

The Ripple Effect

According to the definition given on the 2010 Moral Essay Contest Pamphlet, moral courage is “the ability to take a strong stand on a specific issue based on one’s personal beliefs and to defend it, regardless of danger or threats to personal safety.” This is the quality that a man named John Bland exemplifies wonderfully.

He graduated from Georgia Tech in 1983, majoring in management science. He had a very promising career, having co-founded a software company, but the path he chose led him away from all that and into the poverty in Nicaragua. In 1998, while a partner in Effective Technologies and being a core member at Prince of Peace Catholic Church, he was looking for a service project for the high school teens. He came across the poverty in Nicaragua, specifically in Chinandega, where the children were eating out of a garbage dump. Armed with a video camera, he and his friend, Gary Caprara, traveled to Nicaragua to see what was really happening. What they saw astonished them. Upon returning to Buford, Georgia, they showed the video to the teens, who immediately wanted to take action. In response to the hopeless poverty they captured on film, the teens decided to raise money for a cafeteria to alleviate the suffering (“Compassionate Calling”).

On October 30, 1998, the unthinkable happened. Hurricane Mitch struck Nicaragua and the poverty situation went from bad to worse. Las Casitas volcano was filled with rain and the side collapsed, causing a mudslide which killed more than 3000 Nicaraguans and destroyed hundreds of homes around Chinandega. The next year, during spring break in April 1999, 18 teens and 20 adults went on the first mission trip. As the Nicaraguan government relocated the displaced families to a plot of land right next to the city garbage dump, the primary goal of the first trip was to transfer the families from shelters made of cardboard and plastic to structurally sound housing. The plane ride back was a somber one. The group decided much needed to be done to help the people of Nicaragua and hence

Amigos for Christ was born (“Compassionate Calling”). It was officially created in June 1999 as an independent 501 C (3) charity with John Bland as the Executive Director (“Our History”).

Since its creation in June 1999, Amigos for Christ has completed four new village communities (San Marcos, Santa Matilde, Miguel Cristiano, and Villa Esperanza) and is in the process of completing the fifth (Villa Catalina). They have also established St. Martin de Porres Surgical Hospital which serves all of Chinandega and the surrounding areas. Their main focus lies “in strengthening families without resources, through our community housing, medical, educational, clean water, small business cooperative and agricultural programs in rural Nicaragua” (“Our History”).

I personally am involved in Amigos for Christ and have been attending the spring break mission trip for the past four years. This coming April will be my fifth and final spring break trip. I have witnessed what this organization does, not only for the people of Nicaragua, but for everyone who participates in the charity. It gives a real sense of purpose and belonging. I believe that everyone who has taken part in these mission trips have gained almost as much as a Nicaraguan family who has been lifted out of poverty, but perhaps not in the same sense. The Nicaraguan people gain a physical gift, but the missionaries gain something immaterial and irreplaceable, and that is the gift of giving of ourselves.

Because I have been involved for more than four years, I can see the transformations that have taken place and I can bear witness that the actions of one individual can make a significant difference. What most people don’t understand is that an act of kindness, no matter how small, can make all the difference in the world. Perhaps this difference is not noticed by anyone except the person who did the kindness, but the difference is there and that is all that matters. I myself have been questioned about why I choose to spend my spring break like this and I tell them that I love the people in Nicaragua and I love what I do for them. It is about this point that they give me a look that shows they don’t understand

what I mean. It is difficult to understand just how much of a difference Amigos for Christ makes for the people of Nicaragua unless you experience it for yourself.

John Bland, one person, has made this happen. He has lived a life shining with moral courage, standing up for the people of Nicaragua even when their own government wouldn't. He has created hope for the people of Nicaragua and has opened up a new world for us as missionaries to go out and serve the poor. I would love to have someone tell me that one person cannot make a difference. I would tell them to go out and do one act of kindness for someone and see the difference it makes. Love is a ripple; it starts out small, but grows larger and larger with each passing moment.