

A hug that saved a soul

by Patrick Barrett

Isaiah 40:11: [The Sovereign LORD] tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

I was not going to be able to complete my high school education because I had no place to live.

Friday was going to be my last day of classes. I was in my junior year, but would never graduate. I had been through 10 different foster homes, and my caseworker made it clear that no family would want to take in an 18-year-old. Since there was no place else for me to go, I would be sent across the state to a trade school and learn how to be a welder. But then I was called to the guidance office. I thought it was just going to be another bureaucratic hoop required of me on my last day. To my surprise, the guidance counselor proposed that I meet with a family interested in taking me in so I could complete my education.



The Barrett family

I was shocked and immediately explained that I was not interested. I was not willing to experience the rejection of foster homes again. As I walked down the hall, I couldn't help but think, *What if I never try this option? For the rest of my life I will be looking back to this day and asking myself "What if?"* So I went back and was introduced to Ray and Harriet Miller.

Their love and concern were so obvious in that first encounter. And much to my surprise, I heard myself saying that I was interested in pursuing this option.

Ray and Harriet had stepped out in faith. Ray recently had been laid off from his job and had just taken responsibility for several grandchildren. Here I was, a stranger, yet

they took me in. I was poor and not able to buy food and clothing, yet they cared for me. Their generosity amazed and intrigued me. Because of their physical demonstration of love, I was able to finish school. But even more important, I learned what love could be like.

One memory still stands out clearly in my mind. One night the Millers confronted me about a rule that I had broken. Would I be out on the street again? It did not turn out that way. They explained what the problem was and what they expected of me. They still loved me and wanted me to stay. Then Harriet came around the table and hugged me. Had I ever been hugged before? What was I supposed to do? I stood there stiff as a board. I was not able to receive the hug, nor was I able to give a hug in return.

The Millers were building a bridge of understanding for me. I was starting to know what it meant to be loved and accepted for who I was. These connections would be crucial in enabling me to understand God love for me.

Could God use me to be His arms so that He could hug a hurting soul today?

Despite this family's nurturing care, I still struggled. I knew that my strength was not enough to make my life worthwhile, so one night I called out to the darkness, "God, if You are out there, help me!" The help came in the form of a small rural church. One summer night, Preacher Terry was explaining salvation. Jesus was not just the Savior of the world; He could also be my Savior. I walked out of the service emotionally distraught. I cried out, "God, how can You expect me to trust You — a God that I can't see, touch or feel — when I can't trust those that I can see, touch and feel?" Poignant memories of being rejected flooded my mind and made it difficult for me to focus. Then God spoke to my soul in words that assured my heart, "Yes, you will

continue to be hurt, but I will heal you every time." I accepted that promise and the offer of salvation. I have never regretted it.

God has healed me of so much. He blesses me daily with more than I ever thought possible. Today, I can freely give and accept hugs. I am able to love others because someone cared enough to make love real for me. Since that day, I have found so many others hurting and without hope. Could God use me to be His arms so that He could hug a hurting soul today? I have no choice. I have been given so much that my heart aches to see people live with so little joy, love and peace in their lives. What a joy when another "Patrick" discovers the fullness of life that only God can offer!

I met a man in Costa Rica, a retired banker. By Costa Rican standards, he was very successful. He had a pension and a nice home and could buy whatever new car he wanted. He had been a faithful churchgoer his whole life but was still discontented. I shared my testimony in Spanish and discovered that our childhood had many similarities. I didn't say anything eloquent; it was just my story. After hearing it, this "Patrick" observed something different about me. The hug that saved my soul was now allowing me to impact another soul.

What about you? Can people see God at work in your life? Could God send you into the life of a hurting person with His message of love? ■