

Met the Nun: Lost my Heart

Biographical Memoir

A Synopsis

The cook grabbed Nicoll by the hair and dragged her kicking and screaming to the dining room.

SISTER EDITH SUAZO FERNANDEZ, a Franciscan nun, embarked on a remarkable journey fueled only by a dedication to her God. She renounced her position as a nun after fifteen years, following a one-year sabbatical from her congregation during which she traveled from her native Honduras to the US. In New York, she watched on TV the terrorist bombers level the twin tower buildings of the World Trade Center. Returning to Honduras, she submitted her resignation.

FORTUNATO VELASQUEZ, a 66-year-old Peace Corps Volunteer Trainee from Seattle, disgusted with the inherent, ingrained racism in his own country, and assigned to Honduras, encountered a way of life in a third-world country that opened his eyes and his heart forever. Early in the morning on November 5, 2008 while camped in a remote clothing-optional hot springs area in Death Valley, California, Fortunato turned on the car radio to the news of Barack Obama's election as president of the United States. Eight years later, still living in Honduras, he watched as a racist lunatic succeeded Obama as president.

Following the decision to leave the Franciscan order, Sister Edith told the city's mayor that she wanted to serve the community. He provided her with a vacant house owned by the city and after a few months she accepted the first of a soon-to-expand group of at-risk children from dysfunctional families. The abandoned children had no place to go. She had stumbled onto her calling in life.

Fortunato, assigned to La Paz, La Paz for two months of Field Based Training, was introduced to Sister Edith by NICK, a Peace Corps Volunteer (PCV) who had just completed his two-years of service. Before leaving for home in the US, Nick asked Fortunato if he and his fellow trainees would help Sister Edith clean up a dilapidated abandoned building offered as a political sop to the nun after an election. She and the children had been kicked out of the home they occupied that had been provided by the previous mayor.

That first Saturday morning, fifteen PCV Trainees took a long look around in every direction at the wasted ground before them. They saw caved-in adobe walls everywhere and no roofing on any of the remaining standing buildings at the former school site being used as a neighborhood community dump. Garbage heaped in mounds and immense piles of dirt and other scattered trash were piled inside and outside the obliterated what-remained-as rooms.

Undaunted, Sister Edith and the twelve children were hard at work when the PCVTs arrived. For two months the PCVTs labored every Saturday hauling dirt and garbage helping the nun and the children clean the new Children's Home: *Fundación Señor San José*. After the PCVs graduated and were feted at the US Embassy in Tegucigalpa, Fortunato adopted a lifestyle that fit him like a tamale corn husk wrapping. His fellow PCVs assigned all over the country, he returned to La Paz and immersed himself into the culture like a chameleon.

The children who are fortunate enough to live at the *Fundación Señor San José* would be living on the streets, begging for food, stealing, or worse for the older girls, if not for Sister Edith. Each child has a unique story of abandonment, physical or sexual abuse, extreme poverty, rejection, or exposure to drug addicted and alcoholic parents.

Each day an adventure, what Fortunato experienced in the weeks and months that slid by resembled a panorama of human suffering that he realized to be a daily recurrence without end. The images crowded his mind with sensations of a pathos of every caliber. Like the time a thirteen-year-old girl resident told him her drug-addicted mother had left her at the age of two with her aunt. The mother's sister, also a druggie, threw the child into a roaring bonfire on the beach in a drunken stupor. Someone managed to pull her out of the flames. She pulled down her blouse exposing a burn-scarred shoulder and neck to show the PCV. On another day, while preparing a lesson plan for his English class, Fortunato watched as the wretched woman who was the Home's cook, tried to force a 10-year-old female resident to eat her breakfast when the nun was absent from the Home. The cook knocked the girl down with a clenched fist when she refused, then grabbed her by the hair to drag her kicking and screaming across the dirt hallway to the kitchen sixty feet away.

It is difficult to watch the vulgar displays of human failing and avarice and not be able to prevent aberrant behavior nor intervene. On the other hand, Sister Edith, by force of will and a profound belief in her God, transformed a dilapidated neighborhood dump into a clean, hygienic sanctuary for at-risk children, defying all the odds. After construction of a new building at a different location, it marked a turning point in the Children's Home's fortunes. The new building was dedicated in March, 2014 to receive twenty-four eager, excited children hungering for change, starved for a sense - for a feeling - of permanence.

Once ensconced within the mainstream of the humanitarian world, the *Fundación Señor San José* became a growing force. The country's large humanitarian community, dominated by first-world countries, wields considerable political national clout, wedded as it is to existing third-world bureaucratic structure. The evolution of this phenomenon expanded in tandem with the evolution of the children of the *Fundación Señor San José*. The tentacles intertwined and resulted in positive as well as negative development. The children, however, remain at the

positive end of the educational growth curve. Throughout it all, Sister Edith and the expanding mission of the Children's Home have become a beacon of hope as the Foundation marches toward a future intended to cultivate and reap a renewable resource: the country's children.

The End

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