

Faith led Robanske to become involved

His nonprofit group, Embracing Orphans, has completed a lengthy list of projects in Jamaica.

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Carl Robanske didn't start out planning to create and build the Walla Walla-based nonprofit organization, Embracing Orphans.

He really just wanted to put some muscle on his Christian faith, he remembered.

It was the tail end of 2007, the last Friday before winter break from his job teaching P.E. and health classes at Garrison Middle School. He's also coached track and swimming and acts as the school's Associated Student Body advisor.

Plenty busy, but something was missing, Robanske said. He recognized the problem, but wasn't sure where to go or what to do. He did know, however, his desire to grow closer to Jesus Christ was overwhelming.

Which had nothing to do with Jamaica, the 30-year-old teacher was just about certain.

"I didn't want to go there. I had contacts in Trinidad and El Salvador. I knew a Christmas break trip would not allow a lot of travel time, so those were logical."

He gave the coin toss to God, telling him, "Whatever plane ticket is the cheapest, that's where I'll go."

While he searched travel Web sites Expedia and Orbit with ticket boundaries defined by money and time, Jamaica popped up.

Jamaica?

"What I thought was in Jamaica was reggae (music) and marijuana. And neither of those interested me."

Robanske checked back with God. If this was the right choice, there needed to be a cheap hotel room and an orphanage nearby.

There was. "So I thought I'd call the orphanage and talk to the manager, to see if they needed help and didn't need a lot of paperwork," he said.

With the surprise factor rapidly decreasing, Robanske got the manager's answer. "She said it would be great to have help. They were short-staffed over Christmas."

There was no easy way to back out now. Robanske then called friend Sean Johnson and enlisted him for this journey.

The orphanage was Blossom Gardens in Montego Bay, which cares for about 70 children, from newborns to 8 years old, as well as some older special needs kids.

It was quickly apparent Robanske and Johnson were in the right place, at the right time.

"As soon as we walked in the door, every kid wanted to be picked up," Robanske said. "We fed all 20 infants. They left us with the bottles and the babies. In two hours we got them all fed."

Robanske likes to share a story about that first visit.

"Nap time came at about 11 a.m. Children were falling asleep on their colorful mattresses, but one looked uncomfortable, confused and heart broken. Her eyebrows dipped and her lower lip stuck out as she looked at the kids around her. Then a single tear rolled down her cheek. I asked a staff member how long she had been at the orphanage. She responded, 'Two weeks, she never talks.' I could read the hurt on Monesia's face.

"Throughout the time I spent at Blossom Gardens she barely made a noise, until the last day. I took Monesia to the classroom upstairs. I got out picture books and read to her. I took out the stuffed animals and pretended they were talking to her and kissing her. I picked her up high in the air over and over again. She started to laugh. Much to my surprise as I embraced her she began to sing. In a still, small voice she sang. How often we forget that we are loved."

It was an exhausting, exhilarating winter break. At some point, he and Johnson realized this was the first step of something much bigger than a one-time mission trip, Robanske explained. "It became more and more obvious, and I started thinking about what I, Carl, could do to meet those needs."

Since then, Robanske has used every school break and summer vacation to travel to Jamaica. He founded the nonprofit Embracing Orphans organization and has racked up a lengthy list of projects for Blossom Gardens and other orphanages. Those include building and furnishing a playroom and library; facility maintenance work such as drywall, painting and electrical work; starting a preschool program that includes teacher training and supplies; funding dental check-ups; installing hands-on toddler toys and two commercial-style playgrounds; replacement of all toddler cribs and paying overdue utility bills. Embracing Orphans has also funded training on issues such as autism and abuse and neglect, and provided appreciation dinners for the facility staff.

More than 100 volunteers from a dozen states have joined him in eight trips to embrace orphans, he said. "Which is, in my opinion, incredibly amazing. We have a ripple effect from that, one relationship builds another relationship, building a whole other community of people. "

His life is probably not exactly what his parents pictured when they were raising him in Dayton, Robanske speculated with good humor. "I think my parents think it's odd. I think all of us in my family are odd, so it works out all right."

He continues to love teaching and has no immediate plans to leave the field, he said.

"I try not to do too much long-range planning. Then you take the guess work out of what God really wants to do."

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