



INCARNATION

“To be the presence of Jesus Christ...” 1986-1990

The day began as a fairly routine one for Mike McBride, an electric serviceman with SRP, Phoenix’s main power company. It was his job to do field inspections. One call on the west side, to the home of Jorge and Rosa Macias, put him in a particularly familiar environment: meeting an immigrant with limited English. Mike and his wife Belinda, members at Open Door Fellowship (ODF) since 1983, were heavily involved in the Hispanic ministry. Belinda volunteered as a coordinator at the Food Bank, where she liked nothing more than trying to establish a rapport with the women who came for aid. For the McBrides and the rest of the team, the Hispanic outreach was about evangelism as much as meeting practical needs. Food Bank volunteers were trained to share not just bread, but the Bread of Life. Toward that end, Mike, Belinda, and other volunteers studied Spanish and boned up on their Latin American history. Then they started paying home visits to people who’d come to the Food Bank for help. In time, the home visits and the love shown through the Food Bank bore fruit: small women’s Bible study groups emerged.



Jorge and Rosalinda Macias

So when Rosa answered Mike's knock on the door, he was glad when he discovered he could practice his Spanish with her—after all, this would help him in future follow-up conversations with Food Bank visitors. He and Rosa struck up an easy conversation, Mike remembers. “She was a very outgoing person, very friendly,” he says. Despite her limited English and his schoolbook Spanish, the two connected. Mike told Rosa that he was a churchgoer and that his church had Bible studies for Spanish speakers. And then he realized that God had appointed this call that day for something far more important than inspecting the

home's power source when Rosa told him, “My husband and I would like to learn more about the Bible.” Clearly, God wanted to shine a light in the Macias home far more powerful than the energy supplied by SRP! Delighted, Mike quickly invited Rosa to come to the Spanish-speaking Bible study and to bring Jorge with her.

The Macias family and the McBride family started meeting weekly to examine the Word. “I remember Jorge always being curious. He had a lot of questions,” Mike recalls. “He was never cynical or skeptical, He just had a sincere interest in God.” After meeting for some months, both Rosa and Jorge gave themselves to Christ and to a new life in Him. A simple house call—Mike showing up as “Jesus with skin on” at the Macias' front door—had reaped eternal consequences. But God's plan included even more than heavenly rewards. For in future days, God was going to make Jorge Macias His instrument on earth to lead dozens of Latinos in Phoenix to faith in what years later would become the Spanish-speaking congregation of Neighborhood Ministries.

While the Neighborhood Ministries' volunteers entered their urban neighbors' homes in the early years with something to teach—the message of Jesus—they showed up with even more to learn. “We were always getting exposed to things we knew we were clueless about, like the gangs and the teen pregnancies, the prostitution and the kids without shoes,” Kit Danley remembers. “The learning curve was so high. Every conversation, every apartment, every child, every part of this community was so intriguing and interesting and overwhelming to us. It was our first cross-cultural experience—and I'm sure we were making many mistakes!” In the end, though, the mistakes were inconsequential, and the neighbors were forgiving. What mattered was being there. That was what incarnational ministry was all about: showing up, and being the presence of Jesus.

“The idea was not just to minister to the city, but to become part of the neighborhood,” Wayne Danley explains. “To share in the perils of the neighborhood. To deal with the

Crowded families live in small dwellings in our neighborhood.

dangers and the people; to get to know them as friends, as neighbors. To have people into your house and your house would be like their house.” The approach, he continues, “takes its paradigm from Jesus himself. Jesus didn’t stand on a mountaintop and preach at us. He walked with us. He talked with us. He was here.”

Being there was as important for the team members as it was for the families visited. The home visits were chances for the Neighborhood Ministries team to begin really seeing, really listening to what the community was saying. The education was often painful. Team members found 9-year-old Marcos Marquez living in a broken-down house across from University Park, along with his mom and seven younger siblings. Marcos’ dad was in prison for most of his youth. His mom was emotionally weighted down with the family’s depressing, hand-to-mouth existence. She was a regular at the Food Bank, staving off her kids’ hunger with the free groceries. Claudia Sanchez, seven, was living in a cramped upstairs apartment where every single evening brought a living nightmare of sexual abuse by her predatory stepfather. “John-John” Lopez, 11-going-on-25, was already running in a gang. He and his little brother, Victor, lived with their parents



MEMORIES OF THE FIRST KIDS’ CLUB

by Marcos Marquez

I remember it as if it were yesterday.

The way children of the barrio were gathering at University Park, the singing, the laughter, running around and playing games. Me and my three sisters were looking at them from afar, sitting on the bleachers on the other side of the old baseball field, eagerly waiting for the moment someone would come and invite us to join in on all this action. It was being hosted by people who I had never seen in the barrio before. Nonetheless, their presence was very welcomed and enjoyed.

I remember one of the mothers of the children that were at this gathering seeing me and my sisters sitting on the bleachers. She ran over to us and asked us, “Aren’t you guys going to come join in?” I said to the woman, “What is it that’s going on over there?” She said, “They’re a bunch of people from some church around here who are letting the children know about God. Wanna come?” We said, “Sure.” I was only 9 years old at the time and I had visited a couple churches by that time but for some reason I could not explain why these particular people seemed different. Instead of picking us up for church, they brought Jesus to us along with a lot of fun activities as well.

One of my favorite activities that day was designing and putting together a little racing car that I built from scratch. I ended up racing it against other kids’ cars later on that day. I don’t remember exactly what the sermon was about that day. But what I do remember is the sincere friendliness that these people extended to me and everyone else that day. The most important message was that Jesus loved us.

“The idea was not just to minister to the city, but to become part of the neighborhood. To share in its perils. To deal with the dangers and the people; to get to know them as friends, as neighbors.”

—Wayne Danley

and two other siblings in a one-bedroom apartment always kept dark with boarded-up, aluminum-covered windows. Tony Navarette, only 4, was regularly his dad’s punching bag.

“We as the people of Christ need to be people that see,” says Kit Danley. “Sometimes our culture teaches us not to see these poor neighborhoods, these disenfranchised families.”

Really seeing showed a scale of need that was daunting. But if nothing else, it energized the ministry’s commitment to a holistic vision. Most important was to share the love of Jesus—but that meant attending not just to spiritual ministry, but all the practical aspects of life. “One of

the things that I’m reminded of is that Jesus loves me holistically,” says Billy Thrall, Jr., co-pastor of The Church at the Neighborhood Center. “If I’m going to model His love to someone else, then I can’t compartmentalize my love to them. When we show up in these communities, we realize that people in poverty can’t hide their needs. They show up with holistic needs right in our face, and if we ignore that then we’re denying what God has told us to do, which is to pay attention to them as a whole person.”

From Kit’s initial exposure as a college student to urban ministry, she knew that reaching out to kids was critical—both to be able to impact them at a young age (before it’s too late) and because such ministry to children could be an inroad to reaching their parents. Back in the 1970s, she’d written in her journals about a program at the Neighborhood Church of the Master in Denver called “Summer Club.” It was a 2-week program for kids with singing, recreation, and Bible teaching. Kit longed to do something similar in Phoenix. She shared her vision at a 1988 potluck supper at Open Door. Turns out that God had already put a similar dream into the heart of her fellow parishioner, Sherri Wolfswinkle. Sherri took Kit to lunch to swap stories, and the two agreed to move forward. They planned the first-ever “Neighborhood Kids’ Club.”

Chuckling at the mixture of ignorance and eagerness that characterized the early efforts, Kit recalls: “We went house to house in the neighborhood with about 200 fliers—and not bilingual ones. And we decided to hold the program in the evenings in August. August is monsoon weather here! What were we thinking?” The first year was an adventure in mishaps, but in small miracles, too.

Utilizing youth and adults from Open Door as well as a team of Urban Young Life teens, the ministry ran an evening



Everywhere you looked there were kids we were ready to reach in the neighborhood

“vacation Bible school” type program at University Park at 10th and Van Buren every night for a week. “We had the skit clothes and the backdrop and the whole thing,” Kit describes. “We’d get started and just wait for the kids to come. And they did. They trickled in. But being novices we didn’t know that in the inner city, the kids come with grandmas and moms and their big brothers,” she adds. “So here we had this little smorgasbord of humanity coming to our VBS—and us with nothing but our all English-only stuff! We’d sing these songs like “Leaning on the Lord’s Side”—and all the neighborhood kids would be looking at us and thinking, ‘Where did you get that song?’ and no one was singing with us. Then by the time we’d get to the craft—which was the part they really liked—here would come the wind. And the next thing we knew, the supplies are flying away, the backdrop is blowing over, and it’s starting to rain. I don’t know how we got through that whole week!”

But the kids loved it and the parents appreciated the efforts all these goofy white people were making. Most importantly, in the end the team had a list of participating kids that they could follow up with and visit in their homes. “As best as I can remember,” Kit marvels, “by the end of that summer, we had met some of the key families that we still know to this day.”



These children belonged to a quiet woman who frequented the Food Bank in the early days. A home visit revealed the depth of their poverty: the entire family lived in one room, with one bed. Cooking was done on a hot plate. The father was a trained mechanic, but spent his earnings on drugs. Food Bank volunteers prayed heartily that the mom would allow them into her life, knowing that she was also a victim of domestic violence. After months of prayer and food assistance, the mom finally started attending the new Women’s Bible Study for Spanish-speakers. She came...and became a Christian. She found the courage to leave her abusive husband and eventually moved to Texas, where she continues to walk with Christ.



NEIGHBORHOOD MINISTRIES
CORE VALUE:

Incarnational Model
Imitating Jesus' incarnational ministry, we reside in and intentionally identify with the community we serve, working with fellow residents to define priorities and design creative, culturally relevant and sustainable solutions.