

Reclaiming the Throwaways _ Manila's Street Kids

A. Brent Cobb

Sweat, disease, garbage, and human waste cause an insufferable stench that chokes and gags hate-filled, love-starved, homeless kids and youth—ages 8 to 16—who sleep wall-to-wall on lice-infested floors. These "throwaway kids" consider themselves lucky if they get one meal a day.

"Throwaway" describes yesterday's newspaper, disposable razors, and rotten garbage. But children? Compassionate disciples are plucking the outcasts from the stench, one heart at a time.

Dank dungeons, dark with despair, surge and swell with children and adolescents thrown away in Manila, "home" to 5 million squatters and homeless people. Stifling hot jail cells, jam-packed to quadruple capacity, reek with street kids. Sweat, disease, garbage, and human waste cause an insufferable stench that chokes and gags hate-filled, love-starved, homeless kids and youth—ages 8 to 16—who sleep wall-to-wall on lice-infested floors.

These houses of horrors make little or no provision for the inmates to have sunshine, fresh air, safe water, health care, or exercise. The "throwaway kids" consider themselves lucky if they get one meal a day. In the midst of overcrowded adult jail populations, the children cry themselves to sleep.

That was their lot before urban ministries students at Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary (APNTS), serving under Robert and JoAn Donahue, began making a difference.

Locked away for long months like animals in a cage, the street kids contract scabies and are covered with oozing sores. Some get gangrene. Jennifer Cacanindin, APNTS student and nurse, brings fellow students with her to clean excruciating, repulsive sores and apply medicines to ravaged bodies.

Ground-zero studies of Manila's squatters, who pour in from the provinces at a rate of 10,000 per week, estimate that street kids number between 75,000 and 150,000. By the time they're 3 years old, many are begging and stealing on the streets. By age 6, most are stealing to survive. By the time they're 12, some have killed just to stay alive. By 16, many are dead.

There are hard-core cases—kids who've been totally abandoned, whose only home is the streets. They live under bridges and in stairwells. They "work the streets," begging, selling, and stealing. Tragically, organized crime extracts much of its "take" from these children. Some children are part-time or most-of-the-time street kids whose families drive them from their homes for a while or who flee for a time to escape abuse. These kids could be at home more if they were willing to endure the abuse. They may return home many nights merely for somewhere to sleep.

Kenell was the firstborn son of a teenage mom. No father was around. After his half-sister and half-brother came, there was no food for him. Though still small, he learned to climb onto cement trucks, clutching a plastic bag in one hand and lifting the lid with the other. He would slide inside the huge tank far enough to scoop out as much fresh cement mix as he could carry. When the truck slowed, he would jump off and run to sell the cement for 80 pesos (\$1.50 U.S.) or for "rugby"—a solvent street kids sniff to get high and ease their hunger pangs. Like tens of thousands of street kids, Kenell struggled to survive. At night he sought shelter in stairwells to escape the wind and rain.

Christians gave him food and told him about Christ's love. By the grace of God, Kenell began to open his heart to their kindness. But one day, when he was desperately hungry, someone gave him an unknown substance. His frail 12-year-old body violently shook in spasms, and his lips turned dark. Writhing on the ground, he gasped his last breath while stunned street kids watched.

Did God care? Would anyone mourn his tragic death?

APNTS students and their professor cared and came. Kenell's distraught mom came to the funeral, as did street friends who weren't in jail.

Our seminary students wept with them. On a remote hillside at a tiny plot used to bury the poor, students read scripture, sang hymns and choruses, and prayed, and one preached a message of comfort and hope. Like so many of Manila's street kids, Kenell died young. But he did not die without love. He had seen Jesus' love in action, and his heart had responded in simple trust.

Late one cold, rainy evening, the Donahues went to a fast-food restaurant. Approaching the entrance, JoAn noticed someone under a nearby public phone stand. She went near, stooped low, and lifted the large, dirty, drenched T-shirt draped over a small form. "Ronald?" she called.

It was 10-year-old Ronald under the T-shirt, which he'd pulled over his head and upper body in a futile effort to escape the rain and cold. The Donahues had met Ronald months earlier, and they'd shown Christ's love to him in tangible ways. This night the other kids had run away and left him. Cold and hungry, he'd fallen ill with a fever.

Ronald's parents had abandoned him when he was 4. An older woman let him stay with her from time to time. He began climbing onto cement trucks to steal cement mix to sell. He was usually hungry and vulnerable to abuse. He faced an ever-present, strong tug to do drugs to escape life's ravaging reality.

When Robert and JoAn found Ronald collapsed on the sidewalk and "sheltered" under the filthy T-shirt that rainy night, they took him to Christian friends who had enough room in their home and hearts for him. Wonderful, life-changing things happened to Ronald over the next 18 months.

Ronald lives with a Christian family, goes to school for the first time in his life, and is learning more about Jesus every day. APNTS students tutor him to make up for lost learning time. Ronald had no idea when his birthday was, so he "borrowed" Robert's birth date. The two celebrate their birthdays together. Joy shines from the face of this "new creation in Christ" because God's grace works through Robert, JoAn, their APNTS students, and the family that welcomed him.

Aquino was born in the Muslim Mindanao area of the Philippines. His parents brought him to Manila when he was small, left him with an aunt who didn't want him, and never returned. He soon struck out on his own to try to support himself. The streets were treacherous. His dyslexia made learning difficult. He never once went to school. Somehow he survived.

When he was 11 a car hit him, knocking out several teeth and cutting and bruising much of his body. He couldn't get up. Other street kids carried him to someone who agreed to take him in. A nurse, she instantly saw the severity of his injuries and rushed him to a hospital, but the staff refused to see him since he had no parents and no money. The nurse took him home to her family. There, Robert and JoAn met Aquino.

He was bedridden and had to be fed by others. Slowly he improved. When he was strong enough, he began to care for houseplants and work in the garden. He loved to see things grow and bloom. Aquino himself began to bud and blossom as the healing rays of Christ's love brought him hope and joy. He came to trust Jesus as his own Savior and has steadily grown in God's grace and in his love for Jesus. APNTS students have faithfully tutored Aquino. Now he has completed more than a year of school. He loves to help people and to let them share his joy.

What divine transformations these former outcasts are experiencing. By loving Manila's street kids—society's outcasts—Robert and JoAn Donahue and their urban ministries students from Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary are helping children and adolescents find a bright future filled with hope.

This is a story appearing in the December 2003 issue of Holiness Today. Featured is the urban ministry of Nazarene missionaries, Robert and JoAn Donahue, to street children. The Donahue's are assigned to Asia-Pacific

Nazarene Theological Seminary, Metro Manila, Philippines. Their work includes leading APNTS students in urban ministry experiences.

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