

Christmas Comes In March for Hearts and Hands Across America

By Mark Baker
Herald Publisher

Did you ever see Christmas in March?

I did.

It happened on a darkened street in Cochabamba, Bolivia, two weeks ago.

Six of us were squeezed into a minivan, hurtling down the avenues and around the roundabouts at breakneck speed. Anna Haarman of Holland was behind the wheel, firing off answers to my questions with the same recklessness as her driving.

We were speeding through town because we were late. Blame me. My PC had come down with a virus earlier, and five experts were in my hotel room, trying to scrub it clean. I'd forgotten about the trip to Casa de Nazareth. When the phone rang, saying the rest of the party was in the lobby waiting for me, we were already 45 minutes late.

And so we went hurtling through town with Anna behind the wheel, trying to make up for lost time. After 15 minutes, she pulled the minivan over on a side street and shut off the engine. The neighborhood looked like it was getting ready for bed. All was quiet. Lights glowed in the surrounding houses. The late-summer wind whispered quietly through the leaves and branches of trees.

But something was different.

The iron gate within the six-foot high brick wall -- normally shut tight to keep intruders out, and Casa de Nazareth boys in -- was ajar.

In fact, a handful of boys were hanging on the gate, serving as lookouts for their guests.

And if you ever forget how it feels on Christmas morning, between the time children wake up and the time they get to open presents, come to Casa de Nazareth.

Two and a half dozen boys, most wearing the same dark blue patterned pajamas, were in a state of anticipation. They could hardly stand still. They knew tonight was the night that the people from Hands and Hearts Across America were coming to their house.

The boys, ages 7-11, watched with glee as the visitors unloaded several tubs from the van and made their way past the gate, up the steps, and into the front foyer. One almost forgot that these were abandoned children

The Rubbermaid tubs were opened, and some of the adults carefully stacked handmade quilts in several piles on the dining room table.

The excitement was now palpable.

It was a game of chance, to a certain extent. As the boys lined up to receive their own home-made quilt – to be wrapped up in it, and given a special hug – they didn't know which of the blankets would be theirs.

But each quilt is unique. The Hands and Hearts Across America program has, since its inception, provided thousands of quilts to the children of Bolivia.

Ann Miletich of Port Angeles, Washington, told the boys that the quilts came from people in America who wanted the boys to know that they have friends there, and that they are special.

Kathy Peterson, a teacher in the Eau Claire public school system, has sewn quilts for Hands and Hearts Across America for the past five years. But this is the first year that she's been to Cochabamba to see the quilts being handed out. And it's her lucky day. She gets to distribute the quilts to the boys on this special night.

She is handed a quilt from the pile, and the boy at the head of the line steps up. She asks his name, and repeats it to him. She takes an envelope clipped to the quilt, and opens it. Inside is a note from the seamstress, telling a bit about why she chose to make the quilt in that particular style and color. Sometimes, the envelope contains a picture of the person who made the quilt, too, so the boy can see it.

Peterson opens the quilt wide, displaying its handiwork for all to see. A wave of "oohs" and "aaahs" float up from the gathering. Then she draws the boy close, wraps him in his new quilt, and gives him a big hug.

If the smiles on faces are any indication, the Hands and Hearts Across America program is a huge success -- both for the boys who receive the quilts, and for the adults who are there to hand them out.

Soon the room resembles a scene from Batman and Robin meet Superman. Boys are flying around the house with their quilts wrapped around their necks like capes.

When the last quilt has been distributed, and the hugs have gone all around and the last photo has been taken, the Casa de Nazareth staff shags the boys off to bed. In their sleeping quarters, with eight and 10 bunk beds per room, the boys feverishly spread their new quilts on top of their mattresses, preparing for that night's sleep.

But it is obvious that it will take some time for Casa de Nazareth to settle into a state of drowsiness this night.

For more information on the Hearts and Hands Across America project, see its web site at <http://www.pasd.wednet.edu/school/fr/teacher/burnett/hands03/index.htm>