

Homelessness, hope and an 8-year-old girl: Philosophically Speaking

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By Phill Courtney

Guest columnist

Maureen O'Keefe Hodge is an optimist. She'd have to be, because she's lived in what was once considered the most dangerous and desperate slum in all of Honduras, and still thinks that the world can change for the better.

As for me, my helping of hope happened earlier this month when I sat down with Maureen for a chat. That day, Maureen had brought along her adopted Honduran daughter, Abby, 8, who's also a part of that hope. But we'll be getting to that.

This column began with an email. Maureen had written to tell me she liked a previous column I'd done in July about the homeless, and wanted to tell me about what she was doing.

In early 2000, Maureen, who's now in her early 40s, helped start up a nonprofit organization called Building a Generation. She'd also married. But then she asked herself a familiar question: "What's it all about?" Yes, she and her husband had all they could want, but what about those who didn't?

For as long as she can remember, Maureen's been concerned about those less fortunate, and that's when that slum in Honduras comes into the picture. She and her husband talked, then decided to go down to live and work amid a community built on an old city dump, where murders seemed to happen every other day.

She and her husband set to work, striving to alleviate some of these squalid conditions, and it was during this time that a baby girl came into their lives in what Maureen describes as a "miraculous" way. They wanted to adopt, but this called for more of that positive thinking. Adopting children from Third World countries can be a convoluted process. Red tape and fears of child trafficking complicate the process, although the need is pressing.

But, as you've probably figured out by now, Maureen is no quitter. She took her crusade for orphaned children all the way to the top, using her connections to land an appointment with the wife of the Honduran president, and one of the results of that meeting was sitting next to me at the table. Eventually she was even able to help rewrite some of the nation's adoption laws, and start a nonprofit to help orphaned children in Honduras.

About a year ago, Maureen returned to live in Redlands when she became the executive director of KEYS (Knowledge and Education for your Success), a new nonprofit affiliated with the

Housing Authority of the County of San Bernardino, which has been helping to house the poor since 1941.

“The typical way,” she explains about low-income housing, “is if the income’s low enough, you just get the housing for year after year and there’s no incentive to move on. So this Housing Authority is looking at it very differently.”

That’s where Maureen comes in, working to make sure there’s follow-up. “KEYS is not just saying ‘OK, good luck in your life.’ We’re actually going to put social services around you to get you stable, and then get you on a career path.”

In addition to homeless families, Maureen is also concentrating on the huge problem of homeless veterans with a campaign called One Thousand Homes, which aims to eliminate homelessness for veterans by 2015. KEYS received a new \$606,000 Supportive Services Veterans grant, which launches Oct. 1, and will help as well. “Congress is saying they don’t want veterans living on the streets anymore.”

Finally I ask Maureen a tough reporter’s question: In the face of exploding populations, massive environmental degradation, and the biblical injunction that the poor shall always be with us — just what keeps her going since it all seems so bleak? Maureen lets out with a good-natured laugh, but her answer is sincere and quite serious.

“Yes,” she confirms, “the poor will always be with us. But children should never be on the streets in this country. Never! We as a society are failing our children if they’re living under a bridge. It should just never happen.

“I’m so passionate about change,” she concludes, but reminds me that it “doesn’t all happen at once.” For instance she cites the dangerous slum where she and her husband once lived almost 10 years ago, and through combined teamwork with others, providing housing, education and jobs, is now one of the safest neighborhoods in Honduras.

As a matter of fact, shortly after our interview, she’ll be flying off for Honduras to bring back her daughter’s 14-year-old sister to enroll her in school here. “You start small,” she says, “and believe that one child’s life can change.”

After trading goodbyes, I watch as Maureen and her daughter walk off hand-in-hand. I’ve seen the change that can happen.

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