



KEVIN FANKERSLEY PHOTO

By Krista Petty

If children aren't dancing in the community, then something is wrong," says Omar Reyes, community development director at NorthWood Church, Keller, TX (www.northwoodchurch.org). Through his ministry, Reyes is passionate about mobilizing the church and its resources to make a transformational impact in the local community, especially in the lives of children.

Why wouldn't children be dancing in a community? Reyes believes a majority of children lack the security in their lives that they need to feel free enough to dance and to just ... be kids. He thinks that what makes children so insecure is that they lack a crucial part of God's design for families: fathers.

"Statistics show that most social ills can be traced back to fatherlessness," Reyes says. According to the National Center for Fathering (*see sidebar, p. 43*), when fathers are absent, children suffer. Fatherlessness is linked to poverty, high school dropout rates, crime, adolescent drug use and teenage pregnancy. These problems have become systemic, passed from one generation to the

next, creating a legacy of fatherlessness.

As he studied the scriptures and researched the statistics, Reyes says he began to understand the problem of fatherlessness as a spiritual need as well as a social problem. He learned part of this lesson while preaching in a Belize prison to young black men.

"I was preaching to them about the father God and the love of the father,"

he says. "God just stopped me there in the middle of my talk and helped me realize that they did

They did not connect with the message because they did not understand what a father is.

not understand what I was saying about fathers. They did not connect with the message because they did not understand what a father is."

Instead of continuing to preach, Omar asked the young men how many of them knew their fathers and how many had had bad experiences with their fathers? "Ninety-five percent raised their hands to bad experiences," he says.

Reyes wondered how God could reveal himself when children aren't exposed to positive fathering. "What God showed me is

that he wants us (Christians) to express the heart of the father to kids,” he says.

Reyes believes the local church take on that kind of role by beginning very simply.

“How do my own kids know that I am their dad? I feed them, I clothe them, I take

care of them,” he says. “The physical aspect of this is very important. I realized that as we provide for the physical and emotional needs of children, they understand God as father. That will impact them forever.”

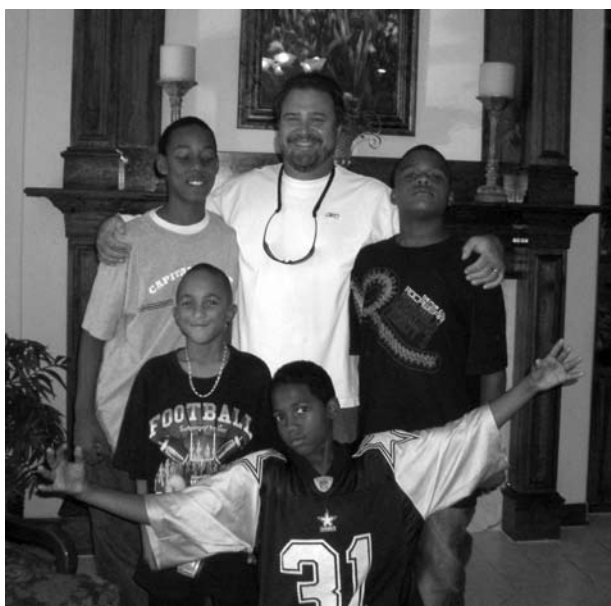
Matthew 5:16 reads, “In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (*emphasis added*). Showing good works to children is precisely why Reyes and his team at Northwood commit their lives to projects like the Park Vista After School Program. “It’s all about showing and doing good works so they can see God as Father,” he says.

NO ORDINARY DAY

It’s an ordinary school day in Keller, a suburban community north of Fort Worth, but to Mark Krynski, no day should be ordinary. He says every day is a chance to make a difference.

“I am a businessman with a software company. But God gave me a wake-up call on 9/11 and I realized I wasn’t in control. I decided to go find out who is in control and start listening to Him,” says Krynski. That search landed him at Northwood Church and led him to become a volunteer with church’s Park Vista After School program, located in the recreation room of a town-home/apartment complex.

Although Keller, with a population of



Mark Krynski (center) mentors young boys in the after-school program by taking them on his family outings, such as to the Texas State Fair.

about 37,000, is not known for after-school problems, an undeniable need surfaced. When a developer purchased land in 2000 in the downtown area of Fort Worth to build a warehouse/retail center, families in the razed apartment com-

plex were displaced.

“When the developer built this center, they moved an entire African American apartment project out of the city to the suburbs,” many of them moving to Keller, says Krynski. “The church is trying to help make this work and improve the lives of these kids.”

The after-school program started in fall 2001 as a small, one-day-a-week project.

Twice the church almost closed the program due to lack of volunteers and uncertainty of its effectiveness. When Reyes came on staff at Northwood, he brought with him his passion for children’s needs and some fresh ideas.

“When I first came to Northwood I found Mark, who was really doing something. He was sort of like a lone ranger out there doing stuff in the community, taking care of kids every Friday for almost three years through this after-school program,” Reyes says.

As Reyes became acclimated with the community, he found another after-school program in town called Love Never Fails, associated with Calvary Chapel Church. “I saw how through partnership, we could make a program 10 times the size,” Reyes says. “We didn’t push Love Never Fails to accept our apartment complex at all. We simply thought we would partner wherever they wanted to work.”

Reyes talked with Krynski about the

changes that such a partnership would bring and they committed the possibility to prayer. Not long afterward, Reyes received a phone call from the Calvary Chapel pastor about the location for the new after school partnership. “He said he had driven by a place he thought would be the right fit for a full time program with Love Never Fails. It was our Park Vista! Their program adopted our Park Vista program, brought a teacher full time and we brought our existing relationships into the program. God just opened that door,” says Reyes.

GROWING IN PARTNERSHIP

Today, the program is a full, five-day-a-week after-school program assisting kids with homework, and providing incentives like trips, camps and activities for good behavior and good grades. To launch the expansion, the apartment complex management advertised the after-school program in the community newsletter and held a kick-off event. Sixty kids, pre-K through 8th grade, are now enrolled. Krynski and a full-time program director from Love Never Fails help provide a moral compass for the kids in the program through Bible studies and stories and personal connections.

Along with the relationships formed in the program, Krynski mentors the young boys by taking them on his own family outings and adventures. They most recently took an 11-year-old boy to the Texas State Fair. “It was his first time to ever visit a fair like that,” says Krynski. Through camping trips and weekly rides to church, Krynski helps them see glimpses of what a father is like – hoping they will come

to know their heavenly father.

In the past, the program took a break during the summer, but in summer 2006, it extended to a half day, providing stability and care for the kids at the complex while school was not in session. “Seventy percent of the volunteers came from Northwood Church,” Reyes says. “We mobilized 300 people that first summer from 12 to 5 p.m., five days a week.”

Northwood continues to find ways to enhance and build the partnership. “Our church brought on a part-time support staff member to support Love Never Fails. This after-school program is an example of how effective a partnership and commitment for children can be,” he says. “We accomplished a 500 percent increase – going from one day a week to five – because of our partnership with Love Never Fails.”

MAY NEVER SEE RESULTS

But working with children, especially those in the community who may come and go out of a program, can be frustrating work. “People don’t always get involved because they do not see immediate results. You have to pour your life into kids and realize that you may never see the results,” Reyes says.

Born and raised in Belize, Reyes says Canadian missionaries had a huge influence on his life. “I would go in Monday and stay all week at the mission, like a boarding school. Those missionaries had me cutting wood and baking bread. They poured their life into me. And yet, I grew up rebellious, and most of them don’t know what’s going on with me now – working for a church!” Reyes’ own life is testimony that

NATIONAL CENTER FOR FATHERING

Founded in 1990, the National Center for Fathering seeks to improve the well-being of children by inspiring and equipping men to be involved more effectively in the lives of children.

Their nation-wide programs includes:

- WATCH D.O.G.S, a school safety initiative that trains and encourages dads and father-figures to volunteer in schools
- Seminars on fathering
- Specific resources on urban fathering
- Fathering Court, an innovative alternative to prosecution and incarceration for men with significant child support arrearages.
- Today’s Father radio and podcasts

www.fathers.com

to change a generation means pouring out yourself and leaving the results up to God.

Reyes concludes, "Abraham should be our example of what it means to pour your life out and change a nation – even when you don't see immediate results. You cannot care for glory if you are going to work with kids. And we must remember that it is not the work that pleases God. It's because of their faith that God commended Abraham, Moses, David, Samuel and others.

"Even if we don't see immediate results in serving children, we have faith that God will bring the results and change a nation and a generation who will dance!"

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

⇒ Understanding God as Father and accepting his deep love for you could be helped or hindered by experiences with your earthly father. How have your family relationships played a part in forming your acceptance of God's love as paternal?

⇒ Single mothers struggle with many challenges. How could such an after-school ministry expand to provide additional services to them?

⇒ Are the children in your community dancing? How could your church make a difference for the next generation?

FIND OUT MORE ...

www.leadnet.org/Resources_Downloads.asp

Leadership Network offers a number of free downloadable concept papers on various community ministry topics through its Externally Focused Leadership Community, including "How Externally Focused Churches Minister to Children: The Power of Serving Kids in Your Community."

www.afterschoolalliance.org/about_us.cfm

The Afterschool Alliance is a nonprofit organization dedicated to raising awareness of the importance of afterschool programs and advocating for quality, affordable programs for all children. Its site offers research and resources for how to get involved in after-school issues and programs.

www.cefonline.com/component/option,comrepository/Itemid,223/func,select/id,25/

The Child Evangelism Fellowship Web site offers free resources and curriculum for faith-based after-school programs, including tips for working with children across cultural barriers.

Krista Petty is a coach and writer for the Externally Focused Church movement, encouraging churches to leave the building and transform communities. This article is an excerpt from her paper "How Externally Focused Churches Minister to Children: The Power of Serving Kids in Your Community,"



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The Goodness of God

Thomas Merton

To be grateful is to recognize the love of God in everything He has given us – and He has given us everything.... Gratitude therefore takes nothing for granted, is never unresponsive, is constantly awakening to new wonder and to praise of the goodness of God.

For the grateful person knows that God is good, not by hearsay but by experience.

Source: Thoughts in Solitude