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## Lessons for Living

**At the Maanaim Center, in São Paulo, children are expected to maintain personal and clothing cleanliness. Some of them have never seen themselves in a mirror. The younger ones, in particular, will spend hours before the glass, getting to know their own form and features.**

Jennifer Grant

School is in session at the Maanaim Center in the rural poor outskirts of Parelheiros to the south of São Paulo, Brazil. The children are dressed neatly in their navy sweats, the uniform for the days when the weather is cold and windy. At the front of the class stands one of the five teachers' aides, 17 year old Sandra. She knows the program well. This was her program.

Not long before, this daughter of a bereft prostitute had been a student here, commencing at the age of three and continuing up until the time of her current college enrollment. This helped to secure her present employment at the Center, where she had not only benefited through Maanaim's on site projects, but also received, a United States funded scholarship to attend a private school offering a better compulsory education.

A woman passes by in the halls. It is one of the two cleaning ladies, Edna. She had first come to the center walking six miles to enroll her four girls. Today, all four continue to be beneficiaries of the program while, through the provision of her present salary, Edna has been able to move from her leaking roof, lightless shack into a closer home complete with functioning electricity.

Since it is a Friday, things are being readied for tomorrow's monthly parenting class. The staff hopes to see a number of the children's single mothers who will learn about the basics of hygiene. This is often neglected in homes which have no bathroom facilities, plumbing, or power and consist usually of four adobe walls, an interior dripping wood-shingled roof, dirt floors with a single mattress for furniture and propane stove for cooking meals.

While the attendance is mostly women, the staff expects to also see Carlos whose three children currently attend the center. This exemplary father had first become involved after his wife had kicked him out of the house. Desperate to talk to someone, he had come to Maanaim for counseling. Today, he is back in the home, but avails himself of any new information, as well as making it a point to be on hand for soccer games in which his son, Carlos Júnior, participates as a member of the school team.

The dream began in 1966 with a couple, Billy Joe and Josephine Hart, who felt the stirring to become missionaries after making a trip to São Paulo, Curitiba, and Rio with an uncle who was a pastor in Los Angeles. At the time, Billy Joe was a construction foreman and Josephine was working as a teller in a branch of Bank of America. Following their call the couple found a church, which was willing to sponsor them for \$400 per month.

Soon after, they set off for Paraná to help build a Bible school for the missionary, who was currently serving there. Daughter Teena, who currently acts as the director and fund raiser for Brazilian Children, the American arm of the center, recalls the red earth of Brazil's south and her three-year induction into expatriate living. "We

were just kids and it was all new. But what I remember was my parent's determination, my mom beginning to pick-up the language and my Dad just going on faith, loving everyone. And most of all I remember that red soil spreading out around us on all sides."

After the completion of the Paraná project, the family headed to São Paulo so that Billy Joe and Josephine could attend the Campinas Language School. Josephine made great progress in facility with the Portuguese idiom, but, up until his death in 1998, Billy Joe preferred to rely on nonverbal communication and the help of others more fluent.

## **Squatter Town**

While living in Brazil's most populated city, the couple felt a burden to help the children who had been abandoned by either families who could not support them or were living in abusive situations with inadequate care, the result of a lifestyle of poverty as affects the home.

For someone who has not traveled there, it is difficult to conceive of this type of need. Parelheiros is a rural area with two million inhabitants, about half of whom are squatters transplanted from the interior of the country. Thirty percent of them are illiterate. Men work as field hands or day laborers helping to cultivate the local crops of soybeans, manioc, and bananas.

Women either serve as maids to the São Paulo upper and middle class or turn to prostitution to support themselves. Without access to, or the finances to afford birth control, many of the women become pregnant without knowledge of who the father is. On an average income of R\$40-R\$50 (US\$11.50-US\$14.50) per month, the outlets for recreation are few. The more athletic men compete in local soccer (futebol) matches. Some men fish. Doing mechanical projects such as fixing cars or auto parts is another positive outlet.

However, for many, alcohol and drugs provides the leisure of choice. Some even choose to advance their social position through trafficking the substances. Thus, relationships, even among known partners, are unstable. Only 10 percent of fathers can be found in the homes, leaving the majority of women to handle the challenges of single-motherhood.

What these mothers are left with is a structure of cinder blocks with a tin or wood-shingled roof consisting of one or two rooms and a small kitchen area. Four or five people share one mattress. Cooking is done over a propane stove. Water comes from rain, which is collected in large plastic vats. There is no sanitation. Laundry is washed in water carried from rivers. Pride comes from maintaining a clean swept dirt floor. For the few homes that have the luxury of electricity, the prized possession is the television, which often blares day and night, spreading an illusion of life in the outside world.

## **Orphanages Outlawed**

Billy Joe and Josephine's first attempt to make a difference was to construct an orphanage as a means to house more children than those they had already begun to take into their São Paulo home. Billy Joe discovered the property on which to establish his mission as he was driving through the Parelheiros countryside. Using money obtained through a pledge offered by an American church, construction commenced in 1974. Billy Joe supervised the building which took four years to finish, a wall going up there, a room completed here, as the funds trickled in.

By 1989, the orphanage was thriving with a total of 60 children being cared for. Then came the shocking decision of the Brazilian government to outlaw orphanages in their attempt to force parents to take responsibility for their own children. Such institutions were given one year to find relatives for all of their wards. Brokenhearted, the Hart's set out to place the children. They managed to locate someone in each child's family tree to be responsible for all except four remaining boys. They were officially adopted by the Harts.

The couple were now left with a large property and nothing they could use it for. Praying about the next step, the pair felt directed to look to the physical needs of the community, as well as find a way to incorporate the teaching of spiritual principles in a manner which would change the lives of both needy children and their families. In response, the complex, now known as the Maanaim Educational Center, became an academic institution in 1990.

Today it serves 160 children from preschool through completion of high school, incorporating bible basics and Christian principles into its activities, though all faiths are welcome. The facility does not replace the regular four hours of public school, which each child is required to attend, but supplements it with the goal of equipping the enrollees to be able to secure better employment, and thus a better future.

Josephine remains the figurehead, main fund raiser, and spiritual leader. Otherwise, the staff is all Brazilian and is under the supervision of two sisters: Sueli, who is the official director of the center, and Sônia, who oversees the school as its principal. Sueli has been with Maanaim for 16 years and Sônia for five. The young women commute for two hours each way five days per week, while also attending masters' programs at a local São Paulo university.

### **Death But No Grief**

Each weekday morning, the children appear at the center, brought by parents who sometimes walk three to 4 miles along rural dirt roads to bring them and deposit them at the gate. Others arrive by public bus or Parelheiros' illegal shuttle-van. But the routes which serve this area are few and do not venture into many of the terrains where a large number of the shacks have been erected. Besides the distance, the walk is sometimes difficult for other reasons. One student was forced to walk by the un removed body of his uncle who had been shot in a drug deal gone bad. Grief was not called for. Such a sight is not uncommon. Early death is accepted as one of the hazards of daily life.

Not everyone arrives at once. Many of the first to come are preschoolers. Since the complex opens at 7 am, mothers can deposit their children and then go on to domestic jobs. Since the local public schools stagger their four hour sessions, the other children arrive in varying shifts. Each is required to appear in uniform, furnished by the center. Since a standard of acceptable hygiene is expected to be adhered to, the kids often take advantage of the showers and on-site washing machine.

Two faithful employees man the kitchen, which serves a total of 500 meals per day to the staggered attendees. Nourishment consists of breakfast, a midmorning snack, lunch, and a late afternoon snack. There is no dinner, since Maanaim's doors close at 6 pm. All fare is chosen through the recommendation of a professional nutritionist. Staples are picked up in town once per week except for the meat and bread, which arrive on a contracted delivery schedule.

Besides hygienic rules, in which training became necessary due to the lack of bathrooms and utensils in some homes, there are other 'house regulations' which are enforced. Children are expected to arrive in uniform and maintain personal and clothing cleanliness. Some of them have never seen themselves in a mirror. The younger ones, in particular, will spend hours before the glass, getting to know their own form and features. They must be respectful with no fighting or cursing permitted and follow general standards of good citizenship.

Chapel is offered three times per week, where Bible basics, which include the ten commandments, the divinity of Jesus' personhood, and beginning Bible stories and scriptures pertinent to developing character, are introduced. While a willingness to adopt the Christian belief system is not an entrance requirement, Maanaim makes no apology or attempt to hide the faith under which it was established.

### **Practice Over Theory**

Since the goal of the center classes is to prepare the children for high levels of employment, most of what is offered is practical in format. Besides the preschool director, there are five degreed teachers and five aides on staff. Classes include woodworking, silk-screening, horticulture, music, and computer science. There is also an opportunity to participate in sports since there is a gym for volleyball and basketball along with a field for soccer. The school soccer team participates in matches with outsiders on the weekends.

Computer classes are divided among two age groups. Basic operational and beginning word-processing skills are taught to ages 3-14. 15-18 year olds learn practical programs such as Excel, Power point, other modern programs requiring more advanced word-processing skills, and how to do research on the Internet. Currently, there are seven computers for each of the learning levels.

Since Maanaim takes in a maximum of 160 children, not everyone who applies is able to attend. Screening interviews are conducted by the center's director who evaluates the ability and willingness to learn and be committed to staying with the program until graduation from public school. There is no tuition charge, though the 15-18 age group of computer program participants, who undergo a separate application and screening process, are asked to contribute R\$10 (US\$ 3.50) toward their instruction if at all financially able. This helps to secure a deeper personal commitment to their training.

School operates year round except for one week in July and two more during the Christmas/New Year's season. A vacation Bible school is offered during the four days of Carnaval.

Since medical care is not readily available, Maanaim also operates a small, but equipped medical and dental clinic. A volunteer dentist arrives twice a month to attend to basic tooth needs. At the medical clinic, exams are performed and vaccinations given. Basic triage supplies and antibiotics are on hand, but more serious cases are referred to other facilities, which are, unfortunately, an hour away.

### **Parent's Turn**

Josephine and her staff also reach out to the parents and to the surrounding community. Once a month, parenting classes are offered on a Saturday. These deal with hygiene, nutrition, and other issues pertinent to child-raising, such as discipline in the home. Basic counseling is available for those who just need someone to listen to the stresses of their daily lives.

Evangelism outreaches are periodically offered and involve speakers, music, and performances by a mime-group. A Christmas celebration, which occurs on the Saturday preceding the holiday, involves not only a celebration of Jesus' birth, but the distribution of food and clothing as well. To those who need it during the school year, a monthly cesta básica ( food basket) containing staples such as coffee, rice, beans, flour, and sugar is supplied.

Maanaim is not without ongoing challenges. It takes about US\$ 18,000 to US\$ 20,000 per month to pay staff salaries and purchase food and other supplies. Eighty percent of the funds come through United States church pledges. The remaining percentage is made up of private donors. Some of the children have psychological problems due to the pressures of neighborhoods where there is ongoing violence and the misfortunes of living in subhuman conditions. Religious practices such as the ceremonial practice of Macumba can play a distracting role.

A recent episode, with an ending of which Billy Joe was proud, illustrates the later. One of the student's mother, a now former priestess of Macumba, decided to become a Christian after attending an evangelism outreach. Upon learning of this, members of her black magic style religion locked her in a bathroom at a Spiritualist center so that she could `come to her senses'. Her son came each day for two weeks and sat on the other side of the door, tapping on it while singing the Portuguese equivalent to the children's hymn, "Jesus is knocking on my

heart." No one knows the true struggle of that mother's spirit during the time she spent in that bathroom. Yet, she finally emerged, with a tug in her heart which caused her to follow up with further evangelism to the point of reaching her decision to renounce the Macumba voodoo practice in response to the devoted visits by her son.

For more information about Brazilian Children, United States residents can contact the Hart's daughter, Teena, at (562) 434-0592 or by writing P.O. Box 41351, Long Beach, CA90853 or [tevens1396@aol.com](mailto:tevens1396@aol.com). Brazilian residents can contact Maanaim through its official Brazilian NGO, Sociedade Evangélica Beneficente Betânia, at Caixa Postal 42001, CEP 04073-970, São Paulo, S.P. Brasil or e-mail [Maanaim@br2001.com.br](mailto:Maanaim@br2001.com.br) The local telephone is 55-11-5920-8148. Information can also be obtained through their web site at [www.brazilianchildren.org](http://www.brazilianchildren.org) . Brazilian Children is a registered 501(c) (3) charitable organization here in the United States and the equivalent within Brazil. Tax-status numbers may be obtained through the web site or by calling one of the telephone numbers provided.

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