How Mentors and Mentees in Indianapolis Are Learning About God’s Love Together

by Brittany Campbell

Imagine waking up one morning at the age of 13 and remembering that the nightmare you had was not a dream. It’s your reality. Your name is Marcela. You have two sisters, 9-year-old Rosa and 10-year-old Isabel, and your parents are gone. Your grandma takes care of you now, and as much as you love her and know she is doing her best, you miss your parents. You miss your mom’s hugs and the way your dad’s voice sounded over the phone.

It is hard to believe that the trauma you have experienced was anything other than a nightmare. What do you tell people when they ask? Do you share with them the truth that your mom overdosed on drugs and your dad was killed by a gang member, and then share with them the truth that your mom overdosed on drugs and your dad was killed by a gang member, and somehow, someway, your dad’s voice sounded over the phone?

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It has been over a year since it all happened, and maybe you feel you have to pick yourself up and carry on with your life. Maybe you hold in the pain and pretend that it doesn’t bother you. Maybe you build up walls for fear that someone will draw close to you but then just leave you. Maybe you can’t control your emotions and any little conflict causes you to explode with rage.

Maybe you are waiting for someone to come alongside you and walk with you through this nightmare.

Two years ago, Marcela, Isabel, and Rosa lost both their parents in a matter of a few months, leaving their grandmother to care for them. The girls’ struggle to cope with their trauma became a cry for help—a cry that staff and volunteers at Shepherd Community Center heard.

This cry is one shared by many children in the Indianapolis, Indiana, USA, neighborhood where Shepherd Community Center—a Nazarene Compassionate Ministry Center—works. Here, an estimated two-thirds of the children are born into single-parent households—just one of the realities that has prompted the church in Indianapolis to live out James 1:27’s call “to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

A Multifaceted Approach

Adults have been mentoring youth at Shepherd Community since it started in the mid-1980s. However, the compassionate ministry center began a more intentional youth mentoring program in 2010. Now, 44 young people have one-to-one mentoring relationships with adult volunteers from congregations across denominations throughout the Indianapolis metro area—including Shepherd Community Church of the Nazarene next door to the center. But these relationships are only one piece of Shepherd Community’s larger continuum of care. The center’s programs reach out to children from before they are born until after they graduate from college. Last year, these programs served around 350 youth.

“We have found that multiple relationships with trustworthy adults are essential for our neighborhood youth to break out of situational and generational poverty,” said Daniel Fuller, Shepherd Community Center’s mentoring coordinator.

According to Fuller, studies have shown that at-risk youth who overcome poverty can point back to eight to 10 adults who were integral in helping them succeed.

“Our mentors are only one of the eight to 10,” Fuller said, “which is why mentoring is a part of our continuum of care that follows our youth from birth to age 25.”

A Consistent Presence

Youth mentoring requires people who are willing to be patient with the ups and downs that children, especially those who have experienced trauma or poverty, face. Mentors are asked to spend one to two hours with their mentees outside of the other Shepherd Community programs in which their mentees participate. The goal is for this time to be as relational as possible. Rosa’s, Isabel’s, and Marcela’s mentors have all learned the importance of this intentional time to connect.

“Rosa needs a listening ear and compassionate heart,” said Chelsey Wiley, Rosa’s mentor. “I know she can be a roller coaster of emotion, and needs a consistent release and encouragement that what she is doing matters.”

The program’s mission goes beyond simply attending to the emotional needs of the mentees. It also promotes good physical health and academic performance. The aim, however, that underlies all this is that mentees as well as the mentors will grow in the knowledge of the Father’s love for them.
Growing in God’s Grace

Before Shepherd Community matched her with a mentor, Rosa would easily explode when things that are hard or frustrating. A few months ago, Rosa told Wiley that she wanted to learn to do a cartwheel. Every time she failed, she picked herself back up and tried again. One time, she just shouted out to God to help her be as strong as she needed to be in order to overcome this obstacle.

“She has opened my eyes to the urgency of God,” Wiley said.

Rosa eventually learned to do a cartwheel, but her mentor gained something even more important—faith. She has been embraced by a new family—the family of God. Recently, the man who killed her son wrote her a letter from prison asking for forgiveness.

The lives of Rosa, Isabel, Marcela, and dozens of other children all over the world, have been transformed in Christ. Their relationships show that it is not what we do in Christ, but rather who we are in Christ, that truly matters.

FROM BIRTH TO ADULTHOOD

SHEPHERD COMMUNITY CENTER’S CONTINUUM OF CARE

Shepherd Community seeks to support children through holistic ministry programs from before they are born to after they finish college.

- PROJECT JORDAN: Teaching prenatal and infant care to pregnant mothers and mothers of infants.
- ACADEMY: Helping preschoolers through fourth graders develop foundational reading skills while teaching them Bible stories as well as honesty, obedience, and diligence.
- AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS: Providing academic help and enrichment activities to first through 12th graders.
- EXCEL PROGRAM: Keeping learning alive during school breaks through summer activities.
- COLLEGE COACHING: Preparing high school students and supporting college students as they enter college.

Nepal Child Development Centers

The Church of the Nazarene in Nepal is using child development centers to develop holistic Christian ministry in some of the poorest towns and neighborhoods across the country. Nepal is diverse, and the church through Nazarene Compassionate Ministries is committed to serving any child regardless of their language, ethnicity, cultural, or religious backgrounds.

NCM’s goal in Nepal is to support children who face life-altering issues such as malnourishment, disease, or inadequate education. Here are just some of the ways Nepal’s 11 child development centers, serving 1,125 children, are doing just that.

- Tutoring five days a week
- School supply distribution each quarter
- Educational field trips at least once a year
- Home visits with parents weekly
- Health checkups quarterly
- Training for mothers on how to cook nutritious food
- Nutritious snacks at the center
- De-worming tablets provided for each child every six months
- Sports competitions among the centers
- Prayer services at the center weekly
- Encouragement for students to attend Sunday school, local church services, youth fellowship activities, and Christian films

*Name has been changed*