

The Pied Piper of the Shanty Town;

Missionary builds relationships among the poor to help them improve their life and know Jesus

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Missionary Journalist

San José, Costa Rica—Keith Holder could very easily be called the Pied Piper of the Shanty Town.

Children just naturally flock to him. As he walks through the San Felipe de Alajuelita community of suburban San José, kids dart out of buildings to say hello, teenagers come up to shake hands and pat him on the back, little girls shyly put their arms around him and give him a hug.

“I love these kids,” he says. “I have a great relationship with them.”

That goes without saying. The youth of this sprawling slum turn to him for advice, counsel, encouragement and, occasionally, financial help.



“It’s all about relationships,” he muses as one boy thanks him for providing financial assistance getting his immigration papers in order.

The majority of residents are Nicaraguan immigrants who came here seeking a better life than would be available to them back home. However, without proper papers, getting a job at a decent wage is difficult if not impossible.

Keith knows that, and he knows that along with proper documentation, an education is crucial to breaking the cycle of poverty.

“Educación Plus has around 80 sponsored children,” he says. “With the money donated by people in England and the United States, we provide uniforms and school supplies to around 450 children at the beginning of each school year.

Later, walking through the shanty town, Keith is besieged by children, teens and mothers who want to share their struggles with him, seek advice or simply receive a word of encouragement.

Stopping by one house, he turns into a tough father, letting one teen-aged youth know of his displeasure that he has dropped out of school. But, then turning softer, he puts his arm around the boy’s shoulder and gently explains that he has arranged for a restaurant owner to hire him several hours a day.

The boy seems moved by the pastor’s generosity. “He wants to be a chef so this will be a good way to help him get a foot in the door,” Keith explains.

Several blocks away a small child tugs at Keith's shirt. "I want you to see my house," he pleads. Keith takes a few minutes to follow the lad along a twisting, muddy path between shacks to a small room no larger than 8 X 10 square feet which serves as a home for four people.

"We share the bed and some of us sleep on a mat on the floor at night," explains the youngster's "sister-in-law" (many couples in this community may be together for decades but never formally marry).

Keith looks around the cramped shack and comments that she cooks for the family on a small burner in the corner. "That is, when they have food," he remarks. "Right now they only have one egg in the house. We will send some food here this afternoon."

The girl invites Keith to look at the small patch of land behind the one-room shack. Muddy water--sewer water from the house behind them--seeps under their house, adding to the stench of the community.

Along the muddy streets of a low-income neighborhood, missionary Keith Holder meets a newly married couple who ask for his advice and assistance.

"That's one of the worst situations I have seen here," says Keith who has worked in the community for 14 years. Originally from London, England, he settled in Costa Rica to begin work in three shanty towns surrounding the capital.

"What's even more tragic is that she was extorted to be able to live there," Keith explains. "A mafia charges each family to live here, even though the property belongs to the government. This family paid about \$70 to be able to squat on the property."

As the missionary ends his several hour walk through the community, the entourage of children and some adults following him grows. Some are going to the Bible church nearby to help a visiting work group from Kainos Christian Fellowship in Swindon, Wiltshire, England, paint the auditorium. Others are lining up for an Educación Plus teen-age Bible study that night. Keith expects at least 60 youth to show up for the session.

"The trip here has helped me to understand that many people back home have similar problems to the people here," explained Ann Hutchinson, one of the working visitors from Swindon. "Their housing may be better, but they still struggle with similar things. Working here has helped me understand that I must be more patient with my students who have problems," said Ann who teaches psychology at a sixth-form college in England.

Arriving at the church, Keith seems energized by his encounter with so many people who look to him for help. "I have a fabulous relationship with the kids," he exclaims. "It's all built on relationships—long term relationships. As my co-workers and I meet people, they know us and trust us, and then they feel free to come to us when they need help. And, they trust us when we talk to them about Jesus Christ."

"One of the main points of the relationship is that they will know Jesus."

Keith founded Educación Plus in 1992. Today there are four Costa Rican staff working with Keith to carry on the ministry while he also raises money in England and the United States. "It costs \$30 (20

Pounds) a month to sponsor a child," he says. "That's used for school supplies, but also to help their families and improve their lifestyles."

The missionary also raises funds for annual summer camp programs for children from three shanty towns and a big Christmas party each December in each community.

The missionary says he not only needs contributions to keep the program going, he needs a few good people to help out with administration, publicity and development in the San José office. "We could use people who would be willing to raise their own support and come here for two to three years to help out," he says.

Meanwhile, he carries on much of the work himself, dreaming up new plans and strategies as he walks along drawing a larger and larger crowd that follows this pied piper of the shanty town.

The Pied Piper of the Shanty Town; Missionary builds relationships among the poor to help them improve their life and know Jesus, *Missionary Journalist*, Nov 19, 2006