

# THE WANDERING YEARS 1997-2001

*“God will make a way”*



Charles Dickens opens *A Tale of Two Cities* with the famous line: “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.” Something similar could be said of Neighborhood Ministries’ “wandering years.” On the one hand, the period from 1997 to 2001 was marked by seemingly endless logistical challenges, as staff and volunteers sought to keep ministering to hundreds of urban children, using other people’s facilities (with some grumbling on both sides). On the other hand, it was time of amazing provision and spiritual breakthrough. If you think that sounds a little like the story of the Israelites in the wilderness, you’re right.

The Open Door property sold in September 1997, so by January 1998, Neighborhood Ministries began using other church facilities. “We had everything we owned in gigantic plastic tubs,” Kit Danley recalls. “So every time we did anything—the Monday Night program, Kids’ Club, the Food Bank, whatever—we had to tote everything in. We had storage units all over town in different places.” The infamous NM buses were parked in various locations throughout Phoenix. Kids’ Club was held on four different campuses over the years, the school year programs at two different locations. In fall 2001, as kids and leaders waited



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We enthusiastically partner with existing community organizations  
and with urban and suburban expressions of the Body of Christ.

breathlessly for the ministry to receive the necessary permits that would allow them to move into the new Neighborhood Center, Monday Nights was even held “on the road.” Kit remembers, “We’d pick up the kids and drive them to a local park to play games, or we would take them to the property to pray in the dark. Halloween was on a Monday that year and one of the local churches threw a big ‘Harvest Blast’ for us.” She adds: “We always seemed to come up with something to do together. We’d go to a place and then we’d just take them back home, but the lack of a facility never stopped us.”

“It all just made us want to pray all that much more for our own home,” Kit says. “We had all this longing—and we prayed like crazy and worked like crazy to get the money raised and the buildings built on our own property, because it was just insane to live like this.”

God’s first provision for Neighborhood Ministries during the wandering season was Arizona College of the Bible. They had purchased an old community center, complete with a pool, full court gymnasium, and large auditorium. It was a perfect facility for Kids’ Club 1998, which boasted 350 kids and a work crew of 40. “It was so great,” one staff member remembers enthusiastically. “It was the only place during all of these years where the work crew could live at the same location where Kids’ Club happened.” Unfortunately, the College was struggling financially and by the following year had folded and sold their property.

It was time for God to show up again with manna in the wilderness. A program involving over 300 kids isn’t exactly inconspicuous, and members of Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran Church, just down the street from AZ College of the Bible, had noticed the Kids’ Club activity. When one of

NM's buses broke down (surprise!), this church gallantly offered the use of their own vehicle for the remainder of the two-week program. This put Kit in touch with Horace Boydston, the administrative pastor at the church. Toward the end of the summer, when all her requests to local churches for permission to use their facilities for the school-year program had come up dry, she turned to her new friend. "We would love it if you would come," Horace told her—much to her surprise. "It blew us away!" Kit admits. For the next three school years, Shepherd of the Valley hosted NM, sticking in there even in the midst of the wear and tear and accidents inevitable when hundreds of energetic kids are set loose. The Lutherans, though, had already made commitments for the summer use of their facilities, so NM had to find other sites on which to host Kids' Club. Wayne still remembers Horace asking if there had been too many problems, to which Wayne replied, "Are you kidding? Horace, we don't even think you guys are Christians. You're all too nice. You've got to be Angels!"

For 1999, God provided First Historical Presbyterian Church, a fancy cathedral in the heart of downtown Phoenix. The beautiful old facility was "like a castle," staff recall, complete with winding staircases, a third floor gym, and numerous classrooms tucked in and about. "It was a like a maze—we had kindergartners wandering all over the place." Kit jokes, "Probably there are still some children from Kids' Club lost in there."

The following years brought more travels and relocations for Kids' Club—to New Beginnings Church way over on Phoenix' west side for the 2000 Club and then to Grace Lutheran Church downtown in 2001. All the moving exacted a high toll physically and emotionally. Thankfully, with progress being made in the redevelopment of NM's newly



## TURNING THE OTHER CHEEK As related by Wayne Danley

Guicho, an old gang leader who has been in the ministry for years, came to me one day, so angry that he was literally shaking. He was serving as a counselor for Kids' Club. Anyway, he got close to me and he said, "Wayne, one of the kids in my small group—I went up to him, I put my arm on his shoulder, and that kid spit in my face." And I said, "Yeah, well, that'll happen." And he said, "You don't understand. In my gang, I would not talk about this. I would just say the word and this boy would be dead. He would not be dead tomorrow. He'd be dead, now! No one does this to me!" It took me a moment to grasp what my friend was telling me. I could see the dark rage in his eyes but I also knew the changes in his heart,

so I talked to him about how we spit in the face of Jesus. I reminded him of what Jesus could have done to each and everyone of us, but instead prayed, "Father, forgive..." And this old gang leader, shaking, still enraged, was trying to grasp the idea of loving this kid who had so disrespected him. It went against everything he knew and understood, but he did it, and he made it through that Kids' Club with that young boy.

More than ten years later I was interviewing a young man who had grown up in our ministry—and I asked him, who did he try to minister to? Who did he focus on? And he said, "I focus on the really tough kid, the kid that was like me. I want the kid

that nobody wants. That's the kid I focus on. That's the kid I can relate to." He said, "Today I walked up to one of my kids, and I put my arm around them, and he spit in my face." And he said, "I remembered when I was 9, I spit in my leader's face." And I was amazed. I just looked at him and said, "You're the kid! You're the kid that spit in Guicho's face. You're the kid!" I couldn't wait to get home to call Guicho and tell him, "I found the boy who spit in your face and guess what happened to him today. One of his kids spit in his face, and he did what you did. He remembered you and he stood and took it in the name of Jesus." My old friend and I talked on the phone with tears in our eyes for the tremendous miracle that day.

Guicho with son Diego





Leaders from the neighborhood  
begin to step forward



acquired property at 19th and Van Buren, kids, staff, and volunteers could remind themselves that a new home was coming. God was shepherding His people in the desert and would make a way to the Promised Land that was visible in the distance.

The ministry's wandering season, punctuated with highs and lows, joys and sorrows, is a metaphor for Victor Lopez's story. Today Victor, 26, is a key leader in the ministry. He disciples kids on Monday Nights, counsels older teens toward the straight and narrow way, makes presentations to urban youth about the futility of gang life. But getting here was a long and winding journey.

Victor and his older brother John-John were regular fixtures at the Danleys' home in the late 1980s. John was big—and scary. As a pre-teen he was already leading a gang. Victor was younger, a gang “wannabe” as he puts it. But he became a full-fledged gangster at age 11. That was the year the boys' father died of alcoholism. For Victor, it was a year of violence, abuse, and paint-sniffing.

Older brother John tried to fill his father's shoes until 1993, when another 14-year-old kid gunned him down in an alley. Victor, 12, quickly bonded with his brother's two best friends—Benny and Luis—both active gangbangers. The three guys and their homeboys hung out in the barrio, skipping school, doing and selling drugs, robbing houses, and surviving a neighborhood replete with prostitution, pregnant teenagers, and strung-out fathers. Death was common. Victor recalls:

*One day me and my homeboys were walking down the street telling each other, “Later, man, we’ll meet up with each other in the Barrio tomorrow.” The next day came, and one of my homeboys was shot to death in front of his home. Then you start to wonder: What’s going on, what just happened? Last night I was just shaking my homeboy’s hand, telling him ‘laters,’ but I guess it wasn’t ‘laters,’ just goodbye.*

“Things like that I couldn’t understand,” Victor says, “not at twelve years old—seeing someone one day and then next day, he’s gone.” But such incidents kept repeating. “After that, things like that happened all the time,” Victor laments. “It would have happened to you, too, if you lived in my neighborhood.”

At the tender age of fourteen, Victor became a father. He didn’t even know about it until he was serving a sentence in juvenile prison for car theft and heard it from a fellow inmate. Behind bars, Victor had time to think about all he’d experienced over the years at Neighborhood Ministries. He and his homeboys were loved there on Monday Nights and at Kids’ Club. Victor had been attending since age 8. He’d always maintained a close relationship with the Danleys. Kit would visit him in prison. Ian and he had been neighborhood and school buddies as elementary students—though the friendship was not without conflict. Upon release from Durango youth detention center, Victor wandered back to the fold, hanging out on the edges of NM’s teen programs. But despite some desire to leave his old life and give himself fully to the Lord, Victor repeatedly was pulled back to the streets. He’d get arrested again, serve some more time, then be out on probation. In the midst of all, he’d seem to have breakthroughs at various ministry events. Kit even remembers a sweet time making gingerbread houses with Victor at Christmastime. Victor’s life was such a roller-coaster.

“I go through all my prayer letters sometimes,” Kit says, “and I said to Victor the other day: ‘You cannot believe how many years I have been asking people to pray for you.’” She doesn’t know why this one kid out of so many has stuck in her heart, but he has. Perhaps it’s because his redemption seemed so improbable.

Kit remembers a time when her son Ian was in 4th grade and Victor snuck into his room and stole his Legos, destroying creations the nine-year-old had laboriously built over months. “Ian was absolutely incensed,” Kit recalls. He demanded she ban Victor from the house, which she couldn’t do: “These kids are in our lives,” she told him.



Kids’ Club on the road

She tried to counsel Ian about Jesus’ love for Victor, but he couldn’t really hear it. “If he ever, EVER, becomes a Christian and follows Jesus—then I will know that God is real!” Ian shouted at her.

“It was like, what’s the most impossible thing that God could ever do? Answer: make Victor a Christian,” Kit explains. “It felt like kind of a dare to God. I held that in my heart. Is that possible? God, are you that big? Can you make a way where there is no way? Can you change THAT life?”

By 1998, it didn’t seem too likely. Victor was 17 years old. His friend Benny Ruiz was sentenced to 3-5 years in prison for assault with a deadly weapon. The gang had been reduced to just Victor and Luis. Everyone else was dead or behind bars. Five months after Benny was imprisoned, Victor and Luis got into a fight with their girlfriends. Angry and drunk, they decided to steal a car and take a joyride. Still drunk, Luis wanted to drive home, but Victor said they were too drunk and should just stay the night. Luis went anyway. He lost control of the car and was killed. He was 21. “This was the biggest mistake that we had ever made,” Victor explains, “because it ended up costing my best friend his life.”

Not long after, another of Victor’s girlfriends had a baby—his second child. The newborn died within days. “I didn’t

"This is the only church I've ever known" (right)

Victor with son "Little Victor" (below)



understand why so many bad things were happening to me," Victor says, "but now I can see that it was like a wake-up call to me from the Lord." Victor hit rock bottom with the death of his second child and seriously contemplated suicide. But God stayed his hand.

"I started looking in the mirror and saying to myself: 'I'm a grown man, and I'm still trying to live the life of a twelve year old,'" Victor says. "It felt gross. There had to be a better life."

Kit urged Victor to pray, to tell everything to God. "So I tried it," Victor remembers, "and it was amazing how it felt. It felt like I had just taken a drug. I prayed that the Lord would help me with these ups and downs that I was experiencing. I wanted a new life; I wanted the Lord to change me, to protect me, and to forgive all my sins." He continues: "I didn't think it would work, until amazing things started to happen. I didn't feel like a crummy person anymore." God also brought back to Victor's mind the memory of reading a book by Nicky Cruz while in jail. Cruz was a reformed gang leader who launched a powerful, nationwide ministry to reach troubled youth and turn them away from gangs toward God. "Nicky Cruz was the leader of a gang," Victor explains, "and I just ran with a gang. If God could change a leader, then He could change me."

He has—powerfully. Victor has custody of his son, now a 6th grader. He works part-time with Neighborhood Ministries. He's been clean and sober for over seven years.

Nowadays, Victor says, prayer is a lifeline. "Praying changes me and my heart," he says. "When life is difficult, with its ups and downs, I go to the Lord, riding my bike all around my old neighborhood, and I think about the things that I have done and how God has changed my heart. Sometimes I'm tempted to go back to the streets, but I can't. That is not me anymore."

"Asking God to rescue Victor had felt like asking Him to move a mountain," Kit says. Smiling, she adds: "Look how big God is."

What Neighborhood Ministries learned in the wandering years was that God is the way-maker. On the first Friday of Kids' Club in 1999,



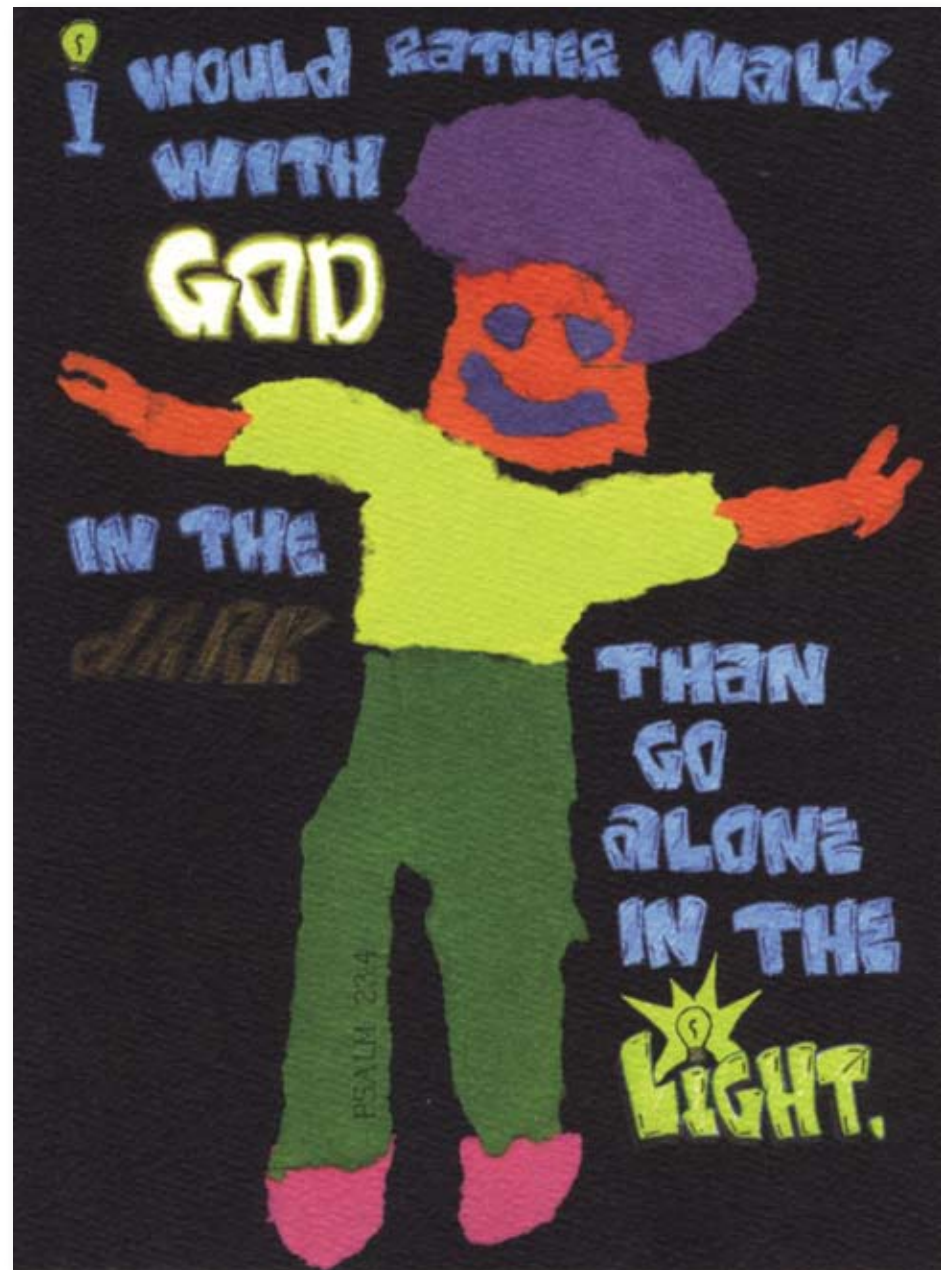
staff and volunteers rounded up the children in front of 1st Historical Presbyterian Church. They told the kids the story of God's parting the Red Sea. The Red Sea was already a bit familiar to everyone—the Kids' Club T-shirts that year featured a drawing of it. And the theme that year was all about God taking care of Israel in the wilderness. Everyone had already learned the theme song: "God Will Make a Way Where There Is No Way." Staff led the youngsters in a chorus of it after recounting the dramatic story, and then piled the kids into the various buses.

They drove the youth down to Neighborhood Ministries' new 8-acre property site. The site had been identified several months earlier, and the \$100,000 dollars needed for the final deposit had just been received in June. Neighborhood Ministries had a new home...but a lot of work lay ahead. One task that had been completed was an architect's rendering of how the first four acres of the site would be developed. The kids would enjoy a two-story classroom, huge multi-purpose room, ball fields, a bike shop, a commercial kitchen, and much more. Kit had several copies of the drawings made, and volunteers passed these out to the children as they sweltered on the bus. They arrived at the site and everyone poured out.

"Children, do you remember the story—God will make a way?" Kit asked them. "Do you remember me telling you that we wouldn't be homeless forever? Today we are seeing our new home." And she held up one of the big drawings depicting the future Neighborhood Center.

"We had had to unlock a big gate upon arrival—the property then was surrounded by razor wire fence," Kit describes. It was also littered with trash: "40 dental chairs that had been rotting out in the sun for twenty years, old WWII vehicles that were scattered about, huge grain silos tipped over, making the area look like a graveyard for abandoned spaceships."

So the kids stood there in 110-degree heat, staring at what was in front of them, then at the drawing. "They looked at the 20-foot-high mounds of sawdust and ancient railroad



ties; then they looked at the picture. They looked at the spaceship graveyard, and looked at the picture. And most were looking dazed and confused," Kit recalls. "But then this one little boy came up to me, and he had his picture in front of him, and he said, "Kit, I can see it. It's gonna be so beautiful."

Kids make greeting cards to earn money for the new Neighborhood Center