

TRUE STORIES OF HOPE AND INSPIRATION

# Guideposts

DECEMBER 2014



*It came upon a  
midnight  
clear*



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LEFT: CRAIG STIDHAM; MIDDLE: ST. JUDE CHILDREN'S RESEARCH HOSPITAL; RIGHT: LISA VOSPER



# The Least of These

When I was growing up, the mission fields were abroad. Now they're here at home **BY SUSAN DOWNS**, Fort Worth, Texas

A HOT, DRY OCTOBER DAY IN the Texas Panhandle. My husband, David, and I drove through parched, flat sagebrush desert until suddenly we came to a small town on State Highway 287. *Cactus, Texas*, the roadside sign announced.

This was our destination. A dusty main street cut through town, with a few stores, a water tower, some mobile homes. Nothing surprising there. But the people! Women in vibrant Bur-

mese wraps hauled groceries along the sidewalk. Tall, slender Sudanese men clustered on corners, talking and laughing. Asian children played soccer on a dirt lot while their mothers watched nearby. Everywhere, in cars and in the stores and on the streets, Central American families bustled about, some dressed in brightly dyed Guatemalan ponchos and plastic sandals.

David and I had known about the Guatemalans. That's why we were

there. David is a district superintendent for our denomination, the Church of the Nazarene. He'd recently been appointed to oversee the 100 churches of a roughly 100,000-square-mile area in West Texas. We were driving around the district visiting churches, including Cactus's tiny Spanish-speaking congregation, which was comprised largely of Guatemalans.

But what was this virtual United Nations of immigrants doing in a remote

**COMMUNITY** David and Susan Downs (second and third from left) with members of the Cactus Nazarene Ministry Center

Texas town? The whole scene took me aback. It wasn't so much the diversity. In fact, I embrace that. It was the poverty. Many of the mobile homes were rusted and collapsed, their roofs anchored by spare tires. Tumbleweeds blew down the streets. Men slumped in front of a gas station drinking from

PHOTOS BY CRAIG STIDHAM

bottles in brown paper bags. The only spruced-up building on the main drag was a gold-domed mosque.

The worst part was the smell. The air reeked of methane and heaven knew what else. I could hardly breathe as we pulled up to the tiny, rented cinderblock building where our Hispanic congregation met. We'd brought our five-year-old grandson along on this trip. He dubbed the odor "the Cactus smell."

Yet when we got inside, the small sanctuary was packed, every wooden pew filled, with just six inches between pews. The praise band played for nearly an hour. The pastor, a woman named Elda whom my husband had coaxed out of retirement, preached in Spanish to an eager sea of faces. Our grandson found other kids his age and settled in.

**A**FTER THE SERVICE, WE joined the congregation for a traditional Guatemalan meal, in our honor. David and I talked with a number of the English-speaking church members. I was bursting with questions but didn't want to sound rude.

"You're probably wondering what all these different people are doing here in the middle of the Panhandle, aren't you?" a woman said, smiling. I nodded.

"It's the meatpacking plant," she said. "Just outside town. One of the biggest in Texas. They process something like four to five thousand cattle a day. Almost everyone works there. A few years ago, authorities raided the place and found the plant was employing



**REACHING OUT** "Everywhere I look I see evidence of God at work," says Susan, here with Mama Alisa, a church member.

huge numbers of illegal immigrants. After that, the company switched to recruiting refugees who have legal permission to live in the United States. We have folks from Guatemala, Myanmar, Somalia, Sudan. Just about every war-torn country. Most of the Somalis are Muslim, as are the Burmese. But there are some Christians too, particularly among the Sudanese and Guatemalans. They come here for worship, to one of several Protestant congregations that rent this building, or to the Catholic parish. That's about it for churches."

While David continued talking, I took our grandson outside to play. The odor of the packing plant and feed lot was overpowering, but the kids didn't

seem to mind. Watching them run around a dirt lot, I tried to sort out my feelings. I grew up in small-town Oklahoma, down the street from the house where Garth Brooks, the country music star, was raised. My childhood was about as All-American as you can get.

Yet I knew America had changed, even in small towns like Cactus. David and I had served as missionaries in South Korea for five years. I'd also traveled extensively working for an international adoption agency in Fort Worth. I was comfortable around different cultures. And I knew in my heart the church exists to serve those in need. But Cactus overwhelmed me. The need seemed so huge. And immigration is such a hot-button issue in Texas. Was it really a good idea to get involved?

David finished visiting and we got back in the car. We prayed as we headed toward our next destination.

"Lord, this town, this church, need you in a big way," David said. "Show us how to bring the resources of our denomination to serve this place. We remember your words in Scripture: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'"

Less than an hour later, David's cell phone rang. "Hey, Harley Man," said the caller. David rode a motorcycle, so that was his nickname in our previous district. "It's Ron, from Ohio. Guess what? I'm a rich man! They found gas and oil on my land. I just felt moved to call you up and ask if you have any projects you could use forty thousand dollars for. You name it, I'll send you a check."

I felt a tingling sensation. Whatever doubts I'd wrestled with, standing outside the little church in Cactus, vanished. It was obvious God himself was opening a door for us. David told Ron we sure could put that money to good use. We spent the rest of the drive dreaming up projects we could start up.

A short time later, David returned to Cactus along with Sam, a fellow Nazarene from Amarillo, to talk with residents and community leaders and get a feel for how the church could help. The main priority was a building, both for worship and to house community-service projects such as ESL classes, free legal aid and health clinics.

**D**AVID WANTED TO INCLUDE everyone in Cactus, so he visited with Rasheed, a Muslim leader of the Somali community. Rasheed told him he'd be pleased to see the church expand its offerings. He suggested not putting the word *church* on the sign, so no one felt inadvertently excluded.

"What if we call it a ministry center?" David asked.

"Perfect," said Rasheed.

A plan took shape. We'd solicit donations and buy one of those warehouse-style building kits, then ask church volunteers to help put it up. David and Sam filmed video footage of Cactus and made a short movie to show at the Nazarene district convention the following spring.

It seemed like everyone we told about Cactus wanted to donate. Not only that, but Sam's daughter Jenni



and her husband, Vito, pastors of a Nazarene church in Wisconsin, phoned out of the blue to say that the minute they heard about our project, they felt called to serve in Cactus. “I know it sounds crazy,” Jenni said. “But Vito and I were missionaries in Guatemala. We’re fluent in Spanish and we really feel like the Lord is calling us. If there’s work we can do there, let us know.”

**S**OON WE WERE FIELDING OFFERS from volunteer work teams to help erect the 9,000-square-foot steel building—they raised walls, welded, installed electricity. Vito and Jenni moved to Cactus and immediately set about partnering with the local school district to serve free lunches to kids who go hungry during the summer when the school cafeteria is closed. Elda retired (again) and Vito took over as interim pastor of the Guatemalan congregation. A Sudanese man named Chol, whom David had met on his filmmaking trip the previous fall, encouraged other Sudanese families to come to a newly formed African church.


Chol was one of the “Lost Boys” of Sudan, orphaned in that country’s civil war. Only he and an older cousin escaped when troops destroyed their village. Yet you couldn’t imagine a man more filled with God’s spirit. Today, Chol is a ministerial student and assistant lay pastor of the African Nazarene church in Cactus, working alongside a Sudanese pastor and church planter named Michael.

The African congregation meets at

the YMCA while everyone waits for the finishing touches on the ministry center, which still needs heating and air-conditioning. Already we’ve been using the building for occasional “free-market” days, when we turn the main hall into a bazaar of donated food, clothing and other household items. When it’s finished, the beige-and-green metal-sided Cactus Nazarene Ministry Center will have worship space for a number of different ethnic congregations, ESL classrooms, legal-aid meeting rooms and even temporary housing for Nazarene missionaries who are serving short-term stints in Cactus.

Recently, David and I stood under a rare shade tree at the site of our new ministry center, surrounded by Africans. We shared in their excited conversation about the ministry center’s progress and potential. I thought back to my first day in Cactus, that shell-shocked feeling as I gazed around at the seemingly desolate town.

Now Cactus seemed anything but desolate. Everywhere I looked I saw evidence of God at work.

Yes, I thought, *America has changed*. But when Jesus tells us to serve “the least of these,” he doesn’t distinguish between languages or nationalities. “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger, and you took me in,” our Lord says. It’s that simple. So in Cactus, Texas, that’s what we do. 

For more on this story, see FAMILY ROOM



## FAMILY ROOM

MEET THE PEOPLE IN OUR PAGES



**R**ick Jackson (*The Envelope*, page 52) wanted to do more than give 100-dollar bills to foster-care kids each Christmas. So when he was presented with the idea for FaithBridge, a church-based foster-support program, he jumped on board. “It doesn’t make foster care an all-or-nothing proposition,” Rick says. “There are ways to get involved without becoming a foster parent.” The program works by having churches create a foster-care ministry. FaithBridge guides those who want to become foster families through the red tape, and the church community helps them once a child is placed in their home. Each child has a “care coordinator” to organize available support. “You can buy a child clothes or babysit when the foster parents have a date night,” says Rick. “It allows you to be part of the solution.” And if a child returns to their bio-

**JACKSON** Rick hits the mini links with kids from FaithBridge.

logical family, they’ll know they have the support of their foster family and church. FaithBridge has already recruited more than 200 foster families and 400 volunteers throughout Georgia. For more information, visit [faithbridgefostercare.org](http://faithbridgefostercare.org).

**W**e drew caricatures together in the Chicago area,” says **Michelle Mahnke** (*A Very Vegas Christmas*, page 62) of meeting her husband, Doug, who’s now an artist for DC Comics. Before they met and married, she’d been enjoying what she calls her “wandering years,” traveling the world to draw and attend college. She’s added oil paints to her palette, and recently painted a pair of seraphim in oil and gold leaf that are hanging in a Twin Cities

MICHAEL A. SCHWARZ

# The True STORY of One Woman's Miraculous Encounter with JESUS

Eighteen years after a tragic workplace accident, "crooked lady" Ema McKinley experienced an extraordinary healing miracle when Jesus appeared in her room on Christmas Eve.



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church. Michelle and Doug passed their artistic flair on to their seven children, who can't wait to make cut-out cookies this Christmas. "They love decorating!" says Michelle. For more from Michelle, and to check out her art, visit her blog at [michellemahnke.com](http://michellemahnke.com).

**I**t's really quite wonderful," says television legend **Marlo Thomas** (*The Patron Saint of Hopeful*

## Guideposts Outreach



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**REV. CATHERINE PERNEL**  
Canonsburg Hospital chaplain  
Canonsburg, Pennsylvania

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**THOMAS** Marlo and children at St. Jude's

*Causes*, page 59) of St. Jude Children's Research Hospital's year-end Thanks and Giving campaign. Created in 2004 by Marlo, her sister, Terre, and her brother, Tony, the campaign starts the day after Thanksgiving and gives holiday shoppers a chance to donate to St. Jude by adding an extra dollar or two to their bill at participating stores. "We've made it very easy for people to give—we're joining them at the mall." Fundraising for St. Jude gave Marlo another great idea. "As I traveled, I kept hearing women say they felt stuck," she says. She started a section on her website to encourage women who've had to start over after their kids left for college or they lost their jobs. It struck such a chord, Marlo decided to turn it into a book, *It Ain't Over: Reinventing Your Life—And Revitalizing Your Dreams—Anytime*,

ST. JUDE CHILDREN'S RESEARCH HOSPITAL

at *Any Age*. Get updates on Marlo's projects at [marlothomas.com](http://marlothomas.com).

**I**'ve learned to change the subject when one of my daughters asks me which school's flag is on the flagpole in our yard," says **George Barnes** (*A Heart Like Cubby's*, page 44) of the new rivalry in his household. He's thankful Ella's Virginia Tech Hokies and Caitlin's University of Connecticut Huskies don't face each other in sports—he gets the mascots mixed up as it is. With the girls away at school, George and Cubby spend a lot of quality time together. "We have two marvelous dog parks nearby. Cubby's a little too big for the small-dog park, and a little small for the big-dog park, but he always makes friends." The family has stayed in touch with Home for Good Dog Rescue, the organization through which they adopted Cubby. Earlier this fall, George met the woman who sheltered Cubby in Georgia before his trip to New Jersey. "Back then, he was missing fur, had a rash and was afraid of people," George says. "She was overwhelmed to see him so healthy and loving just one year later—she got down to hug and kiss him."

**T**here's one memory from her years of missionary work that **Susan Downs** (*The Least of These*,

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page 38) will never forget. “I worked with an orphanage in Seoul, South Korea, and took up a collection of gifts for the kids one Christmas. People donated so many gifts, we had to carry them to the orphanage in big trash bags,” Susan says. “But when the orphanage director opened the first bag, he found trash! We’d accidentally packed our garbage!” Between trips with her husband, David, to Cactus, Susan works as Guideposts Books’ fiction-series editor. This month marks the release of *Mum’s the Word*, the latest in the *Secrets of the Blue Hill Library* series. Susan got into editing early. Her parents owned three small newspapers in Oklahoma and gave her a unique chore. “When



**DOWN** Susan and her husband, David

I was five, my dad paid me a nickel for each error I found in the papers,” Susan says. “Eventually, I earned a raise and got a dime per correction.” Learn more about the Cactus ministry center at [cactusministries.org](http://cactusministries.org).

CRAIG STIDHAM

## Credit Card Debt? Solutions that can help you get out of debt.

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Toni Hill  
CUA STAFF WRITER

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