

My Experience With Orphanages

In the late 1990's I was contacted by then Presiding Juvenile Court Judge Jaime Corral of the Los Angeles Juvenile Court. He had been approached by a member of Rotary International to assist them in a project in Brazil. He referred them to me.

I accepted the Rotary invitation to work with them to create a foster care system in Brazil. Apparently, when children were removed from parental care, they were placed in orphanages. Rotary International wanted to identify homes where the court could place them. The project included asking the juvenile courts to grant guardianship powers to those families. Apparently, the Brazilian juvenile courts had resisted the project in several communities, and they were hoping that another judge (in this case me) to talk to the judges and persuade them to issue guardianships in these cases.

My visit was very interesting. I met with Brazilian judges in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, visited their courts and talked with them about the project and the benefit of placing children with families. Some agreed, but others believed that the children's families would resist the efforts to place their children in new homes. I also visited several families where children had been placed. The children seemed very happy in those homes, but of course I did not know the background in any of these cases.

I asked one judge to permit me to visit an orphanage. He was reluctant to do so, but finally agreed. He drove me out to an orphanage near Rio de Janeiro. The house reminded me of a 19th Century mansion. It was four or five stories high and very big. The front door was enormous and had a unique opening. Apparently, a parent with an infant could come to the door, ring the bell, and at the opening a small platform would slide out.

A parent could place the baby on the platform and slide the platform back inside the orphanage. The parent could then leave without further contact.

I entered and met two women who appeared to be administrators. I was shown to a room for 2-year-olds. It was the size of a basketball court. In the room there were about 100 two-year-olds and one caretaker who sat in the corner. When I entered, all the heads turned towards me. Then most of the children opened their arms and started moving towards me. I was stunned! I felt an enormous surge of energy coming from these children. They wanted me to hold them. That was what was missing in their lives. I couldn't respond other than kneel and hold a few of them and talk to them. I next went to the 2nd story where I was shown into a similar room for 3-year-olds. It was the same. About 100 children, one caretaker and an immediate response to my entry.

It was an emotional ordeal, both overpowering and sad. Now I am even more convinced that this was not the way children should be reared. They should be in families.



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