day, May's friends and cousins shed many tears in my classroom. I listened, I hugged, I prayed.

My relationship with May and the other Burmese children continued to grow throughout the school year. Outside the classroom, they began to introduce Vito and me to their family members. Little by little, parents began to greet us on the street, and the children were allowed to play on the



Jenni with some Burmese children.

CNMC playground. The families saw that we were friendly people and that we loved their children regardless of our religious differences.

One Saturday morning in April 2015, Vito was working outside when several Burmese children came to CNMC with Easter baskets in their hands. When he asked what

they were doing, they said, “We’re here for the Easter Egg Hunt!”

“What Easter Egg Hunt?”

“We don’t know, but we figured you’d probably be doing one here since tomorrow is Easter!”

Unfortunately, we had not planned an Easter Egg Hunt. However, without skipping a beat, Vito questioned, “Do you know what Easter is about?” That Saturday morning, he shared about Jesus Christ and the real meaning of Easter with a group of Burmese children. There was no invitation offered that morning, but the gospel story was planted in their hearts and minds.

That summer, we sat on the floor with May, her cousins, her grandfather, and her aunt and shared a meal with them. It was a time when people who followed their religion fasted during the days. During the meal, we explained about Christian traditions of fasting, specifically during the season of Lent. We laughed, we ate, and friendships were forged.

May is now one of Olivia’s best friends. She, along with several other Burmese children, frequently play in our backyard and in the CNMC park. The Burmese children have been given permission to come inside the ministry center and to play in the community soccer league that CNMC facilitates. All of these activities have gradually evolved as we’ve built relationships with this people group.

For May’s ninth birthday this spring, she told us that the only thing she wanted was to eat brownies and strawberries with the CNMC staff because, “You guys are my best friends.” So we ate brownies and strawberries and watched

in amazement as a handful of Burmese children ran around with our children in the multipurpose room. It took nothing to pull together the small birthday party. However, the joy in May's eyes and the laughter that rang throughout the room brought tears to my own eyes.

A couple of weeks later, May and her friends were playing in the sprinklers at the CNMC park when Dana Franchetti, CNMC's Children and Youth Program director, went outside to watch them. Dana had been gardening the day before and, having neglected to wear sunscreen, had a noticeable sunburn. Cautioning the kids, Dana said, "It's hot out here! Be careful not to get burned!"

"Oh, we won't," May replied. "Vito made us put sunscreen on."

Knowing the young Burmese children were much less likely to get sunburned than she was, Dana jokingly asked, "Why would he make you do that?"

"He said it was so we don't get burned, but I think it's because he loves us."

# CHAPTER 12

## Love

I wish I could say that living in Cactus has always been full of fruitful relationships. Honestly, it has been a hard journey.

Every day is different, and every day is filled with challenges. Some days we wake and have to ask ourselves, “What are we doing?”

There are mornings we wake to no running water and other mornings to a completely flooded property.

On any given day, we encounter multiple cultures back to back, and the experiences are so incredible that we can’t stop smiling at how God is using us.

Then there are the mornings when we are so emotionally and physically exhausted that we just want to go back to bed.

There are times we worry about where the next paycheck will come from, then come the times when we receive a surprise donation in the exact amount that is needed.



Most days things don't go at all as planned. We don't get anything marked off our lists, and the lists just keep getting longer and longer.

Every day we go about our lives. Every day we see people. Every day we walk by people. Every day we live life around others. The question is, who do they see lived out in us? In Cactus, we hope and pray every wave of the hand, every "hello" in whatever language is spoken, every program and social service offered, every late night call or midday random meeting will be an incarnational proclamation of the love of God. Seeds will be planted, some watered, some harvested, and all given into the hands of God to grow.

When we moved to Cactus, we had many great ideas about what the Monteblando family and CNMC could do to transform the people and the community. We had lists of ideas and plans well before we arrived. In reality, very little of what we had planned ever happened, and the items from the lists that did happen looked completely different from what we expected. We came to the realization that ministry among the people of Cactus was not about what we thought they needed or what we thought would best serve them. Getting to know the people of Cactus first gave a clearer picture of their needs.

Saint Francis of Assisi said, "It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching." The people of Cactus don't need someone to stand on the street corner preaching at them. They don't need someone handing them a tract and promising to pray. They don't need someone to open the doors to a church building and beg

them to come in. They need someone to walk with them, side by side, and love them the way Jesus loves them. They need someone to live out 1 John 3:18, “Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.”

I wish I could say that we have watched hundreds of lives instantly changed over the past three years. We haven't. However, we have seen countless miracles take place, miracles that, until now, we've only read about in the Bible. We have now experienced such miracles ourselves. Few of the miracles resulted in us personally seeing conversions. All the same, I pray daily that the relationships we have built will lead to eternal life changes.

Where will these stories we have shared, these relationships we have built, lead? I don't know. What I do know is that we have given of ourselves, our privacy, our comfort, our ideals...and for what? Certainly not for us, not to add to the tally of lives saved, and not even to make a good book illustration! This is not about me or my family or even about CNMC. It is about being the hands and feet of Christ to everyone we meet. Not for our glory, but that He may be glorified and that lives may be changed.

In the last class of the Spring 2016 ESL semester, the Level 2 class was reviewing superlative grammar, such as nice, nicer, and nicest. One of the students in the class was Su Yi Win [SOO YEE WIN], a Burmese woman. Her brother is Zin Thet [ZEN TET], and he is the main religious leader of their faith in Cactus. We learned that Zin Thet and Su Yi Win's sister was in a serious car accident and had a broken

neck. We were thankful to learn that she was not paralyzed, but she was facing a long road to recovery.

When Vito heard this, he called Zin Thet to ask how his sister was doing. During the conversation, without a second thought, Vito told Zin Thet that he would be praying for his sister and their family. Vito remembers stopping after he said it, thinking, “I hope this doesn’t hurt the relationship, but this is who I am. I would have said that to anyone.”

Zin Thet paused for a second, then said, “Thank you. She needs your prayers.”

The final day of ESL class, Su Yi Win was asked to use the word “nicest” in a sentence. Without hesitation, Su Yi Win said, “The nicest person I know is Vito because he helps people, no matter who they are.”

If that’s what Su Yi Win knows about us, then she’s met Jesus. We’ll continue being the hands and feet of Jesus to Su Yi Win and many others like her. We’ll place each and every one of them in the hands of God.

I don’t know what tomorrow will bring. I don’t know what next year or five years from now will even begin to look like. I do know that God has called our family and the CNMC staff and volunteers to be present in the lives of people who may never otherwise meet Jesus. This is what Cactus Nazarene Ministry Center is about—getting to know the people of Cactus and loving them exactly where they are. Because exactly where they are is exactly where they need to be to meet Jesus.

# ACT ON IT

- People often want to know how to help others. For those attending the Church of the Nazarene, giving to the World Evangelism Fund is the simplest, yet most far-reaching way to do so. Through your participation in the World Evangelism Fund, you help make it possible for this story to be retold, relived, and re-experienced in other cultures around the world.
- There are probably immigrants and refugees living in your community. It is likely they are searching for some friends to help them navigate their new lives. If you live in a large city, there are likely refugee resettlement agencies nearby. Such agencies welcome assistance in classes for the language of your area. There may be other classes regarding health, nutrition, legal assistance, preparation for employment, and much more. In many areas, schools partner with churches to provide support for the immigrant/refugee families. For a list of such agencies and their needs, google “refugee resettlement agencies” and the area where you live.
- Ministering to any marginalized population cannot be done by copying other ministries and anticipating the same results. Get to know the people in your community to determine their needs—physical, social, spiritual. Some of the activities listed in this book may be starting points, but be aware of their effectiveness. Be willing

to change directions and come up with your own ideas based on the needs around you.

- Don't be afraid to say "hello" and offer a genuine smile. The immigrant or refugee may be the person in grocery line who doesn't speak your language. They could be the family at the doctor's office who seem unfamiliar in their surroundings and unsure of what to do. The person who dresses differently or eats foods that are unfamiliar to you could be an immigrant. You might even wonder if that person is here illegally. Your coworker, your neighbor, or even your family member could all be refugees. However, they are all in need of someone to lend a hand, share a meal, show the way, live side by side.
- There are several good documentaries and videos that tell the stories of refugees, specifically the South Sudanese refugee story. These are excellent resources that give insight on the challenges faced. We recommend *The Good Lie*, a video that accurately portrays the South Sudanese refugee experience. Many of these stories are explicit, so please preview any of them before showing them. People, especially children and youth, should be forewarned before being subjected to stories that could be distressing to them.
- Participate in the immigrant and refugee ministries through Cactus Nazarene Ministry Center by praying, giving financially, or serving on a Work & Witness team that serves the ministry center. Visit CNMC's website at [www.cactusministries.org](http://www.cactusministries.org) and their Facebook page at

[www.facebook.com/CactusNazarene](https://www.facebook.com/CactusNazarene) for recent updates, prayer requests, opportunities to serve, and links to give.

- Nazarene Compassionate Ministries (NCM) is a vital player in refugee relief throughout the world. You can learn more about how the Church of the Nazarene is ministering to people caught in the refugee crisis by visiting [www.ncm.org](http://www.ncm.org). NCM provides several resources that address the refugee crisis, which are available free of charge for use in your church or small group. You can access them through the “Church Resources” button at [www.ncm.org/refugees](http://www.ncm.org/refugees).