

A shoulder to lean on

by Joseph Fedora, M.M.

For Maryknoll Lay Missioner Kim Nagy, happiness is helping Salvadorans recover from their traumatic past

Life is tough for 15-year-old Marvin. At home, his alcoholic dad beats him; at school, the other kids make fun of him; and in the streets, he has to pay "protection" money to teenage thugs for the privilege of selling bread after school—his way of helping his family make ends meet. He has a tendency to wring his hands, and it's hard for him to make eye contact.

Life for Maria López (not her real name) is also traumatic. Long-suppressed memories of years of sexual abuse at the hands of her stepfather are painfully coming back. Today, the 37-year-old professional is trying to face up to her past without blaming herself, but it's difficult.

Treating the traumas and blunting the blows of life is Maryknoll Lay Missioner Kim Nagy. The 31-year-old redhead from Hartford, Conn., spends at least an hour a week with Marvin, Maria and many other

members of Our Lady of Lourdes parish in Ciudad Delgado, El Salvador. Nagy, a licensed social worker, directs the parish's mental health program.

"There's a strong counseling component in social work," explains Nagy. "Most people here see me as a psychologist; it's the closest thing they understand to what social work is in the United States."

It's all the same to Father David Blanchard, the Carmelite pastor of Our Lady of Lourdes, just as long as his parishioners' mental health needs are being met. "Kim has been so successful so quickly," says Blanchard. "People don't show up for therapy if they're not getting better, and let me tell you, they're showing up."

According to Blanchard, 80 percent of the 40,000 people who live within the parish boundaries were relocated because of the 12-year civil war that ended in 1992, and they bear many painful memories of loss.

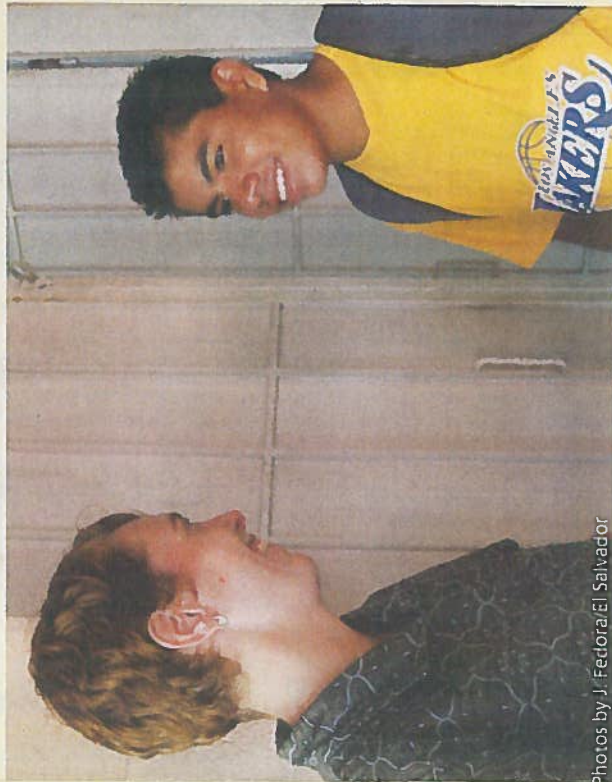
"They're displaced not only physically, but culturally and psychologically as well," he says. "The basic health problem in the parish isn't physical; it's mental."

The director of the parish health clinic, Doctor Janet Española, concurs. "I'd say most of the illnesses I see are psychosomatic," she says. "So when Kim came along, she was a godsend." Española describes the case of a 45-year-old woman complaining of severe headaches and chest pain, but all the tests came back negative. Interviewing her, Española learned that her patient had suffered sexual abuse as a child and spousal abuse as an adult. "I referred her to Kim," she says. "Later the patient returned and told me she no longer had pain."

Nagy graciously acknowledges the praise of others but is keenly aware of her own limitations. "Sometimes what I hear is very heavy and I don't see a way out for them. I'm learning I can't fix all the problems," she reflects. "But what I can do is sit with them—with all their anxieties—and listen."

Shouldering the burden of others, even if for just a few hours a day, belies the lyrics of the 1969 hit ballad "He Ain't Heavy; He's My Brother." The truth is—as any mental health-care professional will attest—active listening is heavy, even if the person sharing is a friend or close relative. For the sake of her own mental health, the mental health professional knows when and how to distance herself from her clients. Music is

Treating trauma 15-year-old Marvin has become a more responsible youth in El Salvador, thanks to his sessions with Missioner Kim Nagy, a licensed social worker from Hartford, Conn.



Photos by J. Fedora/El Salvador



Lover of music
Kim Nagy uses her musical talents to play guitar with the Ciudad Delgado parish youth choir and to sing with the adult choir.

Nagy's way of stepping back. "I have always loved music," says Nagy, who plays the guitar for the parish youth choir and sings in the adult choir. "It has always been a way for me to express my faith and spirituality. Music gives balance to my life. It gives me joy and energy."

If music lifts Nagy's spirit, nature enables her to soar. "The outdoors is another one of my passions," says the missionary, who runs three miles every morning. In fact, it was during a nature trip with friends in northern Canada in the summer of 2004 when Nagy decided to become a missionary. "Some people take a 30-day retreat to discern God's will for them; I took a 52-day canoe trip!"

About halfway through her journey, as she paddled her canoe across Dubawnt Lake one late afternoon, Nagy had an epiphany.



"After a couple of hours paddling and reflecting on the beautiful sunset, it occurred to me I'd be happy doing social work anywhere, but my real dream is to be a missionary working overseas. That moment was for me God's call," she says. "The rest of the journey was just getting used to what it was going to mean for me."

That fall, Nagy contacted Maryknoll and after receiving her master's degree in social work a year later, became a lay missionary. "For some people happiness is getting married and having a good job in the United States," says Nagy, who arrived in El Salvador two years after her fateful canoe trip. "But for me happiness is being here and doing what I'm doing."

Marvin is also glad Nagy's around and doing what she does so well. "I'm changing, I'm more responsible," he says, looking down at his feet, and then—with great effort spurred by gratitude—he looks directly at Nagy and adds, "That's why I come back." ✠

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