



NEVER A Question

by Becky St. Clair

“In Spain, in the summers, we’d pile into our little Fiat and go into towns and do Vacation Bible Schools. We’d pile everything in-between us in the seat and off we’d go.”

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

When I was asked to write this story I never imagined it would affect me as deeply as it did. Ingrid walked into my office on a semi-sunny morning and as she settled into a chair across the desk from me I explained my goal with the interview. As she opened up about her experiences, I began to realize that the story I was writing was as much about the children as it was about Ingrid. This article contains stories that may be difficult to read; I will admit I cried more than once during the interview. But difficult does not mean bad and it does not mean wrong; it just means we’re being challenged to think and feel differently than perhaps we have in the past. And the world we live in needs us to think and feel differently. We cannot effect change in comfort.

INGRID WEISS SLIKKERS HAS fond memories of her childhood, driven by the ministry of both of her parents. As a pastoral family, they moved a lot; Ingrid lived in a variety of places such as New York, Spain, Washington, D.C. and even a little bit in her family’s native Argentina.

“Watching my parents’ minister was probably hugely influential,” she says. “I don’t know if they realized how much my siblings and I joining them doing ministry mattered.”

Today, like Ingrid, her sister is a social worker; their brother serves as a vice president at Maranatha International.

“They didn’t tell us, ‘Go into ministry and service,’ it was their example,” Ingrid reflects. “We always knew that it was what God wanted us to do so that’s what we did.”

During college, Ingrid spent her summers working at a homeless shelter in downtown Washington, D.C., She planned activities and was responsible alone at times for 15 kids, transporting them to museums, the zoo and more.

Later she served at Camp Blue Ridge, working with inner city kids who had never been outside the city. “It was beautiful,” she says with a smile. “They could be kids with us. They weren’t



Left: Ingrid and her brother were raised with a passion for ministry, including Ingathering at a young age
Facing page: Ingrid with a staff member in the Social Work lobby, which is decorated with pictures that refugee children have made of “themselves”



scared of what might happen, and they had predictable meals every day. Seeing many of them accept Jesus as they saw that someone cared about and loved them was extremely moving.”

Though she earned her undergraduate degrees in English and communication, Ingrid knew she eventually wanted to do social work. So she went to grad school and got her master’s. During this time, Ingrid worked in an advocacy role for Hispanic communities, trying to keep the youth out of gangs, offering parenting seminars and family therapy, raising awareness of issues within the community, among other things.

“I participated in a march to address the issues of gangs while pregnant with my first child,” Ingrid laughs. “My husband probably wondered what was wrong with his crazy wife!”

In her role as assistant professor of social work at Andrews University, Ingrid not only teaches her students how to care for others, she exemplifies it, as she continues to consult with a local non-profit,

specifically those who work with refugees entering the United States, such as Bethany Christian Services.

“I’m kind of a lifer there,” says Ingrid with a smile. Bethany has been working with refugees since the 1970s, assisting with family resettlement, reuniting children and parents, finding foster care for unaccompanied minors and providing mentorship programs, among other things. They have helped refugees from many countries or areas like the Sudan, Eritrea, Myanmar, Afghanistan, Central America and, most recently, Syria.

The stories that emerge from such work are not for the faint hearted.

“I remember seeing a 15-year-old boy in therapy who had escaped from a war-torn country,” Ingrid says. “They recruited him, threatened his family and then trained him to kill people with machetes. He finally decided he’d had enough and found his way to the U.S. Working with him during counseling was really something. The things he had experienced were not things anyone should, let alone a young boy, and the resulting nightmares he had were terrifying. Those were key moments when I began really becoming aware of refugee realities and the impact of trauma.”

In early 2013 when the Grand Rapids branch of Bethany expanded their immigrant and refugee child services and asked the Southwest Michigan branch to help, Ingrid was placed as the site manager and therapist. Some of the children coming through her department were from Central America and were unaccompanied minors who had been picked up by Immigration Customs and Enforcement (ICE) as federal prisoners. Ingrid and her team were tasked with screening the children for trafficking and/or abuse.

“The stories they told...” Ingrid says softly, letting her voice trail off. “Someone pays someone else to get them here, then they dump the kids somewhere and hope they find their way. They don’t speak English, and when we pick them up at the airport from the ICE officers they are wearing the

same flip-flops they wore for 3,000 miles. They have lice, chapped lips and stories of murdered parents, rape and abuse. Many are under 13 years old.”

Ingrid and her team work tirelessly as social detectives to find people to sponsor these children. A sponsor would claim responsibility for the child so that they could stay in the U.S., pursue some type of legal relief and begin adjusting to a home with safety.

“There was a 5-year-old girl I picked up from the ICE agents once,” Ingrid recalls. “She had beautiful curly hair that was matted and full of lice. She could tell us her first name and that she was going ‘to the United States of America,’ but that was

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about it. Occasionally she would talk about a mom, but she would refer to ‘mom’ back home and ‘mom’ here in the U.S. so we were a bit confused.”

After a week or so in Bethany’s care, a teacher noticed the girl was regularly singing a jingle to herself. Listening closer, she realized the girl was singing numbers slurred together. On a whim she asked all the other students in the class to listen to her sing and to write down what they heard.

“It was a phone number,” says Ingrid with an incredulous look on her face. “Someone had taught her a tune with numbers to remember it.”

When they called the number, the woman who answered the phone began shrieking and sobbing. The girl was the woman’s daughter, whom she had lost in the desert as they were fleeing. The woman thought her child was dead.

Most recently, when Bethany again expanded their services in Southwest Michigan they began receiving unaccompanied refugee minors from UN refugee camps



around the world. Some have seen their families gunned down or otherwise killed in front of them, others don't know where their family is, they just fled to save their own lives. These children are not allowed to enter the U.S. until they have a foster family willing to open their home, so Ingrid and her team work around the clock to identify willing families to bring as many children into safety as possible.

"Once we post that we have a licensed family, within seconds we get referrals for children in myriad locations around the globe just waiting," she says. "There's usually a tiny picture of the child and their address at the refugee camp—it will say something like, X block, row 5. No child should have that as their address."

Ingrid sadly admits that not all stories have happy endings where the child is welcomed into a new family with teddy bears and balloons at the airport. For example, one boy on the list for a foster family had suffered significant injuries fleeing his village in Africa after everyone

else, including his family, had been murdered in front of him.

"We had a family willing to take him in, and had started to line up doctors for him, but due to logistics we weren't able to get him here before he died," she shares. "That story devastated our staff. We prayed that he knew before he died that someone wanted him. That there was a family here for him, and that we were going to offer him safety and hope."

Not all children have personally experienced physical violence, but have been traumatized in other ways. Ingrid shares the story of a 10-year-old girl who arrived at Bethany with her 4-year-old sister. Ingrid was tasked with screening the pair for trafficking and/or abuse. One of the questions was about self-harm or suicidal ideation.

"When I asked her if she'd ever thought about hurting herself or ending her life, this little ten-year-old girl looked me in the eye and nodded her head yes," Ingrid says. "I asked her to tell me about that, and she told me her story."

The girl and her sister were orphans living with another family in the village. When a violent local gang decided they wanted the family's corner house for illegal drug trafficking, the family received a note under their door to hand over US \$50,000 or the girls would be kidnapped.

"That little girl decided right then that if those people were going to kidnap them she had to figure out how to kill her sister and then herself," Ingrid recalls. "She had seen what the gangs did to other kids—she had seen their tortured bodies in the street and she didn't want that for her sister or for herself. So she'd lie awake at night trying to decide the best way to do it. No 10-year old should have to think anything like that."

Ingrid's team also works with 17-year-old boys from refugee camps who live in a boys' home run by Bethany. Since the boys are too close to their 18th birthday to join a family, they become each other's family in the group home and learn independent liv-

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ing skills such as managing public transit, how to purchase groceries, and more.

"It's like our own mini United Nations in that home," laughs Ingrid. "There are boys from so many different countries and cultures there, and they each have stories of sadness and devastation. And they're still just being boys—hanging out and laughing and loving to eat, but now they are safe."

Every experience she has with a child opens Ingrid's eyes even more to the world around her, the needs people have and her role in being God's hands and feet.

One nine-year-old girl sitting in Ingrid's office was asked if she went to church when she was living in her country of origin. Immediately she jumped up and proudly stated, "I did! I'm a Seventh-day Adventist and I'm a Pathfinder!"

"I had this moment of, 'She's one of ours!'" says Ingrid. "I had to stop myself as I heard God saying to me, 'Wait—aren't they all one of mine?'" That moment has been forever etched in her mind and she relays it often.

Ingrid admits that if you'd asked her ten years ago about refugee work it wouldn't have been on her radar. She acknowledges that it's God that put this burden on her heart and passion in her soul and then put her where she needed to be.

"As Americans, it's easy to forget what's going on in the world around us because it feels like it's so far away," says Ingrid. "We have to take Matthew 25 literally: Did you give me something to eat? Did you give me something to drink? Did you visit me? Did you take me in?"

In addition to teaching classes at Andrews and consulting for Bethany, Ingrid continues to share the stories of these children with various groups and speaks about the trauma they have endured. She encourages listeners to be open to what God is telling them to do about the global refugee crisis, to talk about it with other people, share the stories they hear and be aware of what's happening outside their bubble.

"Let's not go about our everyday lives like it's not happening," she implores. "Let's be aware and let's do something. We could be the one thing standing between life and death for a child."

Recently, while driving, Ingrid heard a story* on the radio that stuck with her. It was about a German woman who lived through WWII. The church she attended during the war was situated next to railroad tracks, and every Sunday a train

would whistle past as the congregation worshiped. One Sunday they heard the cries of people as the train click-clacked down the track. In her own words, the congregation "grimly realized that the train was carrying Jews...We could do nothing to help these poor miserable people, yet their screams tormented us." It became tradition to begin singing hymns when they heard the train approaching, singing louder and louder as the train roared past the church, drowning out the sounds of the Jews on the way to their deaths.

As she listened to this story in her car, Ingrid found herself applying the lesson to herself.

"What more can I do as a Christian?" she asks. "Am I just singing louder and louder in my church and drowning out the cries? But what does 'doing' look like? The work is so big and I am but one person."

The Southwest Michigan branch of Immigrant and Refugee Services of Bethany began with three employees a little over four years ago. Now they have 25 employees and have seen over 400 refugee children come through their program. Bethany aids only a small fraction of the children who need assistance; of the 65 million refugees around the world today, over 50 percent of them are children. Though Ingrid is no longer as involved as before, she continues to provide clinical consultation once a week, helping the staff

process cases and supporting them in their own progression of working with children with such traumatic stories.

"It was never a question, really, whether I would serve people," she says with a shrug. "I never questioned a life of service. I continue to be devastated, but at the same time, motivated to continue on," she says firmly. "I share these stories with the students I teach because that's what we believe in here at Andrews. We're going to seek knowledge; we're going to affirm our faith; and we're going to go out and change the world. That's my passion both in the classroom and outside of it."

Note: For information on how you can support Bethany Christian Services, visit bethany.org. For information on other organizations supporting refugee children and families, including Adventist Development & Relief Agency (ADRA), visit charitynavigator.org. Lots of organizations need funds, some are looking for refugee mentors and many more people than do can open their homes as foster homes. Ingrid says, "It's all about praying for God to show us exactly how we fit into this picture to serve and love our neighbor, and then being open to his answer."

**<http://www.internationalwallofprayer.org/A-010-Holocaust-Memorial-Day-Stover.html>*

Becky St. Clair (current staff) is the media communications manager for Andrews University.

A planning meeting to discuss starting a home for refugee girls similar to one already in place for refugee boys.

