

Where 400 children found love

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When Khenna Marie was 10 years old, her alcoholic father in one of his fits of madness tied her and her two brothers to a tree to burn them alive.

But when he went to get matches one of Khenna's brothers broke free and shouted for her to run, but she refused to leave. "I just stood there, after so much physical abuse, I told myself I would much rather die than live another day like this," Khenna said.

Her father was abusive and a drunk, he hurt her mother and grandmother, and would often beat her and her nine other siblings, she said.

The pain only stopped when Khenna was rescued by Pastor Joe Rosmarino and his wife, Billie, in 1993 when she was 11.

They brought her to their Calvary Chapel Home in Barangay Handumanan, Bacolod City , where through the years they have taken care of about 400 abandoned, abused and disabled children, some of whom have become nurses, teachers and social workers now working in the Philippines and abroad.

"I am thankful to the Lord for giving me parents (the Rosmarinos) who have loved me as their own; I never had that before I met them. I did not come to an orphanage, I came to a home," Khenna said.

"And the kind of love God has given us is stronger than any biological bond," she said.

Under the Rosmarinos care, Khenna graduated valedictorian from high school and cum laude in nursing from Riverside College in Bacolod , after which she went on to earn a second degree in education.

Now 26, she is the school nurse at the Calvary Chapel Christian School that provides education from pre-school to high school, including special education, for the 150 children currently living at the home. She is also the grade two and three teacher.

A BUTTERFLY

The principal of the school is Annie (not her real name) who has a master's degree in education. Annie said her father when he was drunk would threaten her and her six other siblings with a bolo, and would beat them and her mother a lot.

So when they knew he was drunk they would jump out of the window of their house and hide in the nearby sugarcane field or stay at a neighbor's house.

"Our mother would come looking for us the next day when he was sober," she said.

“In 1996, when I was 16 the Lord brought me to the Rosmarinos through one of their neighbors who took me to their Bible study classes in Barangay 40 (Bacolod City),” Annie said. “I was bitter, angry and hateful towards my father and my family then. And at the Bible study classes, I found a place where I could pour my heart out.”

“They (Rosmarinos) took me into their home and took care of me as their daughter,” Annie said.

“It was the first time I really felt I had a home. I found peace, love and joy from the Lord Jesus Christ, and realized that bitterness and hatred was not good,” Annie said.

“I was a caterpillar before I found them and became a butterfly with them,” is how Annie describes her life with the Rosmarinos.

JOE AN ORPHAN

Joe Rosmarino said his parents were drunkards, too, and when he was small they separated causing him to live in an orphanage for four years.

So when he and his wife, Billie, started their home for abandoned and abused children in Bacolod , “I didn't want it to be like the one I had to go through – I knew these kids needed love, a father and mother, but most of all they needed Christ.”

Joe as a child went through six parents and no love so when he was 17, he quit school and joined the US Marines because he had nothing going for him.

Then he found the Lord when he was 28 and it changed his life.

Joe and his wife, Billie, who was a manager of a big department store in California , taught Sunday school and did short-term missionary work in the Philippines , China and Mexico .

MOVE TO BACOLOD

When Joe retired in 1988 they decided to move from Temecula , California , to Bacolod as missionaries at the height of the sugar crisis in Negros Occidental that left many children hungry and starving.

At first the Rosmarinos started a feeding center in Barangay 40 for children, held Bible studies, helped children with cleft palates undergo operations through Operation Smile, and then one day they were asked to take care of two children who had been physically abused by their grandfather and father. Their mother was mentally unstable.

“Their little hearts and minds were bruised, and we gave them love,” Billie said.

Soon more and more children were brought to them, and they moved five times from one rented house to another to accommodate their fast growing family.

With 27 children, it was hard for them to find a big enough house to live in, and then the Lord provided, Billie said.

Through their family inheritance, they bought a 14,000 square meter sugarcane land in 1992 in Barangay Handumanan, Bacolod City , that they turned into the site for the Calvary Chapel Christian Home , which is accredited by the Department of Social Welfare and Development, and is also the site of their school.

The property also has a playground, a donated swimming pool for therapy needed by their special children, an aviary, and 18 dogs. And the walls of the home are painted with happy bright prints by Billie.

The bigger children help take care of the smaller ones -- the youngest is 6 months old. It is a home filled with smiles and laughter, and freshly baked cookies.

150 CHILDREN

Billie said she can remember the names of all her 150 children because the story of each one of them is engraved in her heart.

The home also has a ricefield and gardens to enable them to grow the food they need, and a crafts room where the children make necklaces, chimes and print designs on t-shirts to sell.

“We want them to be creative and let them express themselves through things they make, but not be pressured to do the work so that they loose their childhood.”

“We don't want to lose sight of our main goal to take care of them and to let them be children,” Billie said.

The home is ran mostly on donations from ordinary individuals in the United States , and with some help from groups like Kalipay Negrense Foundation in Negros Occidental.

PRAYING FOR HELP

To keep the place going the Rosmarinos said they need to become more self-sufficient in producing their own food. That is why they are praying that they will be able to raise enough money to buy a 1.5-hectare property adjacent to the home.

They also pray that with the additional property they will be able to put up a facility for sexually-abused children, including rescued child prostitutes. “We need a separate place for them, it would not work if they were immediately placed with the other children, as they could become predators,” Billie said.

The sexually-abused children need to undergo counseling and be prepared for integration into the regular home, she explained.

“It's just a dream but we pray it could really become a reality,” she said.

Also helping the Rosmarinos run the home is Terry Rotherham from California who came in 1991 as a short term missionary and returned to live permanently at the home in Bacolod in 1993.

“Everybody needs a place to feel welcome and special. Can you imagine if you were a child and the people who are supposed to love you are the ones hurting you,” Billie said.

“Some of the children stay for an hour, a week or until they grow up, but for as long as they are here we will love them, make them feel safe, and help them overcome the things that they have gone through,” she said.

Every child deserves that, she said.

“Some of them may not finish college but whatever they become in life we hope to raise them to become good citizens with God in the center of their lives,” she added

DIED FIVE TIMES

The children at the home include Noah, who, when he was just a few days old at the height of Typhoon Ruping in November 1990, was brought to the Rosmarinos home. He was barely a kilo and wrapped in just a cloth.

“When we brought Noah to the hospital because he was starting to turn blue the doctors told me ‘Nanay he's dying’ and that I could hold him but if he stopped breathing I should just lay him down on the bed.

“I held Noah in my arms from 11 in the evening to 6 a.m. and five times he died in my arms because he stopped breathing, but every time I would lay him down on the bed he would start breathing again,” Billie said.

Today Noah, 14, is in second year high school. He paints like his Nanay Billie, plays the drums in the home's band, and helps take care of the handicapped.

‘NO ONE WANTED HIM’

The home has 25 children that are handicapped but we can be the eyes, legs, arms, and voices for them, Billie said.

Only recently Joe said he received a call from a government hospital that a little baby named Matty needed a home but nobody wanted him. “I told them I would be there in an hour to get him. Matty has no toes, no fingers and no tongue, but since he came to the home he has learned to hold his baby bottle with his arms, is eating rice cereal on his own and can stand up,” Joe said.

THEIR OWN CHILDREN

Since the Rosmarinos moved to the Philippines their own daughter, Elizabeth Rosmarino, who was 14 then, has become a doctor and is married to Kenneth Bongcac of Bohol where they live with their three children. Elizabeth graduated cum laude as a nurse from Riverside College in Bacolod and studied to be a doctor at the Cebu Institute of Medicine.

Their son, William Joseph, who was 12 when they moved to the Philippines, is now 33 and a businessman married to Joanne, who is from Manila, with whom he has three children.

HERE TO STAY

"We are Filipinos in our heart and are here to stay. Our Filipino kids at the home have had so many people in their lives who have walked away from them, they need to have someone to say hey we're here to stay," Billie said. "God has done so many miracles for the children, we are the fortunate ones to have been able to see first hand what He has done," she said.

APPEAL

Helping raise funds to keep the Calvary Chapel Children's Home going is Kalipay Negrense Foundation, which helps homeless, malnourished, physically and sexually-abused and out of school children.

Its president Anna Balcells is appealing for help so the Calvary Chapel Children's Home that needs P600,000 more, can buy the adjacent property it needs to become more self-sufficient, pointing out that it is no joke feeding 150 children a day.

Calvary will use the property for planting rice, vegetables and to raise farm animals, and hopefully to build a refuge for sexually abused children, she said.

Kalipay also helps raise funds for scholarships of the Calvary home children going to college.

"We do our share to make sure that these beautiful homes for disadvantaged children never have to give up," Balcells said.

"If we don't break the chain of pain that these children are suffering they can become future criminals. We have to take them away from the horrors that no child should ever have to experience, and give them a new beginning in a home where they feel safe, they are protected and loved," she added.

Those interested in helping may contact Balcells or Kalipay vice president John Gayoso at 09173003595 or send an email to kalipaynegrensefoundation@yahoo.com *

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