



MIRACLE ON FILLMORE

*“Beyond all that we could ask
or imagine”* 2001-2007

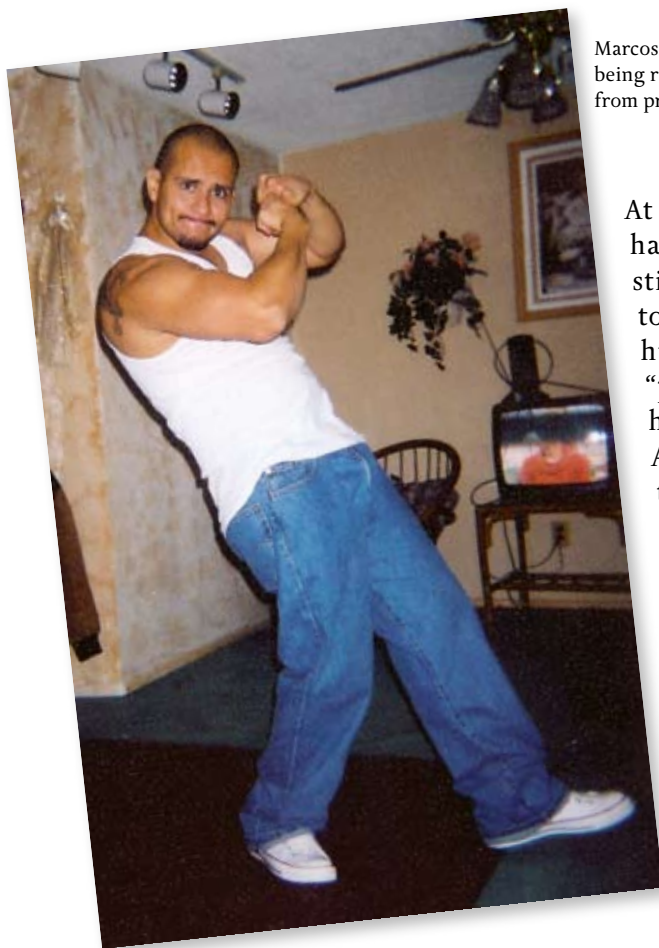


Marcos Marquez hid out from police for over a week after stabbing David Carrasco. He'd done it after “church”—Neighborhood Ministries’ Monday night high school gathering—and it felt like sacrilege. He'd stained his hands with blood. And he'd carved his gang's symbols into David's back—a boy who wasn't even active in the rival gangs, who wasn't really an enemy. Now, after many tortured days and nights, the guilt was just too much. Marcos turned himself into the police. He was 17 years old.

Marcos was sentenced to 11 years in prison, ending up where his father had been for most of his childhood: behind bars. His path had led exactly where his 5th grade teacher had predicted when, in front of Marcos, she had asked Kit Danley, “Why do you waste your time on this boy? He's garbage!”

But the day that teacher gave up on Marcos, Kit hadn't. Kit told the woman that her comment was the grossest thing she'd ever heard a teacher say. “I love this kid,” Kit said. “And he has potential.”

Marcos after
being released
from prison



At Marcos' sentencing hearing, Kit still hadn't given up on Marcos. She could still remember the little boy who'd come to Kids' Club with a genuine spiritual hunger. A boy who, at age 11, defined "propitiation" by pointing to each of his fingers: "G-R-A-C-E - "God Rescues At Christ's Expense." A boy who, as she told the judge that day, "was more than this one horrible act."

Marcos wrote Kit often from jail. Despite her many pleas to him to turn away from his homeboys to Christ, he refused. Finally, one day in frustration he sent her word: "My loyalty is with the gang." His correspondence ceased.

By 2001, though, Christ began to win out in Marcos' life. That summer, he mailed a meditation he'd composed in his cell to his friends at Neighborhood Ministries. It was titled, "Please Hear What I'm Not Saying!" In it, he admitted:

"I wear a mask—I wear a thousand masks...I give you the impression that I am in command, and I need no one. But don't believe me. Beneath my varying and ever-concealing mask dwells the real me, in confusion, fear, and aloneness...I hide behind my sophisticated mask...to shield me from—the Glance That Knows. But such a Glance is precisely my salvation, my only salvation...That is, if it is followed by acceptance; if it is followed by Love."

For Marcos, enduring guilt for his crime created a desperate need for forgiveness—to be fully known, but also fully accepted. He feared the combination was impossible. He visited with Kit and his old friend Victor at The Neighborhood Center when he was released from prison in 2004. "I don't think there's forgiveness for me," he told them sadly. They assured him of their love and forgiveness, prayed for him, and spoke earnestly of the grace of Jesus that

super-abounds over even the worst of our sins. For the next two years, a spiritual battle waged. But Love prevailed.

One special day, Marcos returned to the Neighborhood Center to see his friends. "There was something different about him," Kit recalls. "A light shining from his eyes. I instantly remembered the scripture about the eyes being the lamp of the body. I had never really witnessed this truth so clearly until just right then."

She asked Marcos: "Have you made a new "yes" to God, telling him something important ... like He can have your life, something like that?" He smiled in reply.

"We prayed for him, welcomed him home, helped him get connected to GED, stuff like that," Kit says. A week before Kids' Club, Marcos told her: "If my story can't be used to help others, it will only haunt me. I want to see it help kids." She invited him to be a Kids' Club counselor. "He showed up everyday, calling if his ride was late and then finding a way there. His boys were really receptive to his leadership, and his gentleness with them was really worth seeing," she says. "It was unbelievable to watch him."

At the end of the first week of Kids' Club, Marcos decided he would be publicly baptized on "Lake Day" during the following week. It would mean standing up and confessing Christ's Lordship. It would mean taking the masks off. But grace had sunk in, and Marcos was ready.

The day before Lake Day, Vanessa Cisneros, an "old-timer" from Marcos' early days with Neighborhood Ministries, was wondering if a grace could be found to heal her. She'd never known her father and her mother was a drug addict. One day when she was just 13, she came home to an empty house. There was no sign of her mom. "[When my mom left] I got into a lot of trouble," Vanessa says. She ended up in jail quickly. There, "many horrible things happened." She was sprayed with mace and she got herself thrown into "the hole" (solitary confinement) for 30 days. But it was in prison that she began talking to God. "I could have stayed locked up, but I wanted to make something of myself, not live behind

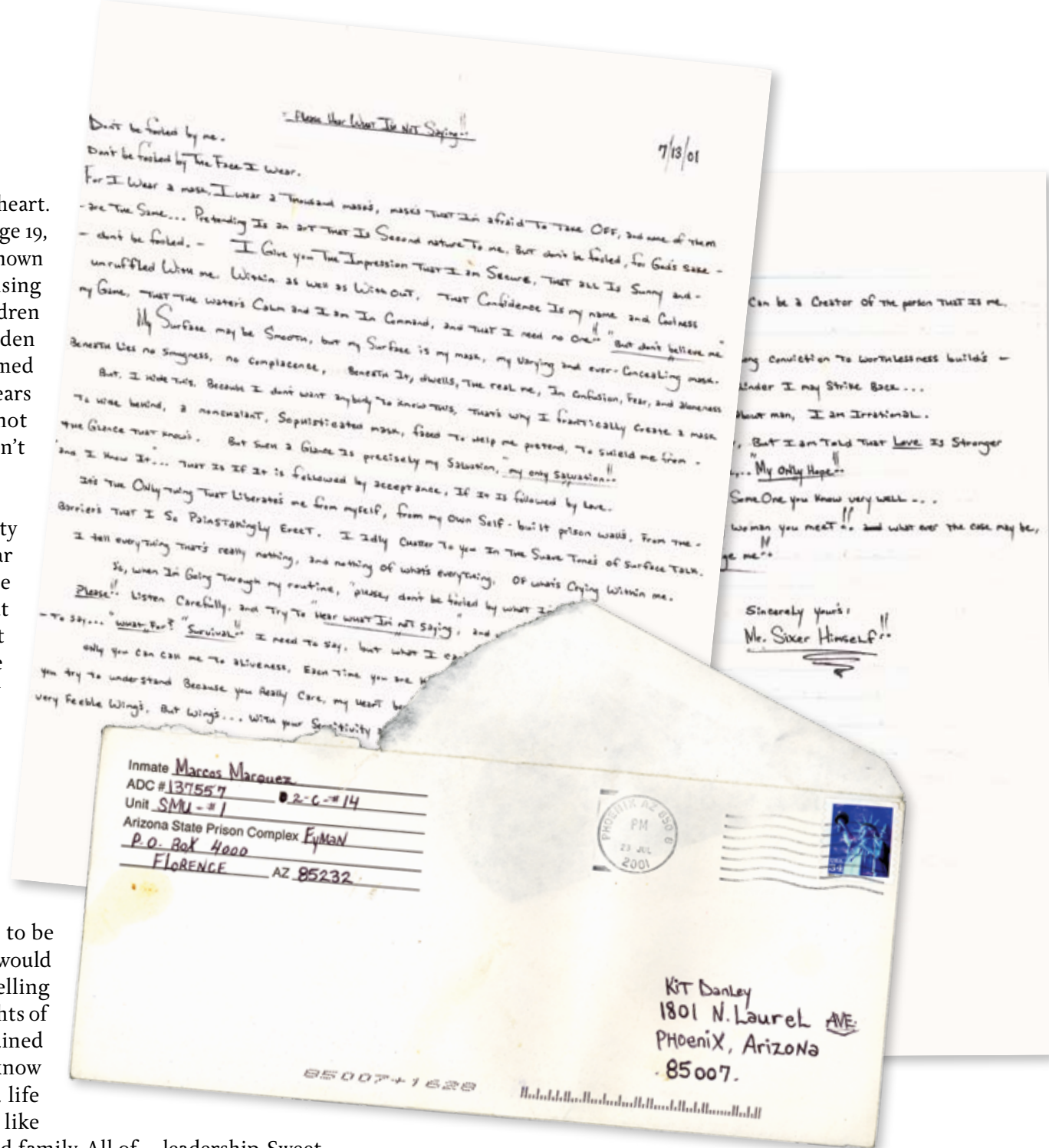
bars like an animal.” She asked God into her heart. When Vanessa was released from prison at age 19, she gravitated back to the ministry that had shown her love as a child. It wasn’t all that surprising to find her at Kids’ Club, watching the children nailing paper confessions onto a big wooden cross. But regrets over her crimes overwhelmed her. She walked up to Kit and Marcos with tears in her eyes and told them: “The cross is not enough for me. I can’t be forgiven. You don’t know all that I have done.”

Brennan Manning once wrote that Christianity is about one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread. Marcos fixed his gaze on Vanessa and replied: “I used to feel that way. It tortured me for over eleven years. But I chose to believe that even as evil as I’ve been, God could forgive me and take away my guilt, and I could be new and different and feel peace.”

On Friday, July 7, 2006, two beggars named Marcos and Vanessa—considered precious treasures by the One who Sees—were baptized in the chilly waters at Canyon Lake. Vanessa spoke words reflecting what so many of the “old timers” feel: “I wanted to be baptized today because when I was in jail, I would have dreams of coming to Kids’ Club and telling kids not to choose the bad way. Those thoughts of helping other kids kept me alive,” she explained to the hundreds of listening children. “I know that when I am baptized, I can put my old life behind me, smile all the time, and be free like a bird. Today I am here with you, my second family. All of you kids are like my second family.”

At that special Kids’ Club of 2006, Marcos was one of 33 young people from the neighborhood who served in

leadership. Sweet second graders and suspicious middle schoolers could talk to Victor or Luis or Marcos or Tony, to Dora or Panda or Irene, and learn that their stories were already known. These young adult leaders had already experienced all that these kids were living now—the instability, the violence, the ache for parental love, the



“Please hear what I’m NOT saying”—
 A letter from Marcos dedicated to
 Kit and everyone at Neighborhood
 Ministries.



The miracle of a life transformed—
Marcos gets baptized at Lake Day
in 2006

pull of the streets. The first generation of Neighborhood Ministries' kids had grown up and was now giving back. God had raised up an army of indigenous leaders who'd been to hell and back, and was using them now to point the second generation to a different path.

Isaiah 61 explains the principle of indigenous leadership that is a heartbeat of Neighborhood Ministries. It speaks of God preaching His good news to the poor, bestowing on the deadened a crown of beauty, on the grieving the oil of gladness, and on the afflicted and despairing, a new song. And it prophesies that those once crushed and shamed will become “oaks of righteousness” through His transforming grace, and that they will “rebuild the ancient ruins and

restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities.” The text is coming true at Neighborhood Ministries. It is alive in the ministry of Victor Lopez and Irene Thomas and Marcos Marquez and dozens more “oaks of righteousness” whose lives God has redeemed; whose lives God is using to renew the barrio. It's the story of God doing more than seems imaginable. It's His miracle on Fillmore. ●



Prayer

We are desperately dependent on prayer, knowing our work is impossible without it, and rejoicing that through it we recognize God's ability to do beyond all we can ask or think.

“I know that when I am baptized I can
put my old life behind me.” (inset)

