

Reports from the field

Answering THE CALL

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LOST CHILDHOOD



FOOD FOR THE POOR, INC.

"I DON'T HAVE FRIENDS..."

At 8 years of age, Gerson David shoulders responsibilities that many adults would find challenging. His days are long. Gerson works and goes to school in Honduras. He also cares for his siblings with special needs. At the end of a typical day, Gerson is often drained. But you'll never hear him complain.

All of Gerson's siblings — he has two brothers and a sister — are mentally and physically handicapped. "I love them," he says with a smile as he washes them. Gerson's family also includes his mother, who relies greatly on Gerson, her youngest.

After his first-grade class is dismissed, this little boy rushes home every day to attend to his family. He helps bathe his brothers and sister, clothe them, secure them in their wheelchairs, cook for them, play with them and put them to bed. He also protects them from occasional neighborhood trespassers. After all this, he tries to study.

"Since he was a little boy he has always helped me," said Gerson's mother, Eliodora. She and her family were abandoned by Gerson's father.

Ingrid Jansen is Gerson's teacher at Primero de Febrero school, where he is repeating the first grade. "He's very bright, but his mind starts to wander," she said. Aware of his family's particular situation, Ingrid offers Gerson extra help by staying inside with him during recess while the other children play.

For such a young boy, Gerson is very certain of his goals. "I want to be a doctor because I want to understand people," he said. If he becomes a doctor, Gerson's selfless disposition will be felt by others: "I would buy wheelchairs for other people and medicine for people without money."

Eliodora worries because her son tells her that when he's in school, he remembers how his brothers and sisters are living and tries to hurry back home. She has already received a note from Gerson's teacher saying that his homework is rarely completed. Distressed, this heartbroken mother cannot come up with a solution because she truly needs her young son's help at home.

Gerson is simply being forced to grow up too fast.

When at home, the love that flows between Gerson and his siblings is exchanged without words. He knows his brothers and sisters love him, although they're generally unresponsive because of their condition. Gerson rarely receives physical responses from his oldest brother, Allan. Gerson said that Allan is the saddest. But when tickled, his sister Wendy smiles and his brother Bryan produces a slight laugh. "I have fun with them," beamed Gerson.

Gerson's teacher claims that he is the friendliest student in her class. But because he has no free time outside of school, he is not able to cultivate

true friendships. Ingrid explained, "If one of the kids says that they don't have a pencil, he runs and gives them one." Despite his friendliness, Gerson claims, "I don't have friends at school." If he did, "I would invite them to come to my home," said Gerson.

Ingrid explained that because Gerson is treated as an adult at home, he is different from the rest of the schoolchildren. According to her, Gerson has adult-like conversations with her that are on a different level compared to the rest of her students.

While Gerson is at school, Eliodora must attend to his brothers and sister alone. With no time to work, she desperately attempts to make a living by begging at nearby soccer matches. She brings a picture of her children to the stadium, with a sign begging fans to help feed her children.

Ignorant of the true desperation faced by the family, some unsympathetic neighbors think that Eliodora is exploiting the situation for money. So they throw rocks at her and her children. One man actually hit Gerson with a broom once.

"They don't understand my situation," said Eliodora. "I'm looking for a way to get out of here... to find a nice place where we won't be bothered... [and we'll be] safe."

The frightened family huddles together in the corner of their shack when it rains. The inside of their home becomes entirely wet. On the wall remains a message that Gerson's father once wrote; it says, "Christ will always be with you and love you forever."

On top of all of their hardships, Gerson and his family will be forced to move this year. Like many poor families, they live along the riverbanks of San Pedro Sula. Due to frequent flooding, the government has designated the area as an endangered zone and is attempting to relocate all families living there to a safer area. The government will give these families a new plot of land, but it cannot guarantee them a house.

With no home awaiting them, this already vulnerable family will be exposed even further. "I'm worried we won't have a place to live," said Eliodora.

With the help of people like you, Food For The Poor is attempting to build simple houses for soon-to-be-uprooted families like Gerson's. The changes your compassion can produce in the lives of children like Gerson can last a lifetime.

This poor 8-year-old boy has been forced to skip what most of us would consider a normal childhood. An afternoon of carefree play with friends and other recreations we associate with childhood have been ripped away from Gerson. Any opportunity to simply be a child is gone.

Currently, the love, care and protection that Gerson gives his family is precisely what is lacking from his own life. While he cares for everyone around him, who will offer love, support and a sense of security to this amazing little boy?

People need not ask if Gerson loves his mother, brothers and sister. It's clearly evident in his actions.

"Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth." (1 John 3:18)

May this little boy remind us all of our call to serve the poor. Please help shelter families like Gerson's by putting into action today the love God has placed in your heart.

This 8-year-old has been thrust into adulthood at a tender age, skipping his childhood. For such a young boy, Gerson displays enormous amounts of responsibility, commitment and love. We ask, who will offer similar care to this amazing child?

Gerson's duties at home restrict his educational and social progress. Here, Gerson washes his brother Bryan. Every day, Gerson rushes home from school to care for his handicapped siblings. Despite their general lack of response, Gerson claims, "I have fun with them."