

## Poor Kids Made Rich; Broken Kids Made Whole

by Liza Baber

Bradasia had four siblings; she lost a sister to the foster care system, two of her three brothers died because of drunk driving and one is in and out of prison. She is now also in and out of foster care.

Cassidy is a six year old girl who lives with a single mom and a brother. She says she hates her half siblings because she does not want to share her daddy, even though he left her and her family.

Justice is six and has a father who recently got released from prison. She lives with her brother, half brother, and single mom. Justice's oldest brother is 12 and her mom is 25.

Lizzie, who is 15, has been smoking since she was eleven. She disappeared for a year and then, to my delight, showed up recently at church. She told me that in the last year she had been taken to Juvenile Detention, was stabbed in the face with a pencil, had her skull fractured and spent time in a hospital in Houston. She is now under house arrest and pregnant. Lizzie was abused as a child, in and out of foster care and bounced around various relatives.

I met these girls and many other kids at a ministry called Pioneers in Bryan, Texas. Here, college students and youth volunteers, like me, come to Emmanuel Baptist Church every Friday and pick up kids who live in the surrounding neighborhoods. Once we've picked them up in the buses we play with them, share the gospel, sing songs, do crafts, and feed them dinner. Most of the kids we pick up are considered "at risk," poor, and come from very broken homes. Pioneers is not a showy ministry; just an opportunity for people to give up their Friday nights to spend with hurting children.

My role as a youth counselor is not fancy either. My job is simply to play with and love these kids. And yet God has allowed us to bless these little ones. The most we ever do is show love, but love is not something they get much of at home. I could give many examples of kids that have a history of being sexually abused, kids with unloving parents, young kids involved in witchcraft, children committing suicide, and so much more.

I have met several adults who say that Pioneers was the only place they felt love growing up. And it is because we show love not only by giving our time, but also because we give them hugs, high fives, encouragement, a shoulder to cry on when they need it, and things like that. The kids are puzzled that we do not get paid, receive community service hours, or any other compensation. In addition, the treats, meals, gifts and other goodies they are given are free gifts of love. And it is beautiful to watch them try to understand our motives for doing what we do. But sadly, I have had kids from my first and second grade girls' class come up to me and say things like, "Oh Liza, I wish you were my mommy," "Why do you spend time with us when you could be with your friends?" "Why do you love me so much?" "If I could have one wish, I'd make you my sister," and "You are the only person who loves me." Things like that break my heart but they show that the love I give means so much. On rough nights when no one will listen to the teaching or one of my girls snubs me for no apparent reason, it seems like I am not getting through to them. But I know the kids do not forget the good news, the attention, and love we show in Christ's name; and it is a light in their dark world.

A few months ago, I was talking to Tia, a fifth grader, on the playground before Pioneers started. We talked for an hour and a half about love. Love was something she did not understand. She lived with a single mom and two siblings in a small house. When

I explained to her the concept of God's love and heaven, she asked questions and I answered them. I then told her of John 3:16, which talks about God giving up His Son because He loved us, and Romans 10:9 which says, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead you will be saved." After hearing that verse, Tia looked me in the eye and said, "I want to do that." Right then, with tears in my eyes, I led Tia in a prayer to accept Christ into her life.

It had been the concept of love that had interested Tia, as is the case with most of the kids I encounter. These children are hungry for something they have never tasted, something that I can offer, and that is Christ's love. Every Friday, all I do is play with and teach these kids, but it is not chore; it is a delight! All I sacrifice is my Friday nights. It is not much, but it is enough.

The kids involved in Pioneers do not really understand the concept of love. For them, it is conditional, constantly changing, and scarce. So I go to Pioneers to show them some unconditional and reliable love for Christ's sake. When they see how much I love them, I tell them about God's love which is far richer and sweeter than anything I can offer. Psalm 103:8 says, "The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow anger and abounding in steadfast love." Because I love them, I have chosen to boldly share this love with these little ones who may not get it at home.

I am not changing the world, but God has let me be a part of a ministry that is changing these kids' worlds by reflecting the grace and love that Christ has shown to all of us. God's love is boundless! The things that God can accomplish through us are unfathomable! That is why I have a passion to share God's love with these kids. That is why, at Pioneers, we love them with the love of God so that He can change their lives.