



Soulfires: A New Direction, A Deeper Purpose

By Dave Franco • November 23, 2017

In our [Soulfires](#) series, we share the stories of people who have encountered God in powerful ways and responded by initiating significant ministry projects.

It was May 1989 and Rocky had had a tiring day. Selling new cars was something he was good at, but the hours were long and the pressures were enough to make a man scramble for some solace at the end of the day.

As he entered the apartment where he sublet a room from a friend, Rocky was eager to shut the door, fall asleep and let the day fall from him. But somewhere between the front door and his room, his friend was able to ask how Rocky was and mention something about how a church he had visited was looking for missionaries to join a team going down to Honduras.

That's when Rocky did something that changed his life.

He asked, "What was that?"

Thousands of civilians were caught in the crossfire between the Communist Sandinistas who threatened to take Honduras, and the rebels, or Contras, who defended it. "It's a humanitarian crisis," his friend said. "People are desperate for help."

Initially, it was something Rocky didn't even consider. But as he lay in bed that night, the idea of offering himself for the mission knocked around in his brain. Later, he had a dream in which God told him he would meet and marry a blonde, blue-eyed Dutch nurse ... in Honduras.

It wasn't long after that that Rocky was on his way.

Two weeks after arriving in Honduras, Rocky lay on a rubber mat in a hut so thick with mosquitos it was like an interior fog. A raging fever from the malaria he had contracted was boiling his blood yet he shivered so violently, his teeth rattled. Each time the Sandinistas' shells would land nearby, the ground would quake and shake the dust from the ceiling to cascade down onto his skin that had turned goopy and oozing from thousands of infected bug bites. He kept his arms pulled tightly to his sides to keep from touching the netting where the vampire bats would suck his blood and turn his arms and bedding into a bloody mess.

He was miserable. "I volunteered for this?" he chided himself through chattering teeth.

One day when he was better, Rocky was riding in the back of a military ambulance when it came to a stop. The back doors opened and there stood a Dutch nurse who was blonde and blue-eyed—the exact same nurse from his dream. His heart began to pulse a little faster. Suddenly, the harsh Honduran conditions got a little more bearable.

In the days to come, Rocky worked alongside medical teams from a field hospital to help burn victims that had been caught in the blitz of incendiary weapons meant to char the Contras into submission. Rocky was initially confused as to why none of the civilians who arrived at the unit were young men—only children, old folks and women.

Most of the men were dead.

The level of poverty Rocky saw in the Honduran jungles was shocking—dirty water, little food, the most crudely crafted shelters imaginable filled with malnourished people. Often times kids would show up to school hungry and naked. Most children had no idea why their fathers were gone or why heaven rained fire.

Rocky's job was to do whatever he was told by the missionary leaders, and there was always more than could be accomplished. They battled the elements, the mosquitos, sickness, injury and the witch doctors who brought the people lies of healing from a dark underworld.

One day while Rocky was trying to comfort burn victims waiting to be treated, a little boy walked up and tugged on Rocky's shirt. Despite only being able to speak the Miskito language of the Honduran jungles, he was able to communicate that he wanted milk. Rocky sent someone inside the field hospital who returned with some canned milk. The boy took it, and when he turned around to walk away, he revealed a severely burned back.

Part of the boy's story became suddenly clear: The milk was not meant for him. If it had been, he would have stayed to be treated.

In the months to come, the boy would come back about every two weeks to find Rocky, who began to buy small cans of powdered milk to keep on hand. In the process, Rocky learned that the boy was taking care of his baby sister by himself. Because the Honduran villagers lived in small clearings in the jungle, they would often have to run into the jungle when bombs began to slam the earth. The night before the little boy tugged on Rocky's shirt, he, his sister and mother had been fleeing from the shelling when his mother was struck. She was obliterated right before their eyes.

That is why the little girl never appeared with the boy to get milk. She stayed where she believed it was safe—in the jungle. To her, a clearing meant death.

Months later, the day came when Rocky was transferred to a different hot zone. As he got on the plane and the pilot began to power up, out from the jungle and into the gusts of wind stepped the little boy

holding the hand of his sister dressed in a filthy white dress. They had come—to the clearing—to wave goodbye to the man who gave them milk—and life. Rocky had dealt with so many sick people in so many ways, it never occurred to him that the day he handed the little boy a can of milk would amount to this dangerous expression of thanks.

“They’re so little,” he whispered to himself as he broke down. He wept for their indescribable plight: on the run from the elements, starvation, disease and communist warriors.

Rocky’s soul had been marked by the eyes of that boy and his sister. He couldn’t shake their image. He forever had a heightened sensitivity for the dangers children face around the world. Would God use it?

Six years later, in 1995, Rocky and his wife, Joske, the Dutch nurse he had met in Honduras, moved to Santa Cruz, Bolivia, where they would start a church motivated by what Rocky believed was a call from God to disciple the *entire* nation—no small feat.

They strategized that to hold services in a movie theater would allow them to take advantage of the free advertising the newspapers would give theaters around the city. So they included the playing of Christian movies as a part of the community outreach, and the movies quickly showed to packed houses. People began to come to Christ at a stunning rate. They traveled from far and wide to hear about Jesus and to be set free from hopelessness. In just six months, the church tipped 1,000 people in weekly attendance, and every six months saw another 1,000 people. But even at the pace, Rocky knew that if he were to reach all of Bolivia for Christ, it wouldn’t happen in 20 of his lifetimes.

And there was one more problem.

Everywhere Rocky went, his heart broke for the children that lived in functioning communities of wild street kids—children with no parents, no money other than what they could steal, no food and no shelter. They lived poverty-stricken in the streets, sleeping where they could, eating out of trash cans. They seemed to exist to exist, fighting and scrapping to live another day and then another. Rocky met one 12-year-old boy named Fidel who, by will and smarts, had become supreme leader of a large group of kids. Just for the asking, Fidel could get drugs, prostitutes—every vice imaginable.

It shook Rocky to his core to see kids so exposed to a harsh, adult world of despair. And contrary to the popular belief that once a street kid grew up they would enter back into mainstream society Rocky knew that wasn’t true. Street kids turn into street adults and end up in prison or dead. Their lives wreak havoc on themselves, their families and on society.

Bolivia had no answer for the problem. But did he? Rocky begged God for direction.

Suddenly it occurred to him. While there were plenty of local churches, they were not the thread that held the society together. The one thing that everybody experienced—even if for just a few years—was school. If kids could just stay in school, they would have a chance.

“Jesus needs to be in the public schools,” Rocky thought. “Without him, there is no other way to save Bolivia. If kids can hear about the love of God through Jesus, they will sense, even if they don’t fully understand, that their school is offering them something they can’t get anywhere else. They will feel that school is a place of love.”

Joske and Rocky went before their church to gain support for what they were about to do. The church enthusiastically came alongside to help build the program and curriculum, even going so far as to begin writing textbooks. They focused on life skills, principles, values and purpose for living—all centered on Jesus’ life and teachings.

Now for the hard part—getting the government to allow it. Initially put off by the idea, officials finally reasoned that they were without answers for the generational problems besetting the country. They, with support from the Roman Catholic Church, approved the curriculum to be tested in three schools.

The result was so dramatic; no one could misinterpret the effect. The kids were filled with excitement and enjoyed school, and the teachers and parents were calling for more. Better yet, the dropout rates nearly vanished. There was no denying that Rocky and Joske had opened the floodgates to a sea of change. Suddenly, Bolivia’s children, and perhaps the entire country, had a new hope. Even the Bolivian government was overjoyed.

Since then, *Mission Generation* curriculum has reached every corner of Bolivia, and more than 15 countries across Latin America, North America, Asia and Europe have either instituted it or are considering it. Even school districts in the United States have seen the value and have adopted it.

In Bolivia, the change is so dramatic and the number of conversions to Christianity is so high that the schools themselves have become the local church in many communities.

“Schools are now a beacon of hope,” says Rocky. “People used to want to get away from them—now they can’t get enough. That’s the power of Jesus.”

Rocky looks at the streets of Bolivia and sees an enormous difference from what they used to be. It’s been a long road from a car salesman to a vessel for life-change in the lives of millions in Latin America.

“It’s good to know God can give you a new direction at any time,” Rocky adds. “It’s happened for millions of kids, and it has certainly happened for me.”