



NPH Rancho Santa Fe



# community

spring 2007

## Oscar Stanley & the Power of Seguir Adelante

It was a somewhat crazy idea with a tight time frame, long on ambition and short on funding. But after many years I've learned that this seems to be a central theme at NPH. I have also learned that if you mix in a healthy belief in miracles and keep your sense of humor – everything will work out just fine. With that in mind, in May of 2006, I strapped my camera equipment on my back and set off on a tour of the nine NPH homes, determined to make a video for each of them by our next international meeting in El Salvador in February of 2007. I was very excited to experience NPH in the other countries as my exposure thus far had been limited to our home in Honduras.

I first came to Rancho Santa Fe as a volunteer in 2000 and have been around in some capacity ever since, living here full-time for about three of those years. So our kids here are pretty used to me and my camera being part of their lives, so much so that they barely even notice us anymore. For better or worse, they have also become fairly sophisticated in their knowledge of video production. A handful of 10-year olds hamming it up

in front of the camera recently told me exactly which parts they wanted in “slow motion.” I laughed out loud the other day when a teenager who was hanging out in our office watching me edit video said “I think you should put a dissolve there instead.” You get the point. Any mystique surrounding the presence of a video camera is long gone here.

Perhaps this is why I was a little thrown off by the initial reaction at some of the other homes, where at first I was regarded as something in between a Martian and a pop star. In Guatemala, a young boy motioned me over to the side of the room: “Can I ask you an important question?” he said. After looking side to side to make sure no one was listening, he drew me in closer, “Are you... famous?” I hated to disappoint the little guy, but I told him the truth: I'm just a Gringa with a video camera who wants to tell the story of all the incredible kids we have at NPH. It is quite a story. And quite a family. Right now, we have close to 3000 children under our care in nine countries. This doesn't count the thousands and thousands that have grown up in NPH

over the past half-century – many of whom you'll now find working at NPH and raising a new generation of Pequeños. While each home certainly has its own distinct flavor, and none is without its challenges, the caliber of our children is a constant and a real testament to what NPH is all about.

As I traveled from country to country, these kids quickly waved the space alien and her camera right into the family. They showed me the ropes, carried my tripod and basically welcomed me into their worlds with open arms. One after another, they told me their stories, their dreams and just how lucky they felt to be part of NPH. Just when I thought I couldn't be more impressed, I'd meet another child who would simply blow me away.

Oscar Stanley, a 12-year old Pequeño from NPH El Salvador, is just one example. I think he stands out in my mind because this home was the first stop on my “video tour” and Oscar Stanley was one of the first kids I met. This fairly serious young man approached me, introduced himself and



**“When you feel sad or depressed, just look for God and he’ll give you everything you need.”**

Oscar Stanley at his home in NPH El Salvador.

told me he wanted record a greeting to send to his brothers and sisters at NPH back in Honduras. I chuckled a bit and set up the camera. With the polish of a politician, Oscar Stanley flawlessly delivered a formal statement he’d prepared, sending love and blessings from one branch of the NPH family to the next. After I turned off the camera and we chatted a bit, I discovered that Oscar Stanley was a writer. I told him I’d love to see some of his stories sometime.

That night, he appeared on my doorstep with several volumes of his manuscripts in spiral bound notebooks. Poems, stories and songs about wonder, love and loss – a large number of which were based on a 12-year old girl who had apparently broken his heart. I stayed up half the night reading them all. They were beautiful, genuine and full of honest emotion.

A few days later I interviewed Oscar Stanley on camera and he shared his background with me. He had come to NPH a couple years ago after running away from two other children’s institutions. His mom had abandoned him as a baby. When he was eight years old, he came home from school to find that his father had left; he hasn’t seen him since. Here’s a kid who had every reason to feel bitter and unloved, but he wanted no part of that. In fact, when we ventured onto the topic of faith, this is what he told me:

“When you feel sad or depressed, just look for God and he’ll give you everything you need. There is no support greater than God. There is no help greater than God. Trust in him. He’s a real father and he’ll never leave us.”

I’m a person who often struggles in her faith – especially when I see all of the injustices in the world, so I played back this part of the interview a few times. Here is a kid who had already lived through a heap of these injustices and he is more spiritually centered than I could ever hope to be. And he’s 12. And he’s going to be a writer, a singer, an actor, an artist, a poet and open homes for disadvantaged kids. It takes Oscar Stanley a full half hour to tell you about all of his plans for the future, and I have no doubt he’ll get it all done.

I think one of the most amazing things about NPH is that our homes are full of kids with the Oscar Stanley mindset. I’ve interviewed dozens of them. There’s a phrase in Spanish that sums up this way of thinking: “Seguir Adelante.” Unfortunately, there is no concise English translation, but it basically means “pick yourself up, dust yourself off and keep on keeping on.” At the end of my nine country tour, I had shot more than 200 hours of tape, including some 150 interviews with the directors, staff, volunteers and the kids themselves. I’d say a good 75% of them invoked this “Seguir Adelante” phrase at least once. My officemates Monica and Jen, who had to endure countless hours of me screening these tapes can vouch for that fact. But it’s more than just talk. If you drop in any given NPH home, you won’t see people sitting around feeling sorry for themselves or dwelling on all of the disappointments life has thrown at them. You will see children being children. Laughing, learning and loving. Sometimes fighting and fooling around too. I mean - come on, they are kids, not saints. But most of them have ideas about what they want to do with their

lives and recognize that NPH is giving them the tools to get there. When you consider their personal histories and the tragedies most of them have endured, it is really nothing short of a miracle.

Of course none of this happens by accident. Father Wasson laid the groundwork for us and his mission is being carried out by hundreds of dedicated employees and volunteers from all over the world. Many of these behind-the-scenes people are just as impressive and inspiring as the children themselves. They have given up comfortable lives and well-paying jobs and found their vocation in raising our kids. In Haiti, for example, where the level of poverty and oppression is simply staggering, we have several volunteers who have committed themselves to NPH year after year, some for well over a decade. They are living examples of love and sacrifice for the children and the rest of us. Then there are those in the group I like to call the “Power Nuns.” They are a handful of amazing sisters peppered throughout our homes that, by all rights, should be somewhere enjoying weekly card games and senior discounts. Instead they are up to their elbows in children who need them and the daily challenges of living in the third world. Throughout all of my travels, I met truly extraordinary people in some unexpected places and was honored and fascinated to hear their stories.

As much as it has been enlightening, this year has also been entertaining and exhausting. In Mexico, a fresh-faced volunteer welcomed me warmly and asked if I was a member of the video “crew.” I laughed. “No, I’m not with the crew, I AM the crew.” And also the

producer, director, translator, editor and so forth. Doing this project as a one-woman band was not easy. Travel, which is always adventurous in Latin America, is made even more so if you're a woman traveling alone and on a tight budget, lugging around bulky and pricey video equipment. I have bounced around on colorful 15-hour bus rides, in the backs of pickup trucks and on a few planes that looked like they were built from a kit in someone's garage in the 1950s. One such harrowing experience happened during a hurricane, not something I wish to repeat anytime soon.

But once I actually arrived at the NPH houses in the various countries, I always felt safe and very much at home. Probably a little too much so. Much of my video was shot with a kid on my lap, or on my hip or wrapped around my leg. Carefully peeling toddlers off of the lens seemed to be a daily activity. Curious little hands have explored every inch of my equipment. I spent a good chunk of one afternoon cleaning Tootsie Pop residue out of my neutral density switch. But a project like this forces you to let go of anything resembling perfectionism and everything, including me, made it back to Honduras more or less in one piece.

For the past few months, I've been editing these videos right here at the Ranch, often with a varying peanut gallery of personitas sitting quietly by my side – fascinated to get a glimpse of their 'extended family' in the other countries. The technical conditions in my "studio" were not quite ideal. I recorded my audio narrations crouched under a wool blanket, because once the kids go to bed and the Ranch is actually "quiet" the crickets and frogs make clean audio an impossibility. The frequent power outages fried two different hard drives and caused some nearby children to learn a few choice words in English. I lost an entire laptop computer to a colony of teeny tiny ants. In short, it was basically a technological nightmare.

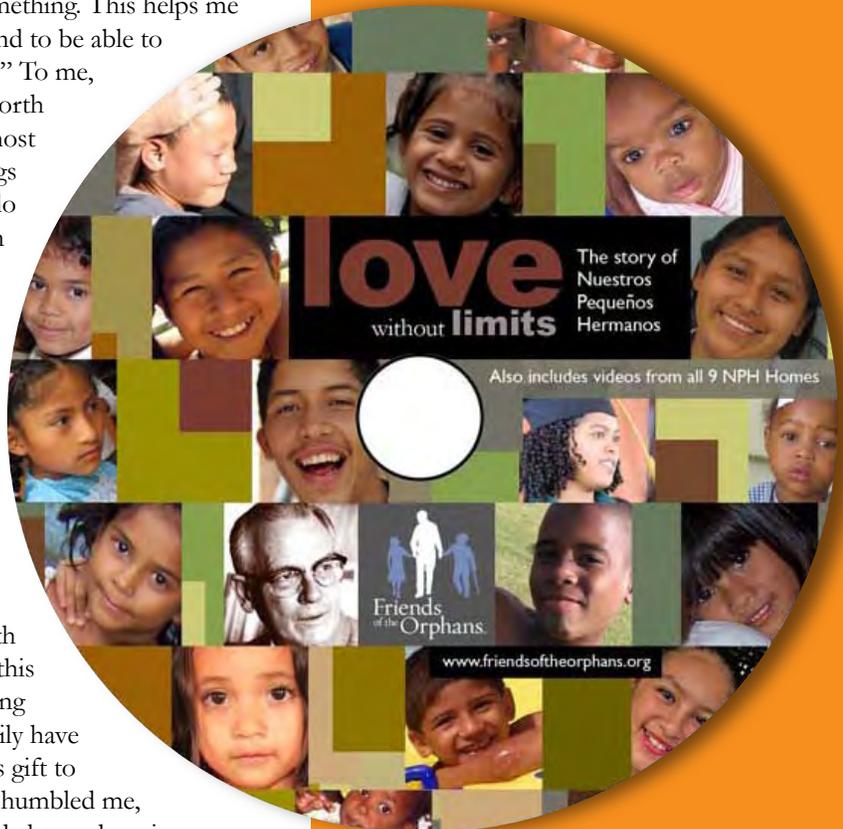
But in the end, it was easily worth all the frustration. It felt great to be able to go to the meeting in El Salvador last week and share the finished videos with a room full of people who love NPH as much as I do. The best surprise of all

was when I spotted Oscar Stanley, who had come to the hotel to dance with the folkloric group at the banquet that night. In between videos, he ran up and gave me a hug and a carefully folded piece of paper. When I opened it a few minutes later, I immediately welled up. It was a letter, beautifully written of course, thanking me for my love and support. One part especially got to me. "I want you to know that you helped me recognize that I am important and that I am worth something. This helps me to have hope and to be able to seguir adelante." To me, instilling self-worth is one of the most important things we adults can do for the children in our lives. It is a gift that NPH gives Oscar Stanley and all of its children throughout the nine countries everyday. My experiences with these kids and this enormous, loving patchwork family have been a priceless gift to me. They have humbled me, inspired me and changed me in ways that I'm still figuring out.

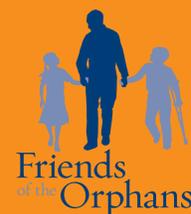
Next week, I am headed back to New York City – where you can't throw a stone without hitting a double mocha skim latte and everyone who is anyone is in therapy. Don't get me wrong, I have a feeling that I will still love my over-priced caffeine and an occasional trip to the self-help section as much as any self-respecting New Yorker. But maybe the next time some impatient so-and-so shoves me on a crowded subway train, I will be able to take a deep breath, fight my first instinct and simply tell him or her to "Seguir Adelante." It's good advice we could all stand to follow.

Shannon Taggart  
Special Projects

"Love without Limits" is a 10-minute video that touches on the history and philosophy of our enormous NPH family. The DVD also includes shorter videos about each of our homes in Mexico, Honduras, Haiti, Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Peru and Bolivia.



To request a DVD please contact:



Friends of the Orphans  
National Office  
Telephone (847) 690-1700  
info@friendsus.org

[www.friendsoftheorphans.org](http://www.friendsoftheorphans.org)