



## *Stories from Cuba*



**Contest Winners:** We wanted to develop some positive thinking at the same time as provide some resources over the Christmas season for those who needed it most. There were two contests—one for those in recovery program of Teen Challenge in Cuba and the other for the poorest of mission families serving in remote regions of Cuba. Those in the rehab programs were to write an essay story on the grace of God that they have seen. Many of their stories were about themselves. The mission families were to write about what they would like, as a family, for Christmas. Understand that these people are not professional writers and they just share stories or their hopes. As you look at the way they see things, value things, and their hopes in the context of their lives and culture we might be able to see things in our own lives and be filled with gratitude for all that God has given us even in this year of 2020. Ask yourself, after each story, Lord, what should this mean to me. My dog Shalom in the picture is a rescued street dog from Cuba. TL

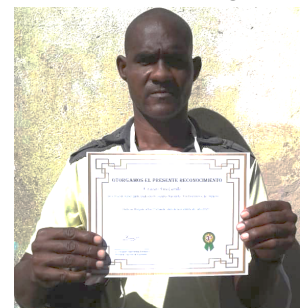
My name is Daisel Brito Dupotey, I'm a graduate student from Teen Challenge. I thank God for being able to tell my testimony. I met Jesus in a hospital on one of the many times I was in, due to a complicated and chronic arterial failure which provoked an ulcer in my right ankle. I had depended on canes to walk all the time for five years. Now the doctors were telling me they had done all they could and they would have to amputate my leg. At the same time, I was lost drinking alcohol, smoking, doing evil, and not good. As a consequence, I lost everything, my house, my family. My mother committed suicide when I was 4 years old and the relationship with my father was not good. I was alone, with no one to ask for help. I had been wandering on the streets and had suffered for years but without a leg? I was not going to cope with that, it was going to be my end. I was 40 years old, on a hospital bed I had determined to take my life, I did not see any way out.



I remember the evangelist who entered the hospital room I was in. He asked me if I believed in God and I answered no. But he insisted —“God loves you and He has the solution for your life!” The evangelist added that Jesus had seen my suffering and pain, that I shouldn't be worried because the Lord knew where to put me because He had a plan. The word *plan* struck my mind, it was familiar to me. I had been sleeping in porches, and two voices used to speak in my head. One said: “Kill yourself, you've lost everything anyway”. The other voice said: “Don't do it because I have a plan!” How could that man know what was happening to me? I had not told anyone precisely to avoid been called crazy. I began to cry. How could it be that I turned my back on God for 40 years? I surely did not deserve Him to have that great mercy on me. That evangelist asked me if I wanted to receive Jesus in my life, I could not hesitate and prayed the sinner's prayer. From that moment on, something occurred inside me, I could feel a peace that I had never felt before. My heart was telling me Jesus could change my life. I was discharged with my two legs. Right away I went to a clinic for detoxification. I prayed God to teach me His ways and a person approached me and told me about the Christian Center Teen Challenge. I could get in, I truly became a Christ follower in that blessed place. A year passed by, I graduated, and now I serve the Lord in the same place as part of the workers. I live there and walk without canes. I go to church and glorify God. I also study at the Christian School of Evangelism. As you see, the Lord performed the miracle because He is God and always has a plan.



My name is Lázaro Vera Castillo I live under the truth of verse Philippians 4:13 I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. I was born in Santiago de Cuba province on January 3, 1974. I am 46 years old and I lived with my parents until they died. They both loved me so much. We were very poor but they always advised me to be away from evil paths and I was obedient to them. It was really sad when they passed away because I was 21 years old and had to take care of 8 brothers. I started to live with no authority over me.



My brothers and I did not have a correct communication, they were concerned about my material needs and food but I could never express my pain, sadness and loneliness. I studied until the ninth grade and started to work running the errands for my neighbors and with that money I sustained myself. But I also started to be around addicted people and I soon got caught on addiction too. My brothers decided to take me to the Mental Health Clinic for detoxification and I was admitted three times with no results. I was never violent and I always drank in front of my house with one friend, one neighbor and a brother, no other people.

My house was on the way to "The Calvary" church, so, many Christians walked in front of my house. A married couple approached me and spoke to me about the Word of God (they are chaplains and missionaries now). They visited me and invited me several times to church. I finally decided to go and accepted Jesus on July 28, 2017. My life radically changed. My mind was renewed. My old man died. I received deliverance before getting into Teen Challenge program. It was a real impact for my family! Chaplain Alfredo saw I was intentionally attending the church and told me about the Men's Center that same year and I accepted his suggestion. The directors and the rest of the staff received me with love and I soon adapted to the rules of the Center. I stayed in the center one year receiving the Bible lessons with special teachers, spiritually and psychologically prepared. All the attention was excellent and also the relationship between the students. We were one family: us, the board, national chaplain Alex, the teachers, the staff, and the chaplains. Alex was always concerned about us and our training, holding a meeting with us twice a month. We even received special visits from abroad.

In the center I met chaplain Lidia, also from Santiago who brings students to the center. She is always concerned about others' needs and took me as a son and until now we keep that special relationship and we are now working together. I graduated on September 30, 2018. And I've been serving the Lord since then, recognizing where the Lord took me from and what He did in my life in Teen Challenge center. I am now a chaplain, and I bring new students to the center and support them. I also visit the prisons to minister to inmates, I visit their families and the sick in the hospitals; always remembering the grace and mercy God showed me, showing it to others to never go back or be a stumbling stone because His eyes are on me as the Word says. I want to be a blessing, giving all the glory and honor to the Lord Jesus Christ.



My name is Lázaro Reyes Leyva. I had a very tough childhood because my parents raised 6 of us but my mother had also to take care of 6 brothers of hers. We were very poor, almost no belongings. All that led my parents to practice very deep idolatry. My mother was a very nice person but an alcoholic. I remember how my older brothers scolded her for her irresponsible actions. I got married at the age of 18 and it was a total failure. At 22, I got married again to the mother of my only child and I thought my life was going to be successful then, but quite the contrary. I became a heavy drinker with my so-called friends. It was 10 years of agony for me, my wife, my son and my mother. I mistreated them physically and psychologically. That destroyed my marriage and took my son away from me. My daily life was a torment; I was hopeless, resentful, and full of hatred and uncertainty. I hated lots of people, and anger was eating me inside, and I was powerless and frustrated.



I was an atheist in spite of the idolatry practiced in my home. Whenever I would hear about something spiritual, it was all about the dead for me. That led me to feel forsaken. I kept drinking to fill the void and that took me to the edge of destruction. I had lost everything, my family, my house, my work and my self-esteem. While in that horrible situation, I talked to one who drank with me. He told me about Teen Challenge, that he knew someone whose life was restored there. I immediately contacted pastor Norlen and spoke to him about my problem. He helped me to understand several things before going to the Center. I visited the church sometimes but as a routine. I finally got into the program and started to deeply study there. The lessons I received made me comprehend things about my personal life and the affection I received was crucial for me.

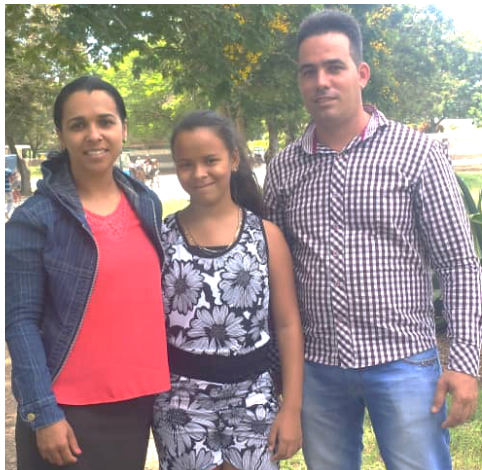
I was in the Center ten months and recovered 22 lost years. When I came back home, it's true I lost many things but I found the most valuable thing: God's love and I got back the love for my family and my self-esteem. Today, I am a member of the Evangelical Pentecostal Church in Cuba (Assemblies of God) "Source of Salvation" in Las Tunas province. I attend every service, I help chaplain Teófilo who follows me up and we rescue alcoholic to take them to Teen Challenge Center. I think my life would not have value unless I help people in the same situation I was in. I am happy to see there is a place of hope and a place with people willing to help others. God bless you!



Pastors: Leuris Fernández Carmenate Yuneisis Ochoa Torres Church: Elim Calixto García. Presbytery: San Andrés. Holguín What would you wish this Christmas?



Rays of sunlight announce a new day has arrived. It is a different day; one can even hear birds singing more vibrant trills. The very same creation manifests the joy. It is Christmas, day of hope, good news and blessings. We are all radiant at home; the house is full of decorations with colorful bellflowers. There are joyful Christmas songs playing and transmitting the beautiful message of peace. The garden is perfumed with diversity of flowers: roses, Annunciation lilies, Jamaican flowers, verbenas, jasmines, carnations; it is all filled with the rejoicing of kids running around and catching butterflies while they wait to open their presents and eat the delicious cake. At one side of the garden, we have pitched a big tent where the tables and chairs are set. The grill emanates the pleasant smell of the roast. Our son Jonathan is right next to the door, solicitously receiving our guests, welcoming them and kindly leading them to the tables which are also decorated with beautiful flowers and a Bible verse on each of them. Where are all these many guests coming from? They are the people we went out to invite from our community; they willingly attended our invitation because no one thinks of them. No person takes them into account. They are rejected, undesirable due to their vices, hopeless, with no motivation to live. We wanted to take the salvation message to them, to give their smiles back to them, to give them a reason to live. The time for supper and presents is close but there is a more exquisite and special time before, a moment of eternal value: We open the Scriptures and we share the story of that Hebrew couple that in the far Bethlehem from Judea did not find a place to stay and just like them -who do not own a comfortable place to rest, had to go to the stable. Amid the bleating of the sheep and the warm breath of cows in that cold night, a salvation light shone in that manger where they placed the divine newborn with extraordinary love. That baby's cry was the melody that filled the lost world with hope. The angels filled the place with the announcement of good news: Jesus is born! Jesus is born! The pastors (shepherds) taking care of the sheep that night heard it; the star of the glorious announcement was visible. There is life, hope and transformation for each life that opens his heart to this child, God. The eyes of our guests are now full of a new hope as tears of repentance and gratitude run down their cheeks. Beautiful Christmas, extraordinary message of love, Emanuel, God with us! I hear my phone ringing, it is 5:00 am, it is sister Ivía Ester from "Making up the hedge" ministry to start the prayer time for the family. What a wonderful dream I had! When I woke up I saw my empty hands with no finances to make it come true. We cannot celebrate the beautiful Christmas we wish because we lack finances. Blessings and Merry Christmas!



Place: Sabanilla 2 Presbytery: San Andrés. Church: Spring of Life. Pastors: Elizabeth Medina García and Luis Enrique Rodríguez García **A valuable treasure God has put in my hands:**

A ministry without the support of a family would not be easy to undertake. That is why I want to share part of the experiences we have lived as missionaries. Since the day the Lord called us we have consecrated our lives to such an honored service. When we arrived at Sabanilla on December 5, 2015; it was the most beautiful and happy day of our lives but at the same time, a great challenge had begun. Far from all our loved ones, we had to focus as a family in order to be successful and fulfill the honored calling.

We remember our pastoral house was in terrible conditions. When it rained at night, the walls fell and we had to get up under the rain and my beloved wife with tears, went out as a carpentry assistant to hold the pieces of wood so I could hammer them; that inspired me to go forward. Illnesses also visited my life as a pastor. I remember my wife had a cervical crisis so bad that she couldn't get up from bed. I thought I could not go on but she encouraged me and prayed at nights until sleeplessness and her faith cheered me up until the day I received healing. There were no rainy days in which she would not go out walking 3kms through the mud to lead the small prayer groups. I used to think she would say she could not go but instead, she would give me a smile showing her joy to serve God under those circumstances. Once, we had nothing to eat, she saw me thoughtful and then stated: "Do not worry, God will provide, but in the meanwhile, let's take advantage of time and fast". That certainly impacted my heart. Around a year ago, those hands that held pieces of wood under the rain and that for times would grab the construction shovel to help me because I was working alone, building the foundations of our home; Those hands that wash with love, that prepare my clothing to be presentable; they are suffering so much pain and inflammation. Washing with her



bare fists has hurt her tender hands. Since that moment I have asked God to open doors to be able to honor my wife, but it has not been possible, finances have not allowed me to do it. If God allows me to have a gift for her for Christmas, I would ask Him a washing machine so that my beloved wife would not suffer so much pain and would not wear herself out because she is very dear to me and a helper in the ministry. She is the precious treasure God has put in my hands to take care of and protect her and love her. We humbly greet you in Jesús' love.



**Family: Arnel García Santana Maricelis Carpio Pérez**

God bless you who read. My wife and I have 3 beautiful kids, a boy who is 13 years old and is in high school, and twins of 7 years old: the boy is Annel and the girl is Anneli. My father also lives with us, he is 87 years old. We lived in Sabanilla de Purnio where we accepted the Lord and were serving the church as pastor. But in 2015, we left our home to serve the Lord full time as missionaries in Amasabo neighborhood. As other families, we have dreams of what we would like to get this Christmas. As there are 6 of us in our family, we sat and started to discuss what each of us would want. My little girl wanted a doll which talks like her friend's Camila. Annel wanted a box full of little cars; my older son (who has a different thinking because he is a teenager) said he had always dreamed with a laptop because he needed it for school. His mother told him he was asking for something too big but he answered with certainty: "I have a big God!" Then, I asked my old man what he wanted for Christmas and he answered laughing: roast pork, rice and beans and salad, nothing more. My wife told me she had so many wishes but the most important was a washing machine and an iron not to spend the whole day washing and heating the iron in the stove. Finally, it was my turn (I am always the last). I said I would want a tactile mobile phone, not necessarily big because I have been trying to buy one for some time now but I have not been able. Then, I explained we would need tons of money for our dreams because the family is too big. That is why we all talked to choose one thing we would all want. Taking into account our opinions, we concluded we wanted a laptop, which we all need. My older son began to jump very excited like he had received it already. We were perplexed and sad at the same time because we know we cannot afford it. But that became the longing of our family for this Christmas. To receive a laptop will be a reason for our family to rejoice and be happy this Christmas. We are all fervently praying for what we long for. Carlos Rodolfo Ávila Peña Noemí Leyva Ramírez Adán Carlos Ávila Leyva

**"My first Christmas with my family"** Carlos Rodolfo Ávila Peña Noemí Leyva Ramírez Adán Carlos Ávila Leyva

All the people have great dreams, many wish to fill stadiums with crowds, to travel to places, to be successful in businesses, to graduate from college, to write a book; all this to leave a mark on this earth and in our generation. These are amazing goals that no matter how difficult they are to achieve, they are not impossible to fulfill.



However, through this essay, I want to tell you about one of the greatest dreams I will fulfill. I had a happy childhood, full of the love of my parents, I know that despite their defects, they did the best to educate me and to raise me as a good man. But I had a huge conflict, my heart was divided. When I was 1 year old, they decided to divorce due to the fact they could not seem to understand each other. I used to spend every Christmas with one or the other but inside me, I had the need to be with both of them because I loved them both. After tough times, God puts special people in your life, my mother married a good man and special for our lives, so special that through him, we knew the Lord and decided to follow Him. I not only learned about His love but I also felt it. I set myself a dream, and I say that from all the other dreams I have, that is the greatest: to build a family in the Lord. When I was 20 years old I met my wife and we got married when we were 21. We are now 23 and thank God we have achieved many of the goals we had in God. We are pastors, I am about to graduate from the medical college and I had the most beautiful gift of all one could have on earth. We have a boy and he is about to be 1 year old. Nowadays, I am about to see the desire of my heart fulfilled: My first Christmas with my wife and my son. If you ask me what I would want for this Christmas, I would say: I would like to buy many toys and gifts for my baby boy. It would be a great day! I would take many pictures to record the memories of such lovely time so that when we grow older, my wife and I remember it with joy and satisfaction. We would have a great family dinner where we could thank God for giving us the opportunity of being a different family, since I will be able to give my baby what I could not have in my childhood. We have great goals and challenges ahead that we will fulfill each day but I will never forget my first Christmas with my family.

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