

HNGR ALUMNI Program NEWSLETTER FALL/WINTER 2016

TIMES AND SEASONS

Reflections from Barb Watson

Warm sunny days ... cool nights ... changing colors of leaves ... fall has definitely arrived in the Midwest. This is one of my favorite seasons of the year, although a bit nostalgic as we head into the winter months ahead. As the season changes, I've been thinking about the times and seasons of our lives and the events that orchestrate our own particular journey.

My journey began in a small rural community in the heart of farm country in the central part of Illinois. This small-town girl had no idea that she would one day be living in a suburb of the metropolis of Chicago, it was not something I envisioned for my future. So, how did I end up living all these years in a little brick ranch house on Prospect Street in Wheaton?

I think back to December of 1976, Tom and I were settled into married life, had bought our first home, and welcomed our first child, a precious baby girl that we soon learned was facing a life of challenge when she was diagnosed with Down Syndrome shortly after birth. We were very fortunate to have parents and extended family nearby as well as a church family who supported us with love and prayer as we adjusted to the routine of therapy for a special needs child. God provided well for our emotional needs during that season of our lives.

Then in the spring of 1978, when our daughter Monica was 18 months old, Tom was offered a pro-

motion which required a transfer to the Chicago suburbs where his corporation's regional office was located. Although we were concerned about leaving our family and our church

we both felt positive about moving, found a home that met our needs, and settled in. Looking back on this season of our lives we can see that we were led to a place that has been exactly what our daughter needed. Monica had excellent educational and vocational opportunities through District 200 here in Wheaton. She recently received a service award from the Wheaton Park District in honor of her 20 years of employment in the restaurant at Arrowhead Golf Club. She also has been employed as a sales associate in the fabrics and crafts department at Wal-Mart for over 18 years. She receives subsidized taxi service to facilitate her transportation to and from work. She has various opportunities for recreational and social activities through our park district cooperative. We give thanks to God for providing what Monica needs to live an enjoyable and productive life.

Another season of my life, the most memorable and meaningful, is the 24 years that I worked at Wheaton College for the HNGR Program. Students would sometimes ask what attracted me to HNGR, the answer is really quite simple. I had been working at the national office of Youth for Christ which



Homecoming at HNGR!

On Friday 7 October 2016, the HNGR office hosted its annual homecoming event for alumni. Members of the graduating classes of 2011, 2006, 2001, and others, including two alumni from the 1970s, attended. In total, there were nearly 30 graduates from Wheaton who stopped by the office. Professor emeritus Norm Ewert, Dr. Jim Clark, and retired office manager Barb Watson also were able to attend (see above for a letter from Barb!). Please join us next year, whether it is your official homecoming or even if you are in town, on **29 September 2017 from 3-5pm** for homecoming weekend! We would love to see you!

at that time was located in Carol Stream. When that organization moved their operation to Colorado I decided to apply at Wheaton College, it's close to my home, and a 9-month job worked with Monica's school schedule. My job skills fit an opening at the HNGR office, so that is where I landed, although I really had no idea at that time what HNGR was all about. It has been a tremendous privilege for me to share the experiences of those of you who came through the program as HNGR interns during those years. It warms my heart to know that so many of you regarded me as your "HNGR Mom" during the Wheaton College season of my life.

And now I find myself in the season of retirement, those "golden years" as it is often called. Although I worked well past the normal age to retire I am enjoying this season more than I had anticipated. I like setting my own schedule for the day and having more time to spend with my husband and daughter. I now have time to join the ladies bible study group at my church and attend the senior activities with my husband. I volunteer one afternoon a week in the church office, which keeps my computer skills active. It's fun to be available for an impromptu lunch or outing if the mood strikes. When my friends ask how I'm doing, I tell them I recommend retirement, it suits me well.

I do not consider retirement the "final" season, I continue this life journey walking with confidence because I know who holds my future and I know who holds my hand. My prayer today is that each one of you dear HNGR alums will experience God's love and peace as you journey through the times and seasons of your lives.

The Boy Who is Always Smiling

by Josh Knowlton

I want to tell you about a boy named Moymi.

Moymi (not his real name) is 9 years old, and was born into a family with five other children. He lives in the squatter community, along with many other children his age.

I met Moymi on my third day here. I learned his name immediately, because a few of the other children called out to him as he came by. "Moymi, umalis na!" (Leave now). "Uwi ka!" (Go home).

He was not doing anything. In fact, I imagine he just wanted to be with people. But he left with a smile on his face, trying to wave as he went away. From that moment on, I tried to find more about this boy, and as much as I could, be his friend.

It is easy to see why the other children always wave Moymi away so quickly: he is so different from them. Specifically, he has a nervous system disorder that prevents him from controlling much of his body. He can walk, but anything beyond that is very difficult if not impossible. Aside from a few grunts, he cannot speak, either. He has a startling appearance, his arms and torso continually twitching and moving in ways that he cannot control.

But there's one thing that Moymi can do very well: smile. In fact, Moymi is almost always smiling. I don't know if this is something he can control or not, but it's always there. Amidst shouts to go home or leave, exclusion from games, and being the object of laughter, Moymi smiles. It is not a smile that is especially attractive. In fact, it is a lopsided, crooked smile. But a hint of it is always there—in his brown eyes, his mouth, his slanted eyebrows.

From an objective standpoint, there is not much Moymi really has to smile about. For one, he is excluded from many relationships both because he is different and because he cannot participate. Surely this is one of the most painful, soul wrenching aspects of any severe disability.

But there is also his exclusion from education. Because Moymi's family is poor, they cannot afford the money to send him to a special school for children with disabilities. And Moymi is not allowed inside the normal classroom—he would create too great a disturbance.

But Moymi does not let this stop him. He may not be allowed inside the classroom, but whenever he can, he goes to school anyways—sitting outside the classroom. He can barely hold a pencil, but he takes notes, although they usually turn out as scribbles. He goes to school even though he's not allowed inside the classroom, and even though his hands and fingers refuse to work the way normal ones do.

For these reasons, I was always astounded with this 9-year-old boy; so perseverant, resilient, even though all the cards in the deck were stacked against him. I would see him continually approaching groups of kids, always smiling, trying to connect with

Mark Your Calendar!

HNGR Symposium 2017

A Child Shall Lead Them: Youth and Transformation

March 16-18, 2017

In just a few short months, HNGR will hosts its 12th annual Symposium at Wheaton College. This year HNGR will host Rev. Dr. David Kasali, President and Founder of the Congo Initiative as our distinguished plenary speaker. We will also host Luis Cesari and Dra. Alicia Casas of Juventud Para Cristo Claves Uruguay. More details will be available on our website soon, but we encourage you to put the dates on your calendar. Please join the HNGR family as we learn from our students and remarkable guests!



Above: David Kasali
Below: Alicia Casas (far left)
& Luis Cesari (far right)



others, even though he was often turned away. I would see him leave for school with his blue bag, that smile still on his face. He was a marginalized boy among the marginalized, but somehow love and perseverance could not help but seep from him.

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A few days ago, I was walking along the alleyway when I heard Moymi limping up from behind. I have always tried to casually touch Moymi when I saw him—knowing that most children like him usually don't experience much physical affection. Today I did just that, gently putting my arm around him. To my surprise, he did the same.

But immediately I realised something was wrong. My arm was wet—soaked with something! I looked back at Moymi and realised he had put his hand in his mouth inadvertently, and then touched me, his twitching hand warm with saliva.

I almost pulled away, wanting to quickly disinfect my arm with a few dozen squirts of antibacterial solution. But I dared not move. To do so would be to reject this priceless gift, Moymi's physical affection—raw and shameless, expressed in the only way that he could do it. Moymi was not afraid to love—even though, whether he knew it or not, it would be messy.

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It is through people like Moymi where I get a glimpse of God's Kingdom. He reminds me that what we need in this world is not smarter ideas or more money or better politicians. What we need is people like him, those who smile in the face of their enemies, who do what others think is impossible, who aren't afraid to love others even though it may be messy.

Moymi inspires me because he reminds me that pleasing God does not depend on how effective I am, how many things I have done "for the kingdom", or how much I achieve in my life. It all boils down to one thing: love. And like a blind person who has an increased sense of hearing; maybe those like Moymi, unable to talk, to write, or run—have an increased ability to love.

I need Moymi in my life. I need his constant smile no matter the circumstances, his perseverance to do what others have refused him the opportunity, and his messy, unashamed love. He inspires me, not because his simple, struggling life challenges me to "take advantage of all my abilities, because others don't have them" but because it is people like Moymi who are really changing the world.

I am challenged to live a life like Moymi. I think he may be closer to God than any of us "normal" people are.

Josh Knowlton is a current HNGR student studying Anthropology and completing his internship in Manila, Philippines with Servants to Asia's Urban Poor.

