

Those children in the child sponsorship ads—they are real

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QUITO, ECUADOR--We have each seen them: the television advertisements with a spokesperson carrying a poor child down the muddy street of a third world barrio. Or the plaintive face of a malnourished child staring out from a magazine advertisement. Or even the image of a bearded homeless man enjoying a meal in a rescue mission newspaper announcement.

These types of appeals are commonly used by agencies such as World Vision, Christian Children's Fund, Children International, Care, Food for the Poor, the Miami Rescue Mission and others. Each one tugs at the heartstrings and challenges the viewer or reader to give in order to help alleviate world hunger.

Those announcements seem to proliferate around Thanksgiving and Christmas when people are more sympathetic to the plight of others and the end of the tax year looms near.

The reactions to this style of advertisements are varied. Some are moved to compassion and are lead to pull out their checkbook and send off a contribution.

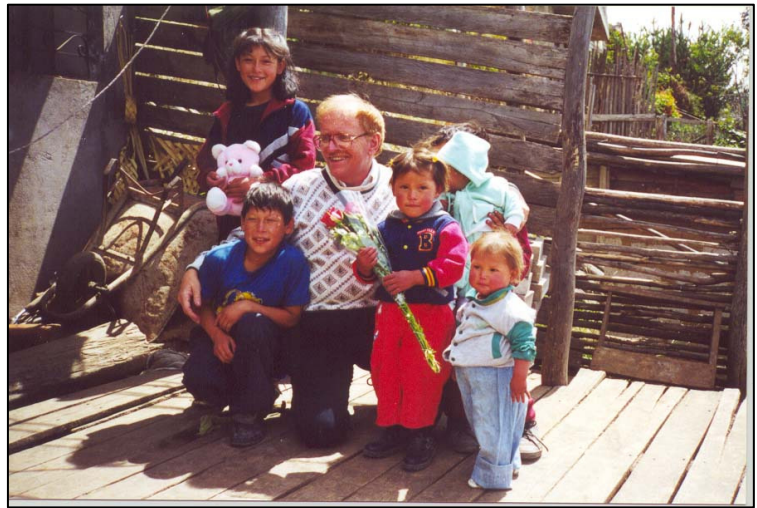
Others react negatively. "Why do they always have to show these pictures of starving children on TV just when we are eating supper?" Besides, some charge, displaying those children in advertisements is merely exploitation.

Still others wonder if those children are really poor. Are they as needy as the agencies like to depict?

Indeed, these children are real. Some agencies, such as Christian Children's Fund will only use the picture of children they support in their advertisements, according to Dr. Paul McCleary, former Executive Director of that organization.

On a more personal level, I can vouch for their authenticity. I just met the child in the television ad, or, at least, one just like her. Her name is Martha Carina, and she lives with her mother, father and 4 brothers and sisters in a squatter settlement high on the mountain overlooking Quito, Ecuador. Their house perches over a deep ravine, the main bulk of the one room wooden shack balanced precariously on a boulder. A heavy rain or moderate earth tremor certainly would send it and its occupants crashing into the canyon below.

I was visiting the community with social workers from the Kansas City, Missouri-based Children International. We had spent some time at the agency's center where sponsored children receive regular health and dental check-ups, help with tutoring and occasional gift packets on their birthday, Christmas, Easter and other special occasions.



The main assembly room was filled with stacks of cement blocks and roofing to help residents of the community fortify their houses in anticipation of the heavy rains expected from El Nio.

As we drove through the area, workers pointed out hundreds of homes with latrines which Children International had helped the residents to build. The community now is electrified and water runs to most of the homes through hoses laid along the streets. But sewers and garbage collection are missing, creating sanitation hazards for its almost 10,000 residents.

At one home, a housewife started to cry as she told how "the foundation," as Children International is known to the residents, had helped her and her husband rebuild their house after it had been destroyed in a mud slide. Modest by U.S. standards, her new house provides a living area, a kitchen and several bedrooms for her family.

But it was the visit with Martha Carina and her family that brought the reality of those advertisements home. Inside their house, no larger than an average suburban second bedroom, they had fashioned two platforms on which the entire family slept without mattresses and with a minimum of blankets to fend off the chill mountain air. There were no other chairs and only a make-shift table and a very antiquated gas stove on which her mother could work to prepare their meals.

Outside, the hose that led down from the street poured water into several large containers. Clothes hung on ropes strung across the narrow space that served as a grassless front yard. In the corner stood Martha Carina, one and a half years old, dirty, quiet and hungry. Her mother picked her up and told us they had not had anything to eat all day. Her husband is a mason and picks up day labor jobs here and there, but not enough to sustain the family.

We took photos. I wondered about the exploitation, but all of the families we visited seemed to encourage the photography without shame. Martha Carina's mother was grateful that "the foundation" was helping to support one of her children. It was through them that she and her husband had taken steps to assure that there would be no more babies they could not feed.

I was also touched by the compassion of the Children International workers. These people see this kind of poverty every day. But as we walked back up the hill to where we had parked the vehicle, each was wiping away tears which had welled up in their eyes.

They would be returning that afternoon with emergency supplies--food, clothing, blankets, some bunk beds and mattresses. Then, they said, they would be asking the Kansas City office to find a sponsor for more of the children.

Now, when I see those television and magazine advertisements, I will be paying closer attention to them. Yes, those children are real, and the situations in which they live are real. I know Martha Carina is real, I saw her and I touched her. And she, in her own way, touched me deeply.

Those children in the child sponsorship ads—they are real, *The Miami Herald*, Jan 25, 2001