

A SMALL LOVE STORY, or so

~ Bob Price

I'm going to tell you a little story about something that happened today. I want to tell you that story so that I can tell you another story. I will have to include a third story so that it all sort of makes sense. Bear with me, all of these stories have semi happy endings.

Today was one of those fun summer days that Kathy and I spend together. It is the weekend after the Fourth of July weekend and we are spending time at a summer cottage we own at Conneaut, Ohio, on the shores of Lake Erie. Yes, everybody tells me how lucky I am to have a summer cottage, and I always remind them that the harder I work the luckier I get. (I promise that this will be the last of my snark).

Kathy and I have a routine on Saturday afternoons at the lake. We drive around and scout out the best garage sales in Conneaut and Ashtabula, Ohio (known as the homes of Urban Myer, head coach at OSU and Connie Schultz, Pulitzer Prize winning columnist.) We also like to visit little specialty shops to pick up goodies for snacks by the lake.

That is where the first story begins, in a little Italian grocery in Ashtabula. Kathy was shopping and I was people watching. There was a young woman in the store who was carrying a little girl, about five years old. Even though it was about 1pm, the little girl was still in her pajamas, and her mother was carrying her. Kathy made eye contact with the child, and soon they were having a lively conversation. Kathy soon learned that the child wasn't feeling well and that is why her mom was carrying her in the store. The child was animated, the mom, well, maybe not so sure.

After all, a five year old can be heavy, and my wife was chatting up her kid while she stood there holding her. Kathy asked the mom if the little girl could have a sweet from the pastry display. Once necessary approval was secured, the child began the rigorous selection process. With the help of a friendly store clerk, the little girl picked a cup cake with sprinkles. She instantly felt better, mom was happy, the clerk was happy, and Kathy was happy.

As I paid the grocery bill, including the cupcake, the clerk remarked at how kind my wife was. Ignoring the fact that I was at least semi kind because I paid the bill, I agreed with her and told her, "You have no idea."

Ok, I told you that story to tell you another story about kind people, and my week end last week, the week end of the Fourth of July.

Before I tell you that story, I have to tell you the story of how Kathy Price and the Mission of Love obtain hundreds of thousands of dollars in relief supplies, and how they get from a warehouse in Ravenna, Ohio, to places like Tec Pan, Guatemala.

I have already mentioned that we spend our Saturdays "junker" at garage sales. We drive around until Kathy sees one that looks promising and then we stop. Usually, I will spend about five minutes looking at the collections of other people's stuff, get bored, and wait in the truck watching Netflix on my phone while Kathy does her thing.

After about half an hour, here comes Kathy, and the proprietor of the garage sale, loading tons of toys, serviceable clothes, bedding, and heaven knows what else into the back of Kathy's little red pickup truck. Without even asking I know that most of the stuff that my wife has just acquired has been donated. She has explained to them that their throw away stuff that they were hoping to sell for a few bucks are going to someplace that they have never heard of to help improve the lives of people that they will never meet. (My wife can be very persuasive.)

These folks didn't know it when they saw my wife walking up their driveway, but their kindness was about to shine that day. These are just some more of the kind people that I promised to tell you about.

Today, Kathy bought about a dozen unbreakable coffee mugs. These are earmarked for a senior center in Tec Pan, in the mountains of Guatemala, where each of the village elders can be given their own personal coffee mug to enjoy coffee when they visit it center. Most likely, they have never had a coffee mug before.

The senior center is run by Telma Martin, a very kind Guatemalan lady. Last year, on one of our junkin forays, Kathy purchased a used jogging stroller. I couldn't imagine what she was going to do with that. She told me, "It is for Edwin." Okay by me. I didn't know who Edwin was or that he jogged.

On Sunday afternoons at the lake, Kathy sorts and boxes all of the stuff that she bought on Saturday and puts them in the back of the pickup. The next week, she will take them to the Mission of Love Warehouse. The warehouse is huge, but it has no heat or light and it is of no use to anybody, but Kathy. Some more kind people allow her to use it at a very nominal price.

A visitor to the warehouse would be amazed by the things that are in there. My wife can be very persuasive. Besides the small garage sale stuff, there are rooms of medical supplies, school supplies, hospital furniture, and tools. Many of the larger items are delivered by trucks owned by other kind people who donate their vehicles and employees to bring critical supplies to the warehouse. (My wife can be very oh, you get the point).

Once these supplies arrive at the warehouse, they must be sorted, inventoried, and stored in the appropriate location. Often volunteers will assist Kathy, more often than not, she spends her days doing this work alone.

Are you wondering what happens to the supplies. That is where my Fourth of July story begins. Several times a year, The United States Department of Defense, you know who, (very persuasive) arranges for the United States Air Force to transport these relief supplies from the Youngtown Air Reserve Station to Guatemala City, Guatemala. This is done through a governmental program known as the Denton Program. It takes months of planning, paperwork and inspections before an air lift is approved by the Pentagon.

After all is approved, a US Air Force cargo plane flies the aid to the command center of the Guatemalan Air Force in that nation's capital city. Once the plane is on the ground, it must be rapidly unloaded and the goods transported by truck to another site in Guatemala. All of this must be coordinated with the Pentagon, the United States State Department, and the Guatemalan government. It is a good thing that the Mission of Love's warehouse manager is also the intergovernmental affairs coordinator. I don't know how it gets done, but it does get done.

One month ago, a C 17 transport plane departed Charleston South Carolina destined for Youngstown. When it arrived, it on loaded fifteen special pallets bound for Guatemala City. It left within hours for its destination.

Kathy and a group of volunteers were waiting on the ground for the plane to arrive. It had taken a good deal of "persuasion" to make this happen. The volunteers were at the air base and could hear the plane in the air. Then, they received word that there was a small accident on the run way and the plane could not immediately land. The crew of the C 17 was forced to return to Charleston with the cargo still on board, including the jogging stroller. The delivery would have to wait for another day.

That other day was July 1. Kathy received the phone call about a two weeks before it was all due to happen. This meant that not only did she have to fly to Central America to receive the plane, but that she had to line up manpower to unload a huge cargo plane, and provide five semis to haul the supplies to Tec Pan, eighty miles away. And, she needed a traveling companion.

Since the fourth fell on a Tuesday, I arranged my schedule to be off work from Friday to Tuesday. I was really looking forward to five consecutive days at the cottage. Did I mention that my wife needed a traveling companion and that she can be very persuasive?

To my surprise, on July 1, I found myself standing on the tarmac at the command center of the Guatemalan Air Force. I was with my wife and twenty Guatemalan volunteers. Francisco Chan had brought five semis and the people to load them from Tec Pan. It was a bad day for our friend, Don Francisco. On the trip from Tec Pan he received a telephone call that a close family member had died. Yet, here he stood.

At 1:00PM, this beautiful silver bird flew overhead and circled the airfield. The C 17 had arrived, right on time. It taxied to a spot not far from where the semis were parked. Within ten minutes, the cargo hatch was opened and a

single fork lift was unloading the fifteen pallets. They delivered them to where we were waiting, and we all disassembled the pallets and loaded the supplies into the five trucks.

The entire operation took forty minutes. After a few quick handshakes and pictures with the Air Force major who piloted the C 17, he climbed back into the cockpit and they returned to Charleston.

The semis then departed for Tec Pan. I thought that the work was done. Not so much. Trucks that are loaded must be unloaded. We climbed into a passenger van that Kathy had rented and we took off for Tec Pan. After a brief stop for dinner, we went to the bodega, or warehouse, where all five trucks had to be unloaded, in the dark, and in the mountains where we were, it was cold. Who would think that it would be cold in Guatemala in July? Not this genius. It took until the wee hours of Sunday morning to unload those trucks and store the precious supplies safely behind locked doors.

Our friend Astrid holds the keys, and she is the lady in charge of distributing those supplies to where they need to be. She is also the key to all that happens in her country when Kathy can't be there. She manages the supplies and oversees a home that Mission of Love has established for homeless children and elderly women. It is called Grandmother's House.

The following day, Sunday, we visited the central market in the main square of Tec Pa, the funeral of Don Francisco's relative, and a fiesta at Grandmother's House. There are more stories to be told of the market, the funeral and the fiesta, but I promised that there would only be three.

The final story begins on Monday, July 3, our last full day in Guatemala. Much of the Mission of Love's work that is done in Guatemala is done by the people living there. The recipients of the work are indigenous people, Mayan Indians, who live in the mountains.

Dr. Juan Manuel Socop, a specialist who treats disabled people, donates part of his practice to the impoverished Mayans who live in hovels built on the hillside. One of his patient is little Edwin, seven years old, and stricken with cerebral palsy. Now I knew who Edwin was, and I was about to meet him. Before we could go home, Kathy insisted that we must visit Edwin.

To reach his family's home, we had to drive up hazardous mountain trails that had steep drop offs on either side. We were about 7,500 feet in elevation, and standing on top of that mountain, looking across the green valley, you could lose your breath. Looking down the hillside into the deep ravine where Edwin lived with his mother and sisters, you could lose your equilibrium. The climb down from the road to his house was more than we were willing to dare. That meant that Edwin's mother had to carry him up the steep path to where we waited. No big deal, because she hand carried this child everywhere she went, much like the mother in the store in Ashtabula. The difference was, she had no choice. Edwin could not walk.

When she brought Edwin from her house to the hilltop, and placed him in Kathy's arms, I thought that he was a baby. At seven years old, he was frail and spindly, like a new born fawn. Kathy gently placed him in the jogging stroller that we had bought last year "junkin". He became animated and began to cry. The guy had himself a set of wheels. He was mobile. And now, I understood.

There are several pictures that accompany my small story. There is a large plane, and there is tiny Edwin. What I have not shown you is a picture of the wretched conditions that these people live in. They don't have much money, but they have great dignity and I would not deprive them of that by taking photos with my phone that cost more than the house they live in. Before we left, Kathy gave the family food, vitamins, and toys for the children. She also gave them a promise. She would return.

The next scheduled air lift to Guatemala will contain an ambulance and two fire trucks. Perhaps there will be room for a small something for a small boy. I would bet on it.



Bob and Kathy with the Pilot of our C5 Humanitarian Denton Plane.



Edwin so happy with his new transportation



Edwin and his brother happy with his new stroller



Edwin with his family and Mission of Love volunteers.