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A global embrace

By [TERI SFORZA](#)

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He had, at last count, 100 children (give or take a few). In Nicaragua. In Senegal. In the Philippines, Mexico and Brazil.

He knows their names: Juan and Marlin, Anzelie and Janil, Ndiaga and Ibrahima. And he knows their stories: Abandoned in a trash bin at 8 days old. Raped by family members, pregnant at 12. Brutally beaten, begging, stealing to eat.

Robert Benson lives in Foothill Ranch with his wife and four - standard-issue - children. He's a mild-mannered lawyer who works on patent law and intellectual property cases.

But in one picture, taken recently in Managua, Nicaragua, he stands beside young Juana and all her ghosts. "When I arrived, I was just a very young girl with a heart full of hate toward everybody, full of bitterness," Juana writes in Spanish. "It looked to me that keeping on living was not for me and that I deserved every bad thing that could happen to me."

But now, standing beside Benson, Juana smiles. After seven years in one of the family-style homes for abused and abandoned children that Benson has set up around the world, Juana is studying to become a primary school teacher. Her goal: to work with the next group of neglected, forsaken children who will live at the Arms of Love home, "hoping to gratefully give back something of the lot I have received."

The hearts, at first, are hard. But Benson and Juana believe that miracles do indeed happen. They're just never easy.

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Robert Benson's mother, Teresa, had better things to do in 1968 than care for a baby. She was drawn to the counterculture in Berkeley and had a bad habit of leaving her son with acquaintances and disappearing. The court documents severing Teresa's parental rights are a litany of abuse and neglect: Baby Benson was hospitalized for severe malnutrition. That scar on his neck is from a tracheotomy. When he was 2, Teresa left and simply didn't come back.

He wound up in the care of the Bensons, a couple with Germanic roots and a deep Lutheran faith. When Benson was 5, his biological father tried to establish ties; the Bensons fended off those advances and adopted him to make sure no one could take him away. Adoption was a touchy subject in the household. No one was to know about it.

Through many years, Benson never met a child like himself.

He went to Christian schools, met the woman who would become his wife, learned to play guitar. When he was a teen, Teresa reappeared, trying to make amends. She played guitar, too, and they sang "The Prayer of St. Francis" together: "Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy."

She died a short time later. That song became Benson's creed. He knew he was lucky. He was grateful for all the Bensons had given him. But his past left a dull ache that never quite went away.

Life went well. He married Kristen, went to law school at UC Berkeley, found a spiritual home at Anaheim Vineyard church, became partner at his firm. On vacations he smuggled Bibles into China, carried food to a family in recession-rocked Russia, joined church teams that built houses in Central America. On one of those trips, he saw children swarming a Nicaraguan garbage dump as giant trucks rumbled in. He watched as they dug through the stinking debris, searching for food, for something they could sell.

If his losses left an ache, what did their lives feel like?

Call it a revelation, call it a bolt of insight, call it what you will. It happened in Dallas on Aug. 14, 1998, while he was sitting in a meeting on a patent-infringement lawsuit. Voices droned on about the intricacies of cell phone technology, when all sound dropped away and one thought crystallized in his mind: Christian homes for abandoned children. Based on the family model - mom, dad, kids. Relationship-focused. Small, so it feels like the real thing. Filled with love, so it feels like the real thing. Run by local people, tied closely to local churches, educating kids. Rebuilding their sense of self-worth, easing their aches.

"This is it," he thought. "This is what my life has been leading up to."

Benson dove into research. He e-mailed two Costa Rican pastors he met on a church trip. They happened to know a Nicaraguan pastor who had gotten land from the government for just such a project and needed money to fund it. Soon Benson was in Nicaragua, scouting land and recruiting abuelitos (grandparents) to run things, and the first Arms of Love home opened in April 2000. Juana was one of the eight children there.

By connecting with local churches, Benson has replicated the model in four other countries. Arms of Love cares for 30 children in Nicaragua, 41 in the Philippines, 24 in Senegal and six in Mexico. An Arms of Love home is being built in Brazil.

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Tatiana's mother was a prostitute in Managua. Tatiana bounced from aunt to aunt. Rather than going to school when she turned 5, she had to hit the streets to beg. She started at 6 a.m. and didn't return until after dark. She was sexually abused and turned to sniffing paint thinner. When she was 11, the Nicaraguan government placed her at Arms of Love in Managua.

Soon Tatiana will be 17. She's a high school sophomore, wants to be a bilingual secretary and is taking computer classes.

"I was never loved before," she wrote in Spanish in a short biography for her Arms of Love sponsors. "But now I have the satisfaction of saying that my 'abuelitos' Emilio and Gladys are my father and mother, even if sometimes they correct me, and I get angry for a while. ... Thank God I have changed my way of being. Now my best satisfaction is that I have improved a lot."

Arms of Love has dozens of volunteers, 300 donors who sponsor children and more than 40 churches that help with work teams, providing things such as dental exams and house repairs.

It's not easy having 100 kids. There's always something to worry about - staffing, rebellious teens, all the complications inherent in dealing with five foreign governments. And then there are the ghosts, the weight of each kid's story.

"When I see the suffering and injustice that these children have endured, I cannot help but wonder why," Benson said. "But whenever I begin to doubt the existence of a loving God, I am brought back to my own experience. I would not be here today except for God's intervention when I was abandoned as a child.

"I have also learned that love has meaning because there is a choice involved. We have a choice to love or not to love."

Benson has organized a conference to teach others how to do what he's done. It will take place March 9-10 in Anaheim.

"Everything that I do through Arms of Love is in some way rooted in my own experience. In every child we love and care for, I see some reflection of myself. And in reaching out to them, there is a part of me that is always saying, 'Thank you, God, for rescuing me.' "

Contact the writer: 714-796-6910 or tsforza@ocregister.com