

Zoom in

By Laura Liz Gil Echenique

Alberto claims that he had been a photographer for 12 years. His life changed some time ago; a series of unfortunate events made him ill and life altered completely.

He was so much stressed at work that his biological defense mechanism plummeted. He began to have stomach problems due to successive giardia infections. Sometime later his mother passed away, and his marriage entered into a crisis that led to separation. By that time he had very little time for himself, between photography and some English lessons he had taken. Since his stomach problems continued, he decided to take some pills (I don't have time to go to the doctor) without knowing for sure what his problem was; he thought he had some parasites; yes, easy to kill. The result was the destruction of his intestinal flora, and a series of immunological problems.

The specialist in immunology who has been seeing him for some time now explained to him that his intestinal flora would never be the same in spite of his recovery. Alberto tried to show me his condition by taking the skin of my arm as an example. He asked me to imagine what my arm would be like if it had little, irregular or no hair at all, and then he told me that that was what happened to his intestines. That was the reason for his propensity to get sick, since his defenses were always down. The giardias that frequented his body were now a real danger for him.

According to him, at the beginning he boiled the drinking water, but then it became economically unsustainable. Fortunately, a kind of miracle happened. Someone told him that there was a purifying water plant at the Kairos Center for Liturgy, and he started to come. His own doctor realized that he not only had improved his health, but had not got sick again. One of his routines is to walk almost a mile to fill his water bottles, and to get some for his sister and nephew.

He no longer dedicates himself to photography, but he hustles with life. He now collects empty soda and beer cans and glass bottles to sell them for recycling. Thus while he collects clean water, he cleans the city too. If we look at these actions with tenderness, it would be a sort of stage to take photographs.

In the words of Julio César Hernandez, who is in charge of tending to the water purification system as part of the management of Kairos Center, this is the first time Alberto is encouraged to talk to someone when he comes to get his water. Maybe coming here for him is having an anchor to reality and to responsibilities with the family life he no longer has. It is this space of sweetness in a smile that everyday life offers in some corners, sometimes not that visible, of the city.

Kairos Center dispenses water and tenderness, similar to a mother who opens her arms to her prodigal children without asking much or demanding something in exchange. Perhaps that is why no one knew this man's story; his past as a photographer; his present as a collector of recyclable matter. It is a quotidian exercise of receiving and not asking who or why or what. That was the first thing I knew about this Center for Christian liturgy. Later I began to learn little by little of the many projects this 'family' promotes to benefit all people, whether Christian or not, who need support.

There are many ways to open doors. One of them is a smile; a kind, sincere, welcoming smile can do wonders. A smile can be stronger than a neon sign that fortunately does not blind our streets yet.