

# Saved for a Special Mission

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The true story of a Brazilian street boy:

*Following is an article Susanna Smoak wrote for missions emphasis week at her children's school. Susanna and her husband, Thomas, are ACTION missionaries in Brazil and direct a ministry named ABBA which offers camps, rescue homes, and a transition home for street boys.*

Isabel had already had three children with a man who had run off on her. Then she discovered she was pregnant with a fourth child. The father was a thief who had come through her neighborhood and won everyone over with his deceptive smile. She was furious with this man, who was long gone, and with herself, for getting pregnant.

Isabel never did have regular work, so she spent her time standing in the long line at the local Catholic Church, waiting for a bag of dry goods. Sometimes she would put on her saddest clothes and go out to the street to clap at the doors of nicer houses. She got so depressed that more and more often she would stop by a friend's house in the *favela* (slum) to smoke marijuana together.

Isabel tried everything to get rid of the child growing within her. None of the special teas or chemicals seemed to work. Her belly kept on swelling, and so did her rage. Finally she tried to find the baby's head from the outside of her abdomen, and attacked it with her sharp fingernails. Sure enough, she started hemorrhaging, and had to be rushed to the emergency room. Great gashes showed the doctors what she had done.

When the doctor reported joyfully that he had saved her baby boy, Isabel resolved to desert the child in the hospital. Her mother, a devout Jehovah's Witness, visited her the next day and told her she would disown her if she did such a thing. Nurses urged Isabel to visit her baby where he was being kept in an incubator, since he was two months premature. She went grudgingly, still angry that the child had survived her attempts to end his life. As if to mock her for his victory, the little thing in the incubator actually grabbed her finger in a strong grip. His eyes were closed and he made no sounds, but he held on like he had held on to his precarious life.

Isabel arrived home to her other three fatherless children, more depressed than before. She tried to ignore the new life that had squeezed into their already small quarters, and attended to Carlos only when his squalling became unbearable. One day when he had managed to stand up in his crib at about a year old, she turned away from him to fold some clothes. Carlos pulled at her

shirt from behind and said her name for the first time: "mama . . . *mamai*." Isabel realized that this child was indeed unusual, for he seemed to love her even though she hadn't shown him any affection.

Carlos had to sleep on the floor as three more children were added to the family, and watched his older siblings spend more and more time on the street. One day he came home to find that his mother had traded shacks with his grandmother next door, leaving them only half the space they had had before. His mother had been desperate for money to pay off her drug habit. He overheard his grandmother explaining woefully to the neighbors that Isabel had threatened to move farther away unless she agreed to the deal, and wanting to keep her daughter close, she swapped houses and paid her the difference in cash.

Carlos, around the age of seven or eight, began to spend more time outside his home. He would often skip school to fly kites with his buddies, and when night fell, rummage through the garbage bags of nice houses to find discarded treasures. He learned which churches offered free clothes and meals, but had to guard his stuff carefully from his mother or he'd find it gone by morning. He knew his mother was into harder drugs now.

The new man in the house, father of the twins that had just been born, didn't like Carlos or his older siblings. But neighbors, even shopkeepers, liked Carlos and would offer him a snack when he came around. Sometimes he was allowed to help clean up for some change, and often he watched cars for folks at the market. Whatever leftover vegetables he managed to recover after market, he brought home to his mother. Her pleasure was his one real joy.

Carlos started spending Saturdays at a little Baptist church that offered free showers, games and lunch to kids in his neighborhood. A lady there named Sabrina would fuss over him, insist on giving him a haircut and challenge him in ping-pong. He liked her. One Saturday she told him she had seen him sleeping on the street and invited him to her house for supper. There they talked about his family and his life on the street. Sabrina gave him medicine for the sores caused by body lice and gave him a new change of clothes. Carlos thanked her and went home tired.

In the morning, Carlos's new clothes were gone, and so was his mother. She had found the clothes under his pillow where he had stashed them in the night, and gone off to sell

them for drugs again. What would he do now? Saturday was coming and Carlos would have to face Sabrina in his old ripped T-shirt again. But Carlos felt that Sabrina really cared about him and would believe him if he told the truth. He slept outside the church door Friday night to be sure not to forget to see her on Saturday.

Sabrina listened to Carlos and then sat quietly for a moment. He was afraid that maybe she thought he was lying after all. "Would you like to live somewhere else for awhile, Carlos?" she asked. "I'd like to find a place for you where you could be safe from your family and go to school," she explained. Carlos wasn't at all sure what sort of place this would be, but he found himself nodding. Pretty soon Sabrina came back from making some phone calls. She was out of breath and excited. "God got you a place at camp, and they're leaving tonight, Carlos," she exclaimed, "and they run a Rescue House!"

Sabrina went with Carlos to tell his mother the news and make sure he got his things packed in time. There they found Isabel on her knees by the only bed in their home. When she saw Carlos she hugged him tight. "I just told God that I didn't believe in Him, but that I knew He was the only one who could bring my son home. I told God that you were His anyway, as He'd been protecting you all your short life. I thought for sure you were dead, after two nights away, and all the thieving you've been up to." Sabrina hurriedly told Isabel about the camp for street boys and Rescue House. Isabel chuckled grimly, "it's just like God, isn't it, to get you hooked up with a bunch of *Creentes* (believers), right?"

Sabrina and Carlos waited under a busy bridge for the van that was to pick him up for camp. It pulled up late, full of yelling boys. Someone is certainly taking care of that boy, Sabrina thought, as the van zoomed off into the night.

At camp Carlos played with all his might. There were games, a swimming pool, foosball, a soccer field, kites and crafts. He ate until he could hardly get up from the table. When he fell into his bunk that night, he didn't even care how early it was. The *tios* (uncles) had kept the boys up after supper to practice skits about the Prodigal Son.

Then one of the men started talking about what it means to say you're sorry to God, to come home to Him and thank Him for a new chance to live in His house. The man spoke of the Rescue House then and told the boys

that they could move in with the *tios* if they wanted to. But like all church stuff, there was a catch: you had to be willing to act like a son, and obey the *tios*.

Carlos would have chores, have to stay inside unless there was a group outing, and he was even expected to go back to school. He wasn't sure he could do all that, but he wanted very much to stay with these guys. Carlos raised his hand when the *tio* asked who was ready to come home to God and start over. He kept his hand up when the *tio* asked who wanted to move to the Rescue House too.

The first night at the Rescue House was pretty wild. None of the boys wanted to sleep in their bunks. The *tios* made popcorn, put on a movie about Jesus, and insisted they all lie down afterward. In the middle of the night, a couple of boys decided to go out the windows. When they found them locked, they started kicking at them, and broke a glass door. The *tios* let them go, and tried to settle the other boys back down, but it wasn't easy, as they all felt hyper. For most of them who usually sniffed glue, going without it for the previous two days at camp suddenly made them feel desperate to find some.

After the first raucous days in the house, things started to fall into a rhythm of devotions led by the *tios*, mealtimes, chores, outings — only if they were good — showers, playtime, and more devotions. The boys started to ask for prayer for their mothers and siblings and after awhile the *tios* took them on visits to their families.

On the first visit, Carlos walked down his old neighborhood alleys, feeling like a hero come home from war. Everyone called his name and slapped him on the back. Carlos didn't wait for his mother to answer their knock but barged into his shack, ready for a big hug. She wasn't there. His sister was sitting forlornly on the messy bed, looking after the little ones with runny noses. Flies buzzed and loud music oozed in from the house behind. The *tios* played with his brothers and sisters and helped straighten up the house, which made Carlos feel embarrassed. He wondered if his mother was out looking for drugs.

One day Carlos decided he had had enough of the rules in the Rescue House. They had been out in the van that day and he had seen some kids sniffing glue. "Why do I have to do everything the *tios* say?" he grumbled. So when lunch was over and the boys were doing chores, Carlos jumped the garage gate and headed down the hill toward home. Where was home? He realized he had no idea how to get home. He realized he no longer felt at home back in his family's shack.

Night was coming on, and he didn't know what to do. He wandered around the streets for a while, feeling hungry and tired. I know, I'll go back and say I'm sorry, just like the Prodigal Son, he thought. He found the Rescue House all dark and figured everyone must be asleep, so he curled up on the front porch to wait for morning. One of the *tios*, having prayed for him most of the night, tripped over him in the morning, then gave him a great bear hug and let him in the house for breakfast.

Carlos learned more about God from the Rescue House and the church on the corner nearby. He couldn't wait for his mother to learn it too. On one visit home, after his mother had promised the *tios* she'd be there, he took a folder full of his Sunday school papers to show her. He would tell her the Creation story. But Isabel was gone again. She didn't seem to care when he was coming to visit. Carlos would have to grow with Jesus on his own, he realized. Maybe someday his mother would want to know.

The next year, Carlos and the other boys moved to another house, called Casa Ebenezer. The *tios* referred to it as the transition house. Only boys who couldn't go back to their homes went there, on their way to a new home. The *tios* prayed often with the boys for Christian families to adopt them, but Carlos didn't mind staying put with his gang of new brothers and uncles.

He decided to be baptized at one of the ABBA retreats. When the pastor asked Carlos who Jesus was, he answered with a grin, "He's my friend, and has given me a new life." No matter where he ended up, Carlos knew he'd always have a family with God's people. He loved to sing the worship songs at church and practice the rap about young urban warriors that one of the *tios* had written for them. And he prayed every night for his mother.

It was at a visit recently with two of the *tios* that Isabel, Carlos's mother, finally accepted Jesus Christ as her Savior. She told them the whole story of Carlos' life and how God had protected him, even in the womb. She said that she knew God had saved him for a special mission in life. The *tios* looked at Carlos. "Do you know what that mission is?", they asked. "Yes, to tell her and everyone else about Jesus," he said with a smile.

*"Carlos," now 13 years old, currently lives at Casa Ebenezer in São Paulo, an ABBA transition home for street boys.*