

This is not a report on numbers but rather of a few stories. Stories can have more impact than numbers at times. It makes the numbers real.

There's a young man entering first year of high school in the fall. He is at least a year behind already and a couple of years ago, he would have been written off as a lost cause. His best friend brought him to Echo when he moved back from TX. I was told he would be a bad influence and that he should not come. Two years later, he is a regular attender and he recently stated that he has decided he wants to do well in school and that he would like to work more closely with someone, especially in math. However, there are also times when he is quite despondent. He knows he has no future and no country to call home. He knows he can't get a driver's license or a real job. He lives in constant fear of his parents being deported. He came to the US when he was boy. Now he is growing in to a man with no future. I try to encourage him to at least finish High School. I tell him that no matter what happens, an education will always be important.

I tell him to use his summer time boredom to read, that knowledge is power. We talk about leaders such as Mandela, Ghandi and Dr. King. He says, "that was for other people, no one ever does anything for us". He says there is no Mexican speaking on the behalf of his plight in that same manner. I tell him maybe he can lead the way.... He says he tries to speak up in school but gets in trouble. And of course, he can't make himself known or he will be sent back to a country he doesn't know. He has no voice of his own because of the risk he takes if he speaks.

Another young man – his dad was just deported. He failed to come to a complete stop at a stop sign. He never knows when he will see his dad again, if ever. He can't go and visit...

Then there's this boy (who by the way is also behind in school) who I never thought would make it at Echo even. That says a lot because I have been very tolerant in working through challenging behaviors. It has not been an easy road. He was pretty much out of control behaviorally. After a school year of coming to Echo, he was student of the month this spring in 5th grade. The only adult other than his teachers at the award ceremony was his Echo volunteer. His parents, as is the case with so many others, either had to work, but more likely, were afraid to come to the school. I have learned that many parents are afraid to be there for any type of celebration or problem because they don't have papers. There's no one in the family to share in such celebrations. On top of that, their parents may have a second grade education, so if you make it to 5th grade, you're doing pretty good.....

I'm not sharing this in support of breaking our laws. I'm sharing this to shine light on children who did not ask to be here. And these children, one after another, is growing in to young men and women with very limited options. Their parents came to escape extreme poverty. These children can go back to a place they don't know and live in that extreme poverty. Or they can become day laborers and maids. Or to make real money, the men can become involved in crime/drugs and the women can become strippers and

prostitutes. Then we expect them to do well in school...as this reality stares them in the face every day....

Side note: I see a lot of alcoholism in the men and fathers these children are around. And I know there is much abuse of the women and mothers. One can then also infer much that the child has to endure including being beat. Symptoms of circumstances...

Then we have the “regular” American children and youth

I was asked for some duct tape by a young man. Knowing who he is and that he never pays attention and that he seems to enjoy being disruptive I’m thinking he probably broke something and wants to try to fix it. So I tell him, I won’t give you any tape unless you tell me why you need it. He embarrassingly shows me his shoe. He needs the tape to fix his sole. (He needs us to fix his soul.....) So another time I talk to him some more. He says he lives with his mom and has no siblings. He says his mom works at night. He is in 7th grade and is so far behind in school. I talk to him about graduating High School. He doesn’t care anymore about anything. He says he wants to get to High School so he can drop out. Then he says, “how will I stay out of trouble since Echo is closing for a few weeks?”.

Another young man is even more lost. His mom won’t even give him a key so he can get in to his own home after school. He aimlessly wanders the streets. He came to my house a couple of months ago to pick up a pair of shoes that Ronaldo wanted to give him. I haven’t seen him since. I spoke with his mother a few times. My impression is that she is likely on drugs because nothing was coherent. She would leave his younger siblings at home asleep by themselves with the door unlocked. Never understood why it could be unlocked for that reason and not for him to be able to get in.

My point with all of this is – how can we expect to be a strong society when we seem to turn a blind eye to what is literally right in front of our eyes. These children did not ask to be born into these situations. They are trying to figure things out themselves and as we know, children are not the best problem solvers. Yes, the parents should be there and they need to take responsibility. BUT, when they don’t, and many won’t, then what? The way I see it, we can choose where to spend our time effort and money – we can be reactionary and spend more and more money on prisons and law enforcement or we can be proactive and help guide them into productive individuals.

To finish, when I was in Kenya in 2008, God gave me this verse from an 11 year old boy named Jemleck. Out of nowhere, he quoted it to me and it is these words I claim for the children I know. From Jeremiah 29:11 - the Message version – “I have it all planned out-plans to take care of you, not abandon you, plans to give you the future you hope for.”