



# Calling Them BY NAME

by Erin Rickwa

Witnessing the plight of abandoned Bolivian children leads a U.S. woman to make an option for the poor

**Abused Three-year-old orphan Janeth was hospitalized in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, with injuries from child abuse.**

**J**avier, a 5-year-old with a slight frame and feverish skin, suffered in pain, alone in a room whose only light filtered through a shattered, dirty window. He vomited onto the cement floor. An orphanage worker, a teenage girl who was also a victim of violence, yelled at him to get up and clean it up.

I came upon this scene at an orphanage in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, where I went as a Salesian lay missionary in 1995 right after graduating from college. I spent two years working in this orphanage for abused and abandoned children. I met my husband, Spencer, also a Salesian lay missionary, there.

I wasn't a parent yet, but I felt that all of humanity had

failed our world's children by allowing a scene like this to take place.

Javier and his 3-year-old brother, Ramiro, arrived at this orphanage, victims of migration. Large numbers of poor families continue to migrate to Santa Cruz from the highlands in the Andes. Many are unable to find work, feed their families or send their children to school. Many heads of households turn in despair to alcohol or drugs. Many women, alone and scared, do not have the resources to care for their children.

UNICEF estimates there are over 132 million orphans in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. The United Nations defines orphans as children who are without the care of their parents, whether living or not.

During my mission in Bolivia, I spent six weeks at the Instituto de Idiomas Maryknoll in Cochabamba. The Maryknoll priests had a wonderful way of putting into words all of my emotions and thoughts about serving the poor. I had just had my world turned upside down during my orphanage experience. As I talked with the priests and read more about Maryknoll's vision, I felt both understood and inspired to continue despite the struggle of trying to understand why so many of the world's most vulnerable are suffering.

Spencer and I met Maryknoll Father Michael Gould, who was the only priest for many villages near the Bolivian town of Okinawa, where Spencer taught in a rural high school. Father Mike

**Loved Erin Rickwa enjoys time with Gabby, Angelica and Ana at an orphanage in Bolivia in 1995.**



Photos courtesy of E. Rickwa/Bolivia

took us under his wing. He brought us food and supplies and, more importantly, gave us spiritual sustenance. He truly walked with the people he served and preached the Gospel more with his life than with his words.

After returning from Bolivia, my husband and I had some difficulty finding people who had also walked the

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path with the poor and could share with and support us as we tried to live a life of mission here in the United States. We joined the Maryknoll Affiliates in San Diego, Calif., in 2002.

Our group is a wonderful mix of fun and support. Our Affiliate friends are there to listen as we share our struggle to raise our children in a culture that seems to support violence and materialism. It is refreshing for us each month as we leave our Affiliate meeting to know we are not alone as we work to raise peaceful, loving children. Each of our members is involved in some way in serving the poor. We also do some group service activities,

including a recent trip to one of the orphanages helped by Bridges to Healing International, a non-profit organization Spencer and I founded to help children like "Sebastian NN," a 9-month-old Bolivian orphan who died in 1996. Sebastian was the name he was given at the orphanage. "NN" (No Nombre-Name) is the last name given to abandoned children. He died of malnutrition and dehydration because of a lack of medical attention. We buried him in a pauper's grave alongside many other "nameless" dead. As we buried him, I was overcome with grief and kept thinking that his mother—if she were alive—would never know where he was buried. How did we fail this precious child? My solace in the moment was to picture Mary's loving arms there to receive him in death, calling him by name. Bridges to Healing's idea got started in that makeshift cemetery in Bolivia.

From our experience in Bolivia, Spencer, a physician, and I, a child welfare social worker, have made mission a regular part of our lives. We had always planned to return to Bolivia, the second poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, to establish medical care in orphanages. We will be doing short-term



Photo courtesy of E. Rickwa/Bolivia

mission in Cochabamba from July to November 2012. We will work with the Maryknoll community there and set up a health care program using local resources to sustain our work once we leave. Our goal will be to raise funds, hire a Bolivian nurse for the orphanage, and train the nurse before we leave.

Jesus made it clear that we are to give preferential treatment to the poor and marginalized. We must make a conscious decision in our busy lives to make time for them, to seek them out and walk with them.

Not long ago, I was at one of the orphanages where our Affiliate group works in Tijuana, Mexico. A 6-year-old girl, Gaby, had just arrived.

The nurse asked her if she was feeling OK. Gaby replied, "My head hurts, but I don't want anything for that. Do you have a pill that I can take so I can die?"

What could possibly have happened in this child's short life that she would want to die? This is why we must place a priority on the poor.

The suffering is so often beyond my comprehension, but I know that we cannot run away despite how painful it is to hear the stories. This is mission to me, forcing myself to keep going back, listening to the stories, crying with them, being present and knowing that they are giving me so much more than I am giving them. ✕

**Easing the pain  
Spencer Rickwa  
treats Dana, 5,  
an orphan with  
burns on her  
hand as a result  
of child abuse,  
Tijuana, Mexico.**