



# Holy Cross District of Peru

## *Yancana Huasy Project*

### **The Bond**

#### **A Doctor Returns to Canto Grande**

by *Dr. Joseph Paul Dutkowsky, MD*

*Part II*

Baby Aroma was born in Lima, Peru, a city of nine million people cramped together in a narrow strip of land between desert and ocean. For years her parents had waited and hoped for a child of their own to love and raise. Those hopes turned to confusion, shock, and sadness upon her birth when it was discovered that she had Down's Syndrome. Their plans for their family's future taken from them, they took Baby Aroma home and tried to adjust their lives and hearts to having a child with a disability. It did not take long before problems were noted in the feeding and growth of their daughter. Blood tests showed that Baby Aroma had leukemia and the parents' sorrows compounded. They sought the best medical treatment they could find but Baby Aroma would die before she was a year and a half old.



*Dr. Dutkowsky*

Eleanore was born in Montana amid the big sky and expansive landscape of the American Northwest. Her parents, too, had yearned for a child to love, nurture, and watch grow as she ran across the fields. But Eleanore was born with cerebral palsy and would never walk much less run across any field. Her waking hours would be spent in a wheelchair which would position her to minimize the spasms that characterize cerebral palsy. Her parents took her home, surrounded her with love and care, and built her needs and limitations into the daily life of their family. And so it went until six days before her twelfth birthday when pneumonia would take Eleanore's life from her.

Two lives that contemporary culture considers without meaning. Lives that consumed and wasted limited material and monetary resources with no return to society. Such is the wisdom of contemporary society. It is a modern-day creed that mocks the Author of Life and His creation. And it is fundamentally wrong. For, together, these two children accomplished what no army, politician, or businessman could have achieved.

I am a pediatric orthopaedic surgeon specializing in the care of children with disabilities, and I practice in upstate New York. Four years ago a priest came to visit our church. He described the work of the Holy Cross Fathers to establish clinics providing care for children with disabilities in the impoverished barrios of Lima, Peru. I leaned over to my wife and said that somehow I was going to be part of that effort. After Mass, I spoke with the priest and requested his card. Time passed, but I never forgot about Peru and, eight months

later, I looked for the priest's card. I had lost it. Remembering that he was a Holy Cross Father I searched the Internet and managed to contact his order. They knew who the priest was and put me in touch with his Holy Cross colleagues in Peru. I freed my schedule, bought a ticket, and flew to Lima.

The flight landed at midnight. After clearing Immigration and Customs I picked up my bag and exited into the terminal along a roped off lane between two great masses of people. In the crowd I spotted a man with a sign that said, "Hello, Dr. Joe". I walked up, shook his hand, and met Father David Farrell. During the early morning ride in the old van to the barrio known as Canto Grande, Father David asked me why I was there. I said I wanted to be useful. I asked if they had any children, especially those with disabilities. He said they had a huge number of such children. Then I told him I could be useful.

Later that morning I was taken to a place called, Yancana Huasy. Packed into a space surrounded by an outdoor market and bazaar was an oasis of hope in what appeared to be an endless expanse of destitution and crushing poverty. Here, brick buildings held classrooms for children to learn a skill, or for parents to learn to care for their children with special needs. I saw rooms where disabled children and adults worked producing goods that could be sold in Peru and abroad, and a therapy space where dedicated therapists worked to prevent the contractures that cause pain and limit children with cerebral palsy and other disabilities. Visible through a hallway were benches in an open space that acted as a church for Our Lord of Hope Parish. Beside this space, a clinic to be named for Brother André, the healing doorman of Montreal, was being built.

During the next six days, both within Yancana Huasy and through house calls, I saw children with every disability imaginable. I offered what I could knowing the great limitation of treatment opportunities available to the people I worked beside. Yet, despite their lack of resources, these workers at Yancana Huasy cheerfully sought out and attended to the needs of disabled children and their families in this barrio of 900,000 people. I marveled at their dedication



and service to the neediest of this community of nearly unimaginable poverty. I kept copious notes of everything from an individual child's diagnosis to observations from the buses we rode. These handwritten notes, I was sure, would provide me with the memories to write an article for the Holy Cross newsletter *Signs of Hope* when I returned.

Upon my return home, I found the realities in Canto Grande to be so overwhelming that I couldn't write about my experience for three weeks. I had received far more than I had given, but could not come up with no idea or storyline that didn't seem to trivialize the situation. Finally, I forced myself to sit at my computer. I looked over at my notes

sitting on my desk, folded in the envelope I had placed them in before leaving Peru. However, I didn't reach for them; I couldn't, for my mind just wouldn't let go of the face of an infant I had examined on my lap at Yancana Huasy. The face of a beautiful four-month-old girl with Down's Syndrome named, Aroma. The penetrating beauty of her eyes would not leave my mind.

I serve as the newsletter editor for the American Academy for Cerebral Palsy and Developmental Medicine, the premier academic academy of professionals who care for children with disabilities. Other academy members had worked in third world countries, so I included an edited copy of "The Eyes" in the Academy newsletter. While browsing through the newsletter, a therapist in Montana read "The Eyes" and gave a copy to her friend Tamara Kittelson-Aldred. Tamara is an occupational therapist who specializes in seating systems (special wheelchairs) for children with disabilities. Tamara's daughter, Eleanore, had cerebral palsy and required such a wheelchair for her daily life before dying of pneumonia. In their



*The Yancana Huasy School*



## A Gift for Jackie

grief, Tamara and her husband, Rick, started a ministry of providing specialty wheelchairs for children with disabilities, and had even done some work in Peru.

Their ministry is called Eleanore's Project.

Excited at the possibility of working together Tamara e-mailed me. She would be going to Peru in five weeks and she asked if I would arrange for her to meet Father David and the workers at Yancana Huasy. I e-mailed Father David and he agreed. They met in Canto Grande and immediately realized that together there was a possibility to provide for many of the children at the school. This past fall Tamara e-mailed me again and asked if I would join the team from Eleanore's Project on a trip to Peru to help fit 200 children with special wheelchairs, the first 50 being at Yancana Huasy. I readily agreed.

The trip was nothing short of amazing. Yancana Huasy was busy as before but now the Brother André Clinic was functioning and the space with the benches for Mass was quickly converted into a wheelchair clinic. Four children at a time were brought in, along with their families. A small team worked with each of the children to fit them with a specialty wheelchair that met their individual needs. I examined each child and then made suggestions for the seating systems based on my observations. Children who had previously spent their lives lying in contorted positions were now sitting comfortably with muscles that could relax. Many began using their hands for the first time and smiled for their parents who responded with a love and excitement that transcends cultures or economics.

Saturday morning Tamara and I went to the University of San Marcos in downtown Lima where we had been invited to give lectures on seating systems for children with disabilities. By Monday morning, the folks from the univer-



*One of approximately 50 Yancana Huasy students with cerebral palsy helped by Eleanore's Project was a 13 year-old girl named Jackie. She arrived for her fitting slumped down in a borrowed wheelchair that was obviously far too big for her, and was so uncomfortable that it left her gazing into space and occasionally whimpering with discomfort.*

*However, after a team of technicians and therapist from Eleanore's Project fitted her with a new contoured seat that conformed to her rounded back, Jackie seemed like a new child! Finally her body was properly supported, which allowed her muscles to relax to the point that she can now control her head and use her hands. In a short time she was sitting upright in her chair looking around, playing with toys, and giggling with her mother. The Organization returns to Peru every year to provide chairs to more children at Yancna Huasy.*



**Eleanore's Project** began in 2004 in memory of Eleanore Kittelson-Aldfred as a legacy from her family. Its mission is to improve the quality of life for children with disabilities and their families, through provisions of mobility, equipment, education and related activities in collaboration with like-minded organizations in the U.S. and around the world. Their website can be found at [www.eleanoresproject.org](http://www.eleanoresproject.org).



*Dr. Dutkowsky (right) with Jackie (center), and Tamara Kittelson-Aldred of Eleanore's Project (second from Left)*

sity were at our sides at Yancana Huasy. It was nothing short of amazing. I had to stop for a moment to take it all in. Here, in the geographic and economic center of poverty in a city of nine million people, helping disabled children with disabilities, were therapists from America working with therapists from Yancana Huasy working alongside therapy students from Minneapolis and Lima. It was a profound site. It spoke of people coming together to meet the

speaks of a very real bond between Baby Aroma and Eleanore. It is a mystical bond that defies secular explanation but is crystal clear through the lens of faith. Theirs is a resounding witness to the indispensable value of each human life in God's plan for His creation. Theirs is The Holy Spirit's call of divine love to a suffering world.

Contemporary society would say that their lives were a waste. Their disabilities and resultant needs made each of them less of a person. This denial of personhood strikes at the very foundation of human dignity. This denial of personhood opens the door to atrocities such as slavery, ethnic cleansing, and abortion. But just as society has sought to deny personhood to groups of its members, God has chosen to elevate personhood through the way of the cross. Jesus' loving death on the cross has made holy and life-giving every loving sacrifice.

This is not just the story of two children. It is our story, yours and mine. It is the story of every person who has ever been

Two children who were born on different sides of the equator and who never met. Their lives did not even share the same period of time on this earth. Two children who did not live to see their adolescence. Their extraordinary influence on the lives of children and families in Canto Grande

graced with a heartbeat. For no one can voluntarily will their heart to beat even once. It is a call to invest our heartbeats in the service of our brothers and sisters in need instead of chasing transient petty pleasures. It is an opportunity to find fulfillment in a way that renews society and elevates culture. For we also are part of the mystic bond that unites Baby Aroma and Eleanore. It is that collective union that The Church proclaims as the Body of Christ. Once lifted on the cross for all humanity in the person of Jesus we now are that body and together by that cross we have found our only hope.

Such is the Wisdom of God.

*Dr. Joseph Dutkowsky is a pediatric surgeon from Cooperstown, New York, who volunteers at our Holy Cross medical clinic in Lima. While in Peru, Dr. Dutkowsky focused on the medical needs of the physically and mentally challenged children of the mission.*



*Canto Grande neighborhood of Lima*

needs of others without the barriers that we too often find erected in our paths. Here in a space where Eucharist is celebrated Church simply continued.

Most profound of all, we were all there because of the lives of two children.



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