

BELIZE Journal August 2007

TREE OF LIFE MINISTRIES www.treeoflifebelize.com

SUMMER OF LOVE 2007. There's much talk of the 40th anniversary of the 1967 "Summer of Love" when some 100,000 youth converged on Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco for a free-for-all love-in. This drug-induced media-hyped collective "high" quickly crashed into a collective low of bad trips, overdoses, addictions, rip-offs, sexual abuse, unwanted children, broken homes, bad debts and drug wars. Yet much of the US media kept glorifying free sex, drugs and gang life. When the US media speaks, the rest of the world listens.

Belize was relatively free of this influence until cable TV arrived in 1984. Belizeans now look back on their pre-cable years as an era of stable church-going families, safe & friendly neighborhoods, and limited exposure to the changes wrenching the Western world. Independence from England in 1981 gave Belize a chance to find its own identity. Instead, cable TV became a Pandora's box of attractive images of everything that humble, underdeveloped Belize *didn't* have.

Most Belizeans couldn't afford the American dream of cars and suburban houses with computers, home phones, dishwashers, dryers and private bedrooms. But they could imitate the gangster street life of hustling, drug-pushing, intimidation, theft, pick-up sex and freeloading. Belize City's crime rate grew into the highest of any city of its size in the world. This generation of Belizean families became so fragmented that many don't know who their fathers are. For too many people, one Summer of Love has turned into 40 years of brokenness.

LET THE SON SHINE IN. But the desire for love, for identity, for community and for the supernatural which lured youth to Haight-Ashbury—and which now lures youth into gangs & drugs—still must be fulfilled. That's why God meant the church to be "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession...who has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9). But we have too often confined our light within church walls. Prophetic voices are now calling us to a new church life outside the walls, in the streets, invading broken homes. They are calling this a summer of *divine* love and healing, the dawning not of the Age of Aquarius but of a season of open doors when lost people will "let the Son shine in."

Believe me, it's easy to get stuck within church walls where there's an endless flow of phone calls, emails, visits, appointments, letters and paperwork to handle. Belizean ministry partners are scarce and till I find some, the administrative work falls to me. But in a season of open doors I just have to get out my door and knock on others'.

The time had come to take a hard look at this ministry's fruit. How was our 4P strategy working? Yes, kids were learning how to PRAISE God better in voice and movement, sometimes leading with their own choice of songs. Kids were learning to stop their games to PRAY when they had conflicts. In small ways they were learning to PREACH God's word when they elaborated on answers to my questions. But did they PRACTICE what we preached? To be honest, there was still too much interrupting and complaining inside church and still not enough outreach outside. Sound familiar? I know lots of churches with inward struggles because they lack outward focus.

KNOCK, AND DOORS WILL OPEN. Let's face it. The body of Christ in general is well-fed but flabby and needs to go outside to get some exercise. Leaders must set the pace and be the example. I decided to make time to reach every family in this neighborhood with a summertime plan. School was over but many students had scored low on exams due to reading problems.

So I proposed this: why not have a nightly storytime for the whole family? I would provide a low-cost illustrated Bible storybook. Kids could take turns practicing reading skills while parents and/or older siblings helped. Written answers to questions at the end of stories could earn them yummy fruit chews. A week of answers would earn them (1) a fun activity booklet, (2) a culture-relevant Christian music CD, or (3) a photo album—I can get all these items for about \$1 apiece. On succeeding weeks I can bring them photos of the family and of the kids at Tree of Life Church, produced on our church printer--to put in their photo albums.

So far, fifteen families have agreed to start our storybook plan! Some expressed how sorry they were not to be able to send their kids to our mission high school this coming year. But they understood that all new schools were being delayed by recent government policies. I experienced tremendous goodwill from them, and recommend you consider a similar strategy. It's a way of reaching parents and kids, bringing good music into their homes, teaching God's Word, improving kids' reading skills, promoting family unity, and providing lasting memories of family and friends and church. Plus encouraging them to get more involved in church!

SERVE SQUADS. But we'll do church a little differently. Kids will provide more of the praises and prayers and preaching. And instead of ending with a time of

games & fellowship, we'll send out Serve Squads to practice loving a neighbor. We'll march cadet-style to a neighbor's house and—with prior permission—gather around them, lay hands on them, pray and speak words of encouragement, present an appropriate gift, then divide up to tackle brief chores—the five love languages.

One of our youth leaders, Carlos Sosa, 11, helped develop that last idea. Carlos and his two younger brothers frequently help me with chores like raking, mowing, trash disposal and crab control, for small rewards. One evening Carlos got carried away and began shooting poison into crab holes in my neighbor's yard. I almost stopped him before I realized he had hit on a new outreach strategy.

Crab warfare. The whole neighborhood is mined with crab holes that trip passersby and swallow balls and marbles. Yards are also strewn with trash that keeps blowing in from the streets.

So after Youth Church last night—on 7/7/07, the day The Call Nashville Gathering prayed to reclaim our US heritage from 40 years of ungodly rebellion—our first Serve Squad marched out. We brought flashlights, rakes, spades and crab spray to the one-room 11x13 home of the Castellanos—a recently arrived Guatemalan family of seven. We laid aside our arms, laid hands on family members, and prayed for them. We gave them a flashlight to use in their unlit yard. Then we quickly filled up a 55-gallon trash barrel with stray litter and turned dozens of crab holes into crab catacombs.

Though the eldest son kept watching cable TV, three formerly shy, awkward Castellanos kids followed us around, helping us out here and there. They volunteered to join future Serve Squads. They followed us back to Tree of Life Church where we meant to close up for the night. But they were eager for more fellowship. So we turned on the lights and kept church going till almost 10 pm. Today I saw the Castellanos kids—including the eldest son—playing in their newly cleared yard with their new friends. Our summer of love has just begun...

Tax-exempt Donations: Tree of Life Ministries, Attn. Pat Burgess, Huntington Nat'l Bank, 1227 E. Front St. Traverse City, MI 49686. **Messages:** George C. Ferrar, TLM, 2026 Arrowhead Dr., Traverse City, MI 49686

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