

Sunshine Acres

CHILDREN'S HOME

MIRACLE IN THE DESERT



by Vera Dingman

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SUNSHINE ACRES CHILDREN'S HOME

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Chapter 1

Nothing Is Impossible With God

Jim and I were married in a little church in North Bend, Oregon, on August 11, 1928. I had just turned 17 and Jim was 22. He had a job helping build county roads and was earning \$3.50 a day. The Road Camp was located in the woods about 20 miles from North Bend. To get to the camp, you had to cross a wide river on a ferryboat and travel many miles on a very narrow dirt road with switchback curves so sharp you could hardly get around them.

Jim had put up a tent for us to live in at the camp and that is where we went the night we were married. We knelt by our bed that first night and rededicated our lives to God and asked Him to give us a job that no one else wanted.

We lived at the camp about six months, until the rainy season started, and then we rented a small house in North Bend for \$8.00 a month, and Jim got a job in the Veneer Plant.

The first special job God gave us was to hold services on Sunday at the County Poor Farm in Cogville, Oregon, a few miles from North Bend. In those days, there was no social Security. If you were old and sick and your children couldn't care for you, you went to a Poor Farm. Many of those dear people responded to the Gospel message and came to know the Lord.

My father went to Phoenix, Arizona, as an Evangelist, and wrote a letter telling us that a church there needed a Youth Pastor. The call of God for both of us to minister in His work was so very urgent that we went to Phoenix in 1929, the year that all the banks in the United States went broke. Jim was a Youth Pastor there for five years and went on many evangelistic trips through Texas and Oklahoma, during the summer months.



*Jim and Vera, their first year in Phoenix,
playing their instruments for evangelistic meeting*

Our first child, a darling little girl we named Priscilla, was born August 15, 1929, the first summer we lived in Phoenix. This was before coolers (we playfully refer to those days at B.C.!), and the houses were hot as an oven, day and night.

Priscilla was four years old and we were in Oregon visiting Jim's family when our second daughter was born, another dear little girl,



Carol Louise. During this time, Jim was very ill and almost died several times. He had severe asthma and the climate in Oregon made it worse.

Jim's brother made us a small house trailer (there were no mobile homes in those days) and we moved to Mesa, Arizona with our two daughters; Priscilla was nearly five years old and Carol was a baby of six months. We arrived in the middle of a very hot July (B.C.!) with just one dollar. Someone gave us an old storefront building to use for a church and Jim was pastor there for 17 years.

During those years, we would often hear about children who did not have homes and our hearts were so burdened for them. We saw many of them in our ministry of holding evangelistic meetings in migrant camps in the area. We came home from church and cried many nights, asking God to give us a home to care for hurting children. This was still during the years of the Great Depression, and people were walking the streets of Mesa begging to work for even 15 cents an hour, but there were very few jobs.

Only two men in our little congregation had jobs. They both had families and were making about \$15.00 a week. They each gave us \$1.00 every Sunday and with the \$2.00 we were able to buy a little oatmeal, canned milk, beans, and potatoes. Groceries were very inexpensive at this time; of course, there was very little money to buy anything.



The desire to have a home for children grew stronger as the years went by. We talked to anyone who would listen about our plans to have a home for children, a place we would call Sunshine Acres, the name God gave us ten years before we found the land in the desert.

I don't think anyone believed we had a calling from God; they probably thought it was just a big pipe dream. We had known and loved a very godly man and a dear pastor in Phoenix for many years. When Jim would try to talk with him about our desire to have a home in the desert for children, we would respond, "Jimmy, you are a minister of the Gospel. You have the highest calling in the world. Do you want to leave the ministry and just go into the desert and take care of children?"

At times, Jim would come home and cry because no one believed that we had a real call from God. The burden got heavier as the years went by. We both felt this call and couldn't understand why God would put such a heavy burden on our hearts and let us wait for 17 years before we could start the work.



Finally, when Jim was 48 years old and I was 43, and both of our girls were married, we heard of an old boarding school ten miles northeast of Mesa. The school had once housed 12 boys but had gone broke and had been abandoned for many years. We had looked at many old farmhouses, trying to find a place to start our home, but nothing had seemed right. We drove out to see this abandoned school one hot August afternoon. We got lost on dead end roads and cow trails before finally finding it. The property had 125 acres and three buildings: a dormitory with 12 small bedrooms, a dining room and kitchen, and a one-room schoolhouse. It had been empty for ten years, without a caretaker, and vandals had come in and had gutted the buildings of everything that was good. Homeless families had camped in what was left of the buildings. It was owned by an elderly couple; they were still making payments on it but were too sick to live on the property and take care of it, so they put it up for sale for \$50,000.

We walked through the old buildings, and in spite of the gutted shells and total disrepair, we both felt that this was Sunshine Acres at last, exactly what we had prayed for, for 17 long years!



The couple holding the mortgage on the property heard that we were interested and brought the price down from \$50,000 to \$29,500 overnight, they were so eager to sell. We didn't even have one dollar, so even that price sounded like a million dollars to us.

Now, by this time, we had three little sons: Charles was five years old, Rolland was seven, and Jim Jr. was nine, and we had no extra money at all. We were making our living selling hamburgers, sodas, and chips in a little malt shop in front of our house.



*Gus, Priscilla, Vera, Jim, Carol, Jack, Chuck, Rolland, Jim Jr.,
Circa 1953.*



Jim had belonged to the Optimist Club for many years and had shared with the club members our lifetime dream to make a home for children who do not have parents to care for them. When the Optimist Club heard about the opportunity to buy the old boarding school, they rearranged some plans of their own. They had a little square of land in Mesa, on which they had been trying to build a clubhouse for boys for over four years. They had laid the foundation, but had never been able to get the money to finish the building, so they voted to sell the land and put a down payment on Sunshine Acres, which they did with the \$3,500 that they received for the property.

We moved to Sunshine Acres with nothing to live on, 11 years worth of mortgage payments to meet, and no water or electricity. The school had drilled a well, but it had a gasoline pump that didn't work, and the nearest electrical wires were many miles away. So for some time we had to haul water every day and use a lamp for lighting.



From that first day, we felt that we should never solicit for a penny, a board, or a brick, no matter how desperate our financial problems might be, and that no child would ever be turned away for financial reasons, for God had told us to do this work and He would provide the means! To this day, we have stayed true to this assurance from the Lord and have loved and cared for over 1,170 boys and girls. Some have stayed with us 12 years and many, though grown and on their own, still call Sunshine Acres their home.



Chapter 2

The Impossible Dream Becomes Reality

We went to the local Welfare Department to ask about a license to care for children. Two of their workers came out to look at our Sunshine Acres. They saw the buildings in total disrepair, lacking water and electricity, and they looked at us, grandparents with three small children of our own, Jim's health was very poor, and we had no money. They thought we just had a foolish, unrealistic dream and wouldn't even talk to us! We still knew, beyond any doubt, that this was the place for our children's home.

Some members of the Optimist Club went to the Salt River Project to see what it would cost to bring electricity to Sunshine Acres. The Project was many miles away, and to get electrical power to us would have cost at least \$100,000. I don't know how they did it, or what they said, but they talked the Project into bringing truckloads of poles and erecting them those many miles, with just a small down payment. We then got an electric pump for the well, so our major problem with water was solved.



The people from the Welfare Department were amazed at the transformation. They gave us a license for ten children. The bedrooms were small, so they said just one child to a room. There were 12 bedrooms, so that left two for our family.

We soon had ten very needy children from sad, desperate home situations. We just trusted God each day for our daily needs. Children kept coming and we just couldn't turn them away, so we started bunking all the beds.

When one building filled up and we had to start turning away many children, we would just start another building by faith, even though we did not have enough money to buy a week's supply of groceries!

In 1969, we needed a separate dorm for girls. We built the foundation of the new building with donated material and labor. An architect made the plans without charge, and we kept praying for brick for the walls and lumber for the roof.

In December of that year, two men stood talking on a street in Phoenix. One of the men said, "I've made so much money this year that I'm going to have to pay a whole lot of income taxes. If I knew of someone who needed a tax-deductible donation it would help."



Of the thousands of men in Phoenix, the man he was talking to responded, “Well, I just visited a place out in the desert northeast of Mesa. It’s a children’s home. They’re trying to build another dorm for more children, but they just finished the foundation when they ran out of money.”

The first man, without even coming out to visit, wrote a check for \$10,000 and sent it to us. This paid for all the lumber and brick, and volunteers finished the building. It had taken almost one year to finish.

When we first moved to Sunshine Acres, there were no mobile home parks or private homes nearby. Now there are many within a 15-mile radius of our home and God has blessed us through many of the residents. We have a children’s choir that goes out to sing for the winter visitors who live in the parks. If we are out of money, with bills due, we never even hint that we have a need. Our children just sing to bless the people. We give out brochures telling about Sunshine Acres and invite the people to come out and visit us.



I'm so glad I'm a part of the family of God..” From one of the favorite songs of our choir. Circa 1989



Since our early days of steel bunk beds and bare cement floors, we now have very nice furnishings for our dorms and apartments, donated so generously by friends and neighbors, near and far. Many of these items come from the residents of the neighborhood retirement communities. So now all of our dorms and apartments are comfortably furnished, which helps create a homey atmosphere. God has provided abundantly!

We used to pile the children into an old pickup truck and drive down to the Mesa Verde River where they could play and swim to cool down. This wasn't very practical or easy, with so many children. One year, the Kiwanis Club advertised and sold pancakes all one day and helped us build a swimming pool with the money we raised. The pool continues to be a popular place and a great blessing during the hot Arizona summers.



Vera and children ready for an outing in the old pickup



We had used the girls' dorm for 19 years, but it was very crowded. We had been putting four girls to a room, in bunk beds. It was hard for four girls to get along in one room, which made life harder for the houseparents, so we made five bedrooms for the girls so there would be just two in each room. We have to have a private apartment for the houseparents in every dorm and most of them have children of their own, too.

We felt we were ready to “burst at the seams” when a 90-year-old couple in Gilbert, Arizona telephoned and asked if we needed another building. We told them that we were very crowded and had a long waiting list. They told us to make plans for a new building and give them an estimate of the cost.

The city of Mesa has expanded over the years so we are now inside the city limits, and there are many building restrictions we have to follow. This new building had to have a sprinkling system built in and they required a bonded electrician and a bonded plumber. By God's grace, the building was finished and we moved the girls into their new dorm in 1988.



Since we had a long list of little boys waiting for a home, we decided to use the house the girls had moved out of for 6- to 12-year-old boys. The inspectors came out from the Welfare Department and went thorough the old building. They said we couldn't move another child into the building until we tore out all the electrical lines and plumbing in the walls and got a bonded plumber and electrician to replace them up to code. We didn't have money for these repairs, but God did.

That month, a dear 95-year-old lady died in Phoenix. Though she had never heard of Sunshine Acres and we had never met her, she left a trust fund in a bank in Phoenix and a will that said at her death her money should go to a local charity. For any charity, this would be like winning the lottery, and there are hundreds of local charities in Phoenix. The banker's wife had heard about a children's home in the desert and she and her husband came out to see if we had a special need. After touring Sunshine Acres and walking through the old building, the banker said, "This is a local charity. I don't have to look any further."

We got the money just as the girls moved out and were able to remodel the house inside, and even had enough for a new roof that was badly needed. That building is now a safe, comfortable home for our youngest boys.



For years we had from 20 to 30 children in each building but the children we are now taking in have much more serious emotional and behavioral problems. All of the houseparents feel that ten children are all they can care for in one dorm, to make it like a home where every child can get the personal love and attention that they need.



Chapter 3

Jesus Loves The Little Children

Many volunteers had been working for months repairing and painting our old buildings. Now we had a license and were ready to take children, but we were so far out in the desert that almost no one knew we were there.

Our first two little boys were brought to us by their grandmother. Their parents were alcoholics, and did not want them. Their grandmother loved them very much and was taking good care of them, but when the boys were six and ten years old she became seriously ill and was told by her doctor that she would need complete rest for one year. She dreaded having to tell her grandsons that she would no longer be able to care for them.

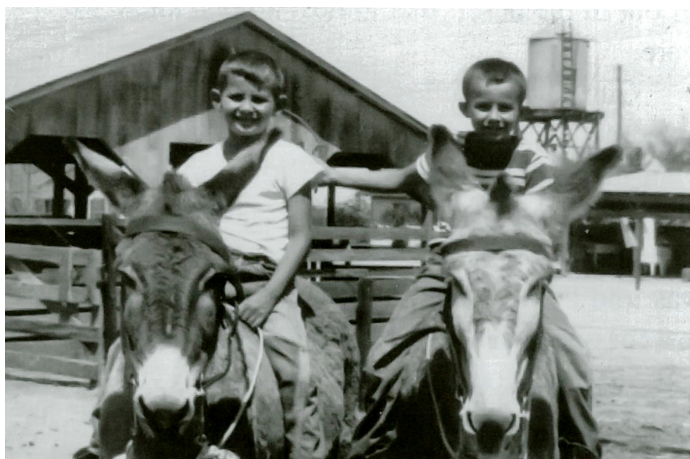
When the two boys got up that morning, their grandmother told them that she could not take care of them because she was very sick. Both of the boys were hurt and upset. “Oh, Grandma,” her younger grandson cried, “Isn’t there anyplace in the whole world for us?”



Later that day, she opened the Sunday paper and there was a story about Sunshine Acres. Mitzi Zipp, a newspaperwoman in Mesa, had written an article for the Sunday Republic, and it appeared on the front page of the second section on June 1, 1956.

Jim had preached at a local church that morning and when he got home, the Grandma and her two young grandsons were sitting on the porch, waiting for us.

We only had a license for ten children, and in a short time all the beds were full. We were so happy with our big family. I had devotions with the children and then, while they were eating breakfast, I would start washing the first of many loads of laundry, using an old wringer-type washing machine that was in an open shed near the dining hall. After meals, half of the children would hang up clothes while the rest of them helped do the dishes.



Rolland and Jim Jr. (Circa 1956), was washing shed in right background.



The children just kept coming! Soon every bed was full. Their needs were so urgent, we just couldn't turn them away, so we started bunking the beds and continued to take them in.

Each time we took another child over our license limit we called the Welfare Department. They could have closed our home but instead they came out each time, scolded us, and checked very carefully to make sure that everything passed their inspection. They could see the children looked well cared for, so each time they just warned us not to take any more.

A dear lady joined us whose husband had abandoned her and their five- and six-year-old sons. She had been dropping her sons off at a babysitters' each day before she went to college, where she was studying to get her degree to teach school. It upset her that they seemed frightened and screamed and cried every time she left them, and she finally found out that the sitters were abusing her sons. When she heard about Sunshine Acres she brought them to us. They were so happy and secure here, sometimes they almost didn't want to go home when their mother picked them up on weekends. They stayed with us until their mother graduated and was teaching school.



*Some of our boys cooling off in a nearby irrigation canal
before our swimming pool was donated.*

Another ten-year-old boy was brought to us by a relative. His stepfather had killed his mother and none of his other relatives wanted him, so he was forced on an elderly, sick grandmother who did not like him. He was very happy here and lived with us until he was grown.

Two brothers were brought to us who had been in 28 foster homes in a five-year span, never feeling loved, special, or wanted. Their story is not unusual. This continues to happen to thousands of children in our own United States. Many are becoming mentally ill or unstable from abuse and neglect.



Soon we had all the beds bunked. The Welfare Department was not pleased with this, but we were keeping all the other rules and we passed all their inspections, so they increased our license up to 20 children.

Dear little children kept coming. It would break our hearts to think of turning them away, for there was no other place to which we could refer them. During these Depression years, the state did not have money to care for the children. We were getting no state or federal money for their care, and simply trusted God each day for our food and other needs.

When we had ten little five- and six-year-old boys, we built little bed frames in the corners of the rooms and cut mattresses down to fit the frames. We placed six-year-old boys in these little beds. We soon had 30 children!

We had 14 girls in the front part of the house with one bathroom, and 16 boys in the other part, where the bathroom and shower were a little bigger. During the winter months, each of the children had a bath every other night. On the nights they didn't take showers, Jim and I would wash their faces, necks, hands, and arms in the three sinks in the boys' bathroom. We discovered very early that we couldn't trust them to wash themselves clean.



One evening after Jim and I had cooked, washed clothes, and cleaned all day, we were so tired we could hardly stand up. Jim was washing a boy at one sink while I was washing one at another sink. I looked over and grinned at Jim, “We asked for it!” One of the little boys said, “What did you ask for?” I told him, “We prayed for a lot of little boys to wash up for bed every night!”

Those were the happy days, in spite of the hard work, shortage of money, and all of the heartaches and problems involved in caring for abused, neglected, and troubled children.

We woke the children with a song every morning and created a happy mood. Every night after prayers, all of the children gathered around for a goodnight kiss, and some came back for seconds! We soon were so crowded again that we couldn’t take any more children, and had a long waiting list.



One of the dear boys who lived in this old crowded house for ten years until he graduated from high school, comes back often to see us. He tells us how happy he was at Sunshine Acres, when all 30 of us lived in the one old house. He said they all felt loved and like a family. One of the other little boys once said, "There is only one place better than Sunshine Acres." When I asked, "Where?" he said, "Heaven!" Another boy who lived with us for nine years said he feels like he's walking on holy ground when he comes back to visit.

Over the years I have often asked myself if I was treating every child like I would want someone to treat mine if I was unable to care for them. We have always told children, when they come, that they are very special to us and to God, and that they can live with us as long as they want to, or need us. We only hold them by love; no fences, gates, no guards. Many stay until they are grown and on their own.



Chapter 4

Miracles, and More Miracles

While we were still living in the old house with 30 children, we woke up one morning and found our well had gone dry. Jim went to the nearest farm where they had a well and borrowed a big water tank on wheels. He hauled water several times a day to fill 20-gallon cans in the dorm, kitchen, and in the shed where I did the daily wash.

This was backbreaking work and Jim was already doing more than he should; he was never completely well because of his allergies and severe asthma, and was tired all the time. Most people were unaware of this. He almost always had a cheerful smile, an optimistic outlook, and sang as he worked.

Someone had a pond near us where natural warm water came up out of the ground. They said we could bring the children over in the evenings to bathe. That was a real help – and the children suddenly looked forward to their baths!

After we had hauled water with the big tank for five weeks, Jim finally hired a man to drill another well. The one that had gone dry was 400 feet deep. The water level here drops every year so we had put down extra pipe, which extended the well to reach the water, but the water level had dropped so low that we couldn't reach it anymore.



When the well-driller reached the 400-foot level in the new well, he hit solid rock. He worked several days trying to drill through this hardpan, but finally gave up and told Jim that we would have to abandon the well.

The weather was getting very warm, and Jim knew he could not haul enough water to take care of us during the long, hot Arizona summer. The buildings were getting too hot to live in. When it's 100 to 115 degrees outside, it can be even hotter than that inside! We had small evaporative coolers, but they also needed water to operate.

City water was nearly 10 miles away and it would have cost many thousands of dollars to pipe it to Sunshine Acres. We had no money and the children we had taken in, as well as our own three sons, had no other home. We were in a very desperate situation.

We finally sat our children down in the living room, and told them that we would all have to leave Sunshine Acres if we didn't get water. The children all stood up and held hands and prayed that we would get water in the new well.



Aunt Vera and Uncle Jim treat the children to a summer watermelon feed in front Bower's Hall, the gymnasium. Circa 1960's.

The well-driller came back two more days, hoping to get through the layer of hardpan. The second day, he called out to Jim, “Mr. Dingman, something has happened here that I’ve never seen before, and I have been drilling wells in Arizona for years! This rock is getting soft – I’m drilling right through it!” He went down 350 feet farther and 300 feet of water came up in that well! We had all the water we could use, and more. We had enough to furnish water for a dairy with 500 cows on the hill behind us, for the next 25 years! Their well had also gone dry, and when they had tried to drill another one they were unable to get through the layer of rock.



We were then faced with another problem: we owed \$7,500 to the well-driller and we had no money. Two men came in to see us from Phoenix, saying that they belonged to a secret club. Their club looked around each year to find the poorest place for which they could raise money. Someone had told them about our home in the desert and they asked us about our biggest need. Jim told them about the well-drilling bill. They said, “This is just what we were looking for, a real need.”

They raised the money and brought it to us just in time to pay the well-driller when he finished the well and pulled out his equipment. What a great God we serve!

One morning we served the last bit of food for breakfast; we had no money to buy more. We prayed that morning, telling God of our need. That very afternoon, four cars drove up and each of them had a box of food for us!

The thin mattresses on the children’s steel bunk beds were covered by equally thin quilts, homemade by some dear Christian women. Inside each quilt, the women had put a blanket instead of cotton, so that we could wash them more easily. As long as the weather was mild, this was all the cover the children needed, but our old house was drafty, and we did not have heaters.



One day, the temperature dropped 25 degrees, as it sometimes does in Arizona. The next day, it rained and a cold wind blew. I told Jim that the children would be cold that night with only one light blanket. We did not have money to buy bedding, so we just prayed and told God of our need.

A narrow gravel road, with big dips, led from the highway to Sunshine Acres. Sometimes, when it rained hard, the runoff would roar through these dips with enough force to wash away any car trying to drive through.

That rainy afternoon, a real old car drove up into our yard and an elderly woman got out and made her way to our door. She said she had 30 wool blankets for us in her car. The children raced to her car, through the pouring rain, and helped carry in the blankets. We had never seen this lady before, so we had no idea how she knew we had 30 beds that would need blankets that very night.

We didn't think anyone would be brave enough to travel on that kind of a road in such a storm! We thanked her as she got into her car and drove away. We have never heard a word from her since that day. She surely was an angel of mercy!



In later years, when we had two more buildings, we had a \$1,000 electricity bill due and no money. Several of us met for prayer one morning. We got off our knees and went outside just as a car drove up. A lady whom we didn't know, and who knew nothing about our needs, got out of the car. She said she was leaving for the summer and just wanted to help us out before she left. She handed us a check for \$1,000.

Another time we had \$2,000 in bills coming due in just a few days. We did not tell one person on the outside about this need. This time, Jim just wrote a little note, folded it, and placed it in his billfold. It said, "Dear Jesus, You owe \$2,000 for the care of your children. Your son, Jim."

About three days before the bills were due, Jim got a phone call from a man from an insurance company in Mesa. He said they had just had a meeting and had voted to send us \$2,000. They had not known about our urgent need – but God knew!

Over the years, I have learned not to worry.



My father was a minister. He told me something that has helped me all through my life. He said, “There are two things you cannot do at the same time: You can’t worry and trust. If you worry, you are not trusting. If you trust, you don’t worry.”



Chapter 5

Everything Works Together

An Optimist Club member suggested that we build some bedrooms onto the back of our one-room schoolhouse to make another dormitory. An architect made plans and blueprints without charge and the brick and lumber were donated; volunteers did the labor, and the dorm was finished in six months.

We moved our 14 girls into the new building and my brother, Roy, and his wife, Catherine, moved in to be house-parents. Catherine was a very good seamstress, and people had given us a lot of cloth, so she was able to make pretty curtains and bedspreads and dresses for the girls. It was so nice not to be as crowded, and every child could receive more individual care and attention.

Six weeks later, the Elks Club invited our children to a party on their grounds in Mesa. We only had one rickety old truck for transportation but were able to take all of the children to the picnic. They had games and a lot of good food, and everyone had a real fun time.



While we were there, a message came over the loudspeaker that Sunshine Acres was burning down. The children were scattered all over the grounds. Jim couldn't stop to gather them up fast enough, so he just jumped into the old truck and raced out to Sunshine Acres. He arrived just in time to see the roof fall in on the new girls' dorm! It burned to the ground with everything in it.

After Jim came back and took us all home, we stood around the still-smoldering ashes with the 14 girls, crying. We didn't understand this at all. We desperately needed this building and believed that God had provided it. Roy and Catherine had lost all of the household goods they had brought with them. The only clothes the girls had were those that they were dressed in, and the play clothes they had worn on Saturday, which I had washed that morning and hung outside on the line.



Playing on the Merry-Go-Round in front of Aunt Vera's Home at Sunshine Acres.



After we cried a while, we began to praise the Lord and thank Him that the fire had not happened at night and that no child had been hurt. We made up beds on the floor in the old building for the girls to sleep in that night.

Because we had been at the Elks Club, we made the news reports that night. They reported on the radio that a home for 14 girls had burned to the ground with everything in it. There was also an article about our home and the fire in the Mesa newspaper the next morning.

When people read about it, many exclaimed, “I didn’t know there was a children’s home out in the desert!”

Up until that time, we had been getting very little help, because people did not know of our ministry to children. The blessing in this terrible fire is that many more people became aware of Sunshine Acres. A Christian architect came the next day and said, “We are starting plans for a new fireproof building tomorrow.”

It took a whole year to get this new dorm built, because all the brick and lumber were donated and volunteers did the building on weekends.



It was very hard to be so crowded again, but a dear retired couple, Bud and Kay, came every day to help us. Kay sorted clothes that were given to us and tried them on the girls. When they needed to be altered, she took them to the mobile home park where she lived, for the women to alter. Her husband, Bud, a retired schoolteacher, helped with everything around the place. I was too busy to tell them what to do. They just saw what needed to be done and did it. They were very good at cleaning closets, storerooms, and the pantry, and many other chores I couldn't possibly do. I was still cooking for the children and doing all the laundry. Bud and Kay were our Sunshine Acres helpers for 14 winters. Bud especially loved to entertain the visitors who came to see Sunshine Acres.



Chapter 6

Trials More Precious Than Gold

JSomehow, when I was growing up, I had the idea that life would be without problems if you served God with all your heart and kept all of His commandments. As I grew older, I realized that this was not true.

It was very hard for me to understand the verse from Hebrews 5:8: “. . . He (Jesus) learned obedience by the things which He suffered.” I thought, What could the perfect Son of God learn by suffering? When He was here on earth, He had the human body and He went through everything that we go through. we can have the confidence that He understands our weaknesses and needs.

We knew, without any doubt, that God had called us to start this home for children. We lived with 30 of the children in one old building and the first three years doing all the cooking, washing, and the many other daily chores involving the caring for a family of 32! We were “on duty” 12 to 16 hours a day, 7 days a week, without wages, feeling it was a great privilege.



However, one day Jim got very sick. For three days he was bedfast with a high fever. I didn't call a doctor because we had no money or insurance. I just kept hoping and praying that God would heal him. I was so very busy and tired trying to keep up with all the household tasks by myself and caring for my sick husband, but by the end of the third day, I knew I had to get help from Jim. I called Dr. John Kerr, the pediatrician who has taken care of our children, free of charge, ever since we started Sunshine Acres, and he agreed to come and look at Jim.

Dr. Kerr examined Jim and said that he had pneumonia and both lungs were nearly full of fluid. Jim also had growths on his lungs from emphysema. Dr. Kerr said Jim was at the point of death and that I should have called him much sooner.

He arranged for an ambulance. They arrived quickly and put Jim on a stretcher and took him to the hospital. The doctor did not give me any hope that Jim would even live through the night. As the ambulance sped away from my dear husband, and their father, our 27 children, and our own frightened sons, were crying with me.

It took me longer than normal to get all of the children comforted and ready for bed that night. We had our prayers and I finally kissed them goodnight and went to my own bed, but sleep would not come.



I laid there, frightened and crying, telling the Lord that there was no way I could care for 30 children all by myself. We had no money. I had my own three little sons to care for, and we still had a nine-year mortgage on the property.

After awhile the Lord spoke comforting words to my heart: “I am holding your hand,” He said.

I did not hear an audible voice, but it was just as real as if I had! God hadn’t said that Jim was not going to die, but somehow, I felt if God was holding my hand, everything would be all right and I soon fell sound asleep.

Dr. Kerr got a lung specialist to examine Jim when they arrived at the hospital. He told the specialist that we had no money or insurance, but for him to do everything he could to save Jim’s life. They worked on Jim all night and by morning he was slightly better. He was in intensive care for several days, but I was only able to visit him once because I was so very busy. They let him come home after nine days, but he was still very weak and had to “take it easy.” With a household of 30 children, you can imagine how possible that was!



Some of the “Acre’s Kids“ (Circa 1963), Charles, Rolland and Jim Jr. in left back row next to Vera.



Jim had asked for the hospital bill when he was released, even though he didn't know how we would pay it. They told him it would be sent later. Three days later, one of our board members brought the bill. It was stamped "Cancelled."

God didn't say that we would never have trials, but He did promise that He would never leave us nor forsake us, and that He is a very present help in every time of need.

We finally couldn't possibly fit any more children in the old building, and we had a very long waiting list of children still needing a home, so we started to build another dorm by faith. We prayed three years for the roof!

Finally, when the new building was finished, we decided that the best time to take in the new children would be during the two weeks of Christmas vacation. They would have time then to get settled in before school started.

We had four large bedrooms in the new dorm, so we took in 24 children who had been on the waiting list for a long time. We had never taken in such a lot of children at one time before. We had three bunk beds to a room, so six boys would sleep in a room.



We seldom have rain in Arizona for more than a day or two at any one time, but that year it rained every day of those whole two weeks! Jim was living in the old house full of boys, and I was trying to cope with the 24 new boys in our new house.

Since it was Christmastime, people were bringing presents for the children and leftover food from parties, and the phone was ringing off the hook! We had no office, just a phone in my bedroom. I still had to find time to cook, clean, and do all of the wash in the outside shed on a wringer-type washing machine. We had to hang everything in the rain, but would end up bringing some things into the house, hoping to get them dry.

We only had a tiny, little dining room in those days, and it was very hard to find time and space to cook. During this frantically busy time, the children would plead, “Mama, when are we going to eat?” So, I would go into the dining room and open up large cans of soup and make sandwiches.

A couple of days before Christmas, a large moving van filled with clothes and toys that had been gathered for the children, by students at Camelback High School, drove up to the house. The only place we could unload all of these things was in our open wash shed, for our houses were full of children! At least they would be under a roof and would not get wet from the continuing rain. I knew I would have to sort them there, bringing only a few things at a time into the houses.



During this time, there were hundreds of migrants living in little shacks all over the desert. They came to pick cotton and work in the citrus groves, but because of the rain they couldn't work in the fields, so they had run out of money to buy food. The Salvation Army fixed Christmas baskets for all the needy families in Mesa, but they said they did not have enough for these hundreds of migrants, too. Somehow word got out that Sunshine Acres had lots of extra food and clothing!



Boys, Bikes, Horse and burros - another fun day at sunshine Acres!

The first of the migrants to arrive was a dear little mother of five children. She knocked on our door one day. “Since we can’t work in the fields, we have run out of everything,” she explained. “Can you help us?”



I told her that we would be glad to share some of the things that had been given to us. I took her to the shed and found clothes and a toy for each of her children. I found cans of food in the boxes and gave her a few.

When she got back to the camp, the others asked her where she had gotten all of the things. She told them, “Sunshine Acres has lots of clothes and toys!”

Now, the people started coming from the camps several at a time. I just couldn’t send them out in the shed to help themselves. I knew some would have taken more than their share, and we needed a lot of things too, so I went out with each family and gave them all some clothes, toys, and food.

During the last half of the week after Christmas, I was so very worn out and tired that I just couldn’t make myself go any longer! I hadn’t even had time to go through the clothes our children had brought with them. I knew that I needed to check and make certain that they all had something good enough to wear when school started again, right after the New Year.



I was so tense and exhausted that I felt like screaming! I am not normally a tense person, but with the phone constantly ringing, visitors coming and going, and the children begging, “Mama, when are we going to eat?” I finally felt like I couldn’t cope with it all any longer, and I just screamed out, “God Help Me!”

Sometimes our prayers don’t get any higher than the roof, but that prayer went right through to Heaven! Every bit of my tired, frustrated feelings left at once! I felt like I had gone to bed and slept for a month! I wasn’t one bit nervous, and felt like a new person!

I reminded the Lord that I had been trying for two weeks to get all of the children’s clothes ready for school, but there had been no time. When you have 24 children, you can’t have even one complain, “I can’t find a shirt to wear,” or “I have no socks.”

I suddenly had an idea. There were 24 shelves in a storage room, so we put the name of each boy on a shelf. Now I had to be sure every day that each child had a clean outfit of clothes all ready to wear, on their shelf.



I called in one boy at a time and went through the clothes he had brought with him, and we picked out the clothes he wanted to wear that first day of school. No one interrupted us, we had no phone calls or visitors, and soon every boy's shelf was in order.

By New Year's Day, everything was in order in the house. I wasn't tired or nervous and I have never again gotten that worn out.

I will be 85 years old in a few days and I feel wonderful! Sometimes, I think I am the happiest woman in the whole world. We have a wonderful Savior who is full of mercy and compassion!



Chapter 7

Every Living Creature

When we bought Sunshine Acres in 1953, we were way out in the country, totally isolated. There was nothing beyond us but desert, and nothing between Sunshine Acres and the highway, four miles away.

Our three boys were born near the center of town in Mesa, Arizona. Charles was five years old, Rolland was seven, and Jim Jr. was nine when we moved out into the desert to start Sunshine Acres Children's Home. They were so happy to be out in the country! Under every rock they turned over they found a lizard, scorpion, or some other desert creature. They loved to turn over those rocks!

There were many large scorpions as big as the palm of your hand that were not poisonous. As hard as it is for some of us to even imagine, the boys gathered them by the dozen and played with them by the hour!

I remember one day when we already had lot of little boys to care for, suddenly I heard one of them scream from the front porch. I dropped what I was doing to hurry out. I found that two of the boys had gathered almost a half-gallon each of these scorpions and they had been dividing them up: "One for you, one for me..." One was left over and they were fighting over it!



There were many rattlesnakes in the area those first years and also a lot of nonpoisonous snakes. We had a ten-year-old boy who was fascinated by snakes and loved to pick up and inspect the nonpoisonous ones. One day he saw a snake coiled around a bush, but failed to notice its rattles. When he picked it up, the rattlesnake bit him on his finger.

Jim always carried a snakebite kit in his pocket, so he quickly did first aid on the little boy, while I called the doctor. The doctor said to bring the boy to the hospital at once. They gave him antivenin serum, but his hand swelled up, and was quite painful. He was in the hospital several days.



Some of our boys playing in the Sundry Wash area.

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Every year we warn the children about the snakes, and to be especially careful not to place your feet or hands where you cannot see. So far, no one else has been bitten, although we do see a few rattlesnakes every spring.



Edmond and Charles enjoying feeding duty.

One summer evening, several of the boys wanted to camp out in a place they called “Sandy Wash.” They gave it this name because we are on high ground and, when it rains, the water floods down into these creek beds.



Rolland was in high school by then and said he would go with the boys to supervise the campout. They took some food, a gallon of water, and bedrolls. They set up camp, built a bonfire, and were having a great time, when they saw a rattlesnake hanging over a bush. It was the biggest rattler that Rolland had ever seen, at least six feet long. Because of his love for reptiles, he wouldn't normally even kill a rattler, but there was too much danger with all the boys sleeping out overnight, so he quickly killed the snake by cutting off its head. Imagine their surprise when five baby rattlesnakes, very much alive, crawled out of the dead snake! The boys dumped the water out of the gallon jar and brought home the five little snakes.

One afternoon, when the school bus dropped our children off, three of the youngest boys were each carrying a tiny puppy. They told me that someone was giving them away at the school bus stop. We were living with 25 boys at the time and I was doing most of the daily cooking and a large wash every morning. The puppies were not even weaned, and I could just imagine hearing them cry all night from hunger, and trying to feed them with bottles.



After calling several animal shelters, I found one that would take the puppies and try to find homes for them. Three sad but wiser little boys, each holding a puppy, went with Jim to deliver them to the shelter.

There were many skunks around the place in the early days. Several boys came to us one day and said they wanted to have a skunk for a pet. Several people nearby were doing this; it was becoming quite a popular thing. The boys would first have to take the skunk to the veterinarian to have its scent gland removed.

My immediate response was, “No, no, no. That’s the last thing we need!” But the boys had a little money they had earned, and putting it all together they had enough to pay the veterinarian to fix a skunk.

Our oldest son, Jim Jr., had the skunk in a cage on the back porch and would carefully take it out every day to hold it and pet it, so as to tame it. One night the skunk escaped. Days later they found a skunk under a deep shelf in a shed near one of our houses.

With a crowd of excited little boys looking on, Jim Jr. crawled slowly under the shelf. “I think it’s our pet,” he yelled, excitedly. “I think it is. I think it . . . nooo, it isn’t!”



In spite of several showers, and baths in various mixtures of tomato and lemon juice, he still smelled of skunk for many days. No one ever again asked to have a skunk for a pet.

Someone gave us several burros that we had for many years. The children had lots of fun with them and several were born out here. One of them was a special favorite. Poncho had been trained to count with its feet, take a hat from a person's head and shake it, and would take food from Jim's lips – very carefully.



Uncle Jim and "Poncho" doing their thing!

Two goats were given to us. One morning, the nanny goat began giving birth to twin kids. The children discovered it just as the first one was born. They called everyone and we all went out and sat on the fence to watch the second one being born, staying until they both walked on their wobbly legs.



As they got older, they loved to follow the children around the yard and we had a hard time keeping them in their pen.

One day, when we all still lived in the old house, the 30 of us piled into the rickety pickup to go into town and do a little shopping. I thought we had locked all the doors when we left home, but when we came back the goats were in the living room, standing on our davenport, looking out the window at us!

For those first few years, we were just getting enough food for about one day at a time. It was hard to buy enough milk for 30 children so it was a great blessing when a man loaned us three of his cows. We were too poor to buy hay for them, so we kept them in a large pasture a few miles away. Jim had to drive over every morning and evening to milk them. In time, we had three calves born and we gave the man back his cows. Eventually, the state authorities would not let us milk our own cows, even though we pasteurized all the milk and it was inspected often.

There was a large alligator farm not far from us. People paid to see the alligators. When times got harder, and fewer people came to see the alligators, they couldn't afford to feed them.



The owners just left town, leaving the alligators with no way of getting food. Someone took the alligators and dumped them into the irrigation canals in the area and gave Sunshine Acres three very small ones, which was quite exciting for the children. Jim Jr. supervised the making of a moat in which to keep the alligators. A butcher shop gave him meat scraps and he went out every day to feed them. As they grew bigger, they became strong enough to jump up and grab the food as he dropped it. Rolland said he had nightmares that one of the small children would get too close . . . they soon became too dangerous to keep. Jim put an ad in the paper and someone bought them.

The children had a pet monkey, Skeeter, that we kept in a big cage. They loved the monkey very much. It was so much fun to watch. After a few months, Skeeter got sick and died. The children cried and they had a funeral service for him. It was like losing a good friend.

Over the years, we've had several dogs that have brought much joy to the children. For several years, we had a very special Basset Hound whose name was Hacksaw.



He was a special friend of our youngest son, Chuck, and his family. Hacksaw came to every chapel service. He would quietly lay under a pew, so we let him stay. Finally, he began to sit up on a pew with the children and was still very quiet, just as if he was listening to every word. Our staff has a prayer meeting each school morning and Hacksaw was always there. One day, a newspaper photographer took a picture of Hacksaw attending services in our chapel and it was published in our local newspaper.

Now we have a 4-H program for the children who are interested. The high school boys are raising steers for showing. We also have horses for some of our teenagers who are part of the 4-H program. From time to time we have had pigs and lambs for our smaller children, and hope to have more in the future.

Chapter 8

Uncle Jim: The Impossible Dream



We had a big family reunion of jim's seventieth birthday celebration in 1976.

Uncle Jim was my dear husband for 51-1/2 very precious years. He told me every day that he loved me. He was a loving father to our five children, and to over 750 foster girls and boys. God took him home on the 12th of April, in 1980.

He was in pain most of his life, but he was always cheerful and never grumbled. Sometimes he would struggle with asthma all night and not be able to sleep much, but he would wake up praising God and singing, no matter how poorly he felt.



If he had a job he didn't like at all, he sang all the time he was working. He especially didn't like to cut up raw chicken. He just didn't like the smell. One morning while cutting up 18 chickens for our evening meal, he was singing at the top of his voice. One of our little boys walked by and remarked, "Uncle Jim sure does like to cut up chicken!"

Many times when he was very sick himself, someone would bring a sick child for him to pray over. They would lay the child on the foot of the bed and he would lay his hands on the child and pray. Sometimes the child would be healed instantly. Jim would still be sick. We didn't understand this at all, but Jim stayed true to the Lord through all kinds of trials and hard places.

Sometimes after working a 12-hour day, when he was quite exhausted, Jim would get a call late at night from a hospital, telling him that someone he knew was very ill and asking for prayer. Jim would get out of bed and go to the hospital and stay, sometimes for hours, knowing he had a full days' work ahead and would not have time to rest. One man was so far gone they expected him to die at any moment. He was healed. The nurses said that it was like Lazarus being raised from the dead.



Jim had a very godly mother who was healed of several incurable diseases. She also was an ordained minister, as was Jim's father.

Jim had gone to church most of his life but had never felt any real drawing toward the Lord. When he was 21 years old, he went to a Wednesday night service in their little church, just to please his mother. Not many people were there. At the close of the service, most of the people went to the altar to pray. The Minister asked Jim if he would like to come up and pray with them. Jim said, "If the Lord ever calls me I will come, but not just because a preacher asks me."

While he was sitting there watching, Jim felt God's call. It grew stronger and stronger, until he could no longer stay in his seat. He went to the altar and totally surrendered his heart to the Lord.

A revival broke out in that little church soon after this and people began to come who had never been to church. The church didn't advertise; the spirit of the Lord drew the people, and many came to know Jesus as their Lord.

Though Jim was a new convert, he preached many sermons during this time of refreshing. He had lived in North Bend, Oregon, all of his life. Some of his school buddies came to the services and were amazed at the transformation in Jim. He was truly a new person. A year after his conversion, Jim and I were married in this little church.



He was an evangelist for 5 years, and pastor of a church for 17 years, before we started Sunshine Acres.

We took in Bob when he was seven years old and he lived with us until he was grown. We also helped raise his two older brothers. Bob has kept in touch with us all through the years. He wrote this letter to me from his home in California when he heard that Jim had gone to be with the Lord:

Dear Aunt Vera,

I just heard about Uncle Jim the other day. It is sad that he won't be with us, but I know he has gone to meet his God. I am sure God has a special place for Uncle Jim. There are few people that have served God so devotedly as Jim and you.

He was a good man. He was a father, a preacher, a doctor, a cook, a barber, and a burro-riding companion to hundreds of kids. Knowing Uncle Jim has been one of the lucky breaks in my life.

I can still remember him driving the truck to take us swimming and calling us to dinner. He pulled cactus out of sore feet and bandaged childhood cuts and scratches. I'll remember all of this and a lot more the rest of my life.

I am real glad I got to talk to Uncle Jim on the telephone this Easter weekend. I am only sorry I didn't get to see him.

I will close for now, Bob.

Chapter 9

Aunt Vera: “He Walks With Me . . .”



Vera Dingman, Circa 1980

I am Aunt Vera to almost 1,200 children as of June 1996. This is the hardest chapter for me to write, but I feel that God would have me tell a little about my background and the call of God on my life.

I was fourth in a family of six children. My parents loved God with all of their hearts and I always felt loved and cared for.

We moved often and most of the time we were very poor, but it didn't seem to make one bit of difference what kind of house we lived in. Sometimes it was a very old house without any inside plumbing and very little furniture.



My mother was a spotless housekeeper, a very good cook who made such wonderful homemade bread, and was always cheerful. She sang hymns while cooking breakfast each morning. I couldn't have been happier if I had lived in a palace.

My father would read the Bible aloud to us often while we were doing morning chores and encouraged us to learn Bible verses. He was a minister and he won many souls to the Lord.

I was almost burned to death when I was four years old. At that time we lived in Spokane, Washington. For six months I was totally bedfast. I nurse had to come every day to change my bandages. My left arm was so badly burned and the muscles were so damaged that the doctor said I would never be able to use that arm again.

One cold winter night, when snow blanketed the ground, my father thought I was dying. He walked through the snow to get the pastor of our church to come and pray for me. The Lord instantly restored the muscles in my left arm and I was soon walking again. My doctor said that this was a miracle, as nature does not restore lost muscle.



We lived in Enterprise, Oregon, when I was eight years old. I felt the call of God so strongly in one church service that I attended that I ran to the altar and totally dedicated my life to the Lord. I have felt God's presence every day of my life since that day. I used to go into a room by myself with a hymn book and sing praises to God. I devoured every missionary story I could find and always felt I, too, would be a missionary someday.

After many moves, we arrived in the town in which Jim lived when I was 16 years old. I am sure this was all in God's plan for my life. Jim was 20 and I was 16 when we went out on our first date. We were married a year later, and both of us knew that God had put us together and that we had a special call of God on our lives.



Our first home was a tent in the woods where Jim was helping to build roads. We walked into the woods each evening to have our devotions together, and we sang as we walked back to our tent:

“And He walks with me
and He talks with me,
and He tells me I am his own,
and the joy we share
as we tarry there,
none other has ever known.”

Life was never smooth and easy. We have had many trials along the way, but God was always with us, to comfort us and give us peace.



The Gittus', Gus, Pricilla and Glen and, in front, Mark, Teresa, and forest in 1976.



God gave us five wonderful children, two girls and three boys. Our eldest daughter, Priscilla, was born on the 15th of August in Phoenix. The first summer we were there nobody had any kind of cooling in their houses.



Cindy, Jack, Jacque Lynn, Mike, Carol and Patrick at Jacque Lynn and Mike's wedding in 1979.

Jim was a youth pastor in a church and also the janitor. Our wages were \$10.00 a week. We paid \$25.00 a month for a one-room apartment and had \$15.00 left over for all of our other expenses.

Priscilla gave her heart to the Lord when she was ten years old and has lived close to the Lord all these years. She also has helped many people to find the Lord.

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She had a very happy marriage with her husband, Gus, who is now with the Lord.

They have four wonderful children. Her daughter, Teresa, and Teresa's husband, Joshua, helped us at Sunshine Acres for 19 years. Teresa cooked for all of us for over 13 years and

Joshua helped in the office and was the pastor of our chapel.



Jack, Jim Jr., Danny and Judy in 1976.



Our second daughter, Carol, was born four years later, in Oregon, while we were visiting Jim's parents. She also gave her heart to the Lord at an early age and she married her husband, Jack, the year we moved to Sunshine Acres. She said she was glad she got married so she wouldn't have to live in this old dump, as all of our buildings were in total disrepair.

Six years later, when they had three children, ages three, four, and five years old, they moved into our first old building with 20 teenage boys, to help us for six weeks, and they're still here, 37 years later! Jack takes care of all of our buildings and cares for and supervises the building of any new structures, as God provides, and Carol has been the Executive Director of Sunshine Acres since Jim's death in 1980. Their three children are all happily married with beautiful families.

When Carol was 10 and Priscilla was 14 year sold, we had our first son and named him Jim Jr. We had given up all hopes of having more children, and we were so thrilled and happy to have a son. He was nine when we moved to Sunshine Acres. From the beginning, Jim Jr. helped his dad with the many chores around the place, and as he grew older he did much of the maintenance.



While Jim Jr. was in college, a beautiful girl came from North Bend, Oregon, to take care of our youngest boys. Judy brought with her six-year-old son, Jack, who was from a former marriage.

It wasn't long before Jim Jr. and Judy fell in love and were married. When they returned from their honeymoon, they moved into the girls' dorm with 12 of our girls. They were houseparents for the girls' dorm for ten years. Many girls lived with them until they were grown. Their son, Danny, was born while they were houseparents. Along with their many other duties, Judy organized our choir, took them out to sing, and led the singing in our chapel. Jim Jr. did most of the maintenance on the place, preached many sermons in our chapel services, and researched what would grow in our climate and planted many varieties of eucalyptus trees. Those tall trees still provide refreshing shade as they remind us of his unique gifts. They were totally dedicated to the Lord in their service at Sunshine Acres.



Jim Jr. was born on my 33rd birthday. He died suddenly of a heart attack on the 13th of January, 1993, while driving his car. He had worked all morning and seemed to be in good health. He was just 48 years old.



Aaron, Nancy, Sarah, Joshua and Rolland, 1996.

To our very happy surprise, another son was born to us two years after the birth of Jim Jr. We named him Rolland. He came to know the Lord at an early age also, and when he was a teenager, he totally dedicated his life to God. He had a great talent for drawing and paid for his university tuition by doing art work.

After graduation, he went to San Bernardino, California, to work as an artist with Campus Crusade for Christ. Shortly after he arrived, he met a beautiful Christian girl, Nancy. They were married six months later, and both worked for Campus Crusade for several years before moving to Northern California.



They have three children, two boys and a girl. Rolland is one of the priests of an Orthodox Church in Ben Lomond, California, where he also works as an artist, painting icons. I have written six books for children and he has drawn beautiful pictures for all of them.



Sam, Charles, Angela and Grace, 1988.

We were more than happily surprised when a third son was born two years after Rolland. We named him Charles. He was just five years old when we moved to Sunshine Acres. The first three years here, when we lived in the old building with 30 children (the youngest 10 were only six years old) were especially hard for Charles. I was trying so hard to be a good mother to all of the children. When a room was full of children and I kissed one of them, I kissed them all, because I wanted them all to feel loved.



I know that Charles did not get as much attention as he should have had at that early age.

When Charles was eight years old, God sent us Edmond, who was exactly his age. His mother loved him but was unable to take care of him. Charles and Edmond became real buddies and every time the mother came to see her son, she would take both of them on a little outing and did many of the little extra things for Charles that I couldn't do. She was like a second mother to him. I thank God for meeting this need in his life.

Charles went into the Air Force for four years following high school. While in the service, he married a sweet Christian girl, Grace. After he got out of the Air Force, they came back to work at Sunshine Acres while he attended college for four years to get a degree in social work. They have two beautiful children, a son and a daughter. Charles is now one of our social workers, with a deep love and compassion for all of the children.

I now have 14 grandchildren and 16 great-grandchildren. The first grandchild was born the year we moved to Sunshine Acres, so I have never been able to spend as much time as I would have liked to with my grandchildren, but each one of them is very precious to me, and I pray that God will make something beautiful out of their lives.



Chapter 10

Letters Home

Most people do not like to write letters, especially boys. It has been hard keeping current addresses for our children after they are grown and leave us; when they are young they seem to move quite a bit. I am so very happy when I do occasionally get letters from any of them and I always answer every letter.

This is one of my favorite letters, written by a boy who lived here for almost ten years.

Dearest Aunt Vera:

It is so hard to express the gratitude for the things you have done for me. All the times you made sure I was clean and had a clean place to live and all the mornings you spent in the cold, washing clothes. You loved me when I felt so alone and wiped away my tears and made sure I had a full tummy.

I thank you for all the songs you sang to brighten up the day and all the times you took care of me when I was sick, even when you did not feel well yourself. But, most of all, I thank you for teaching me about the love of our wonderful Savior Jesus Christ. Yes, Aunt Vera, you truly left a track of Jesus in my heart.



You have truly been a good steward of the things that God has blessed you with.

How wonderful it is to be a part of the family of God. I only hope that I can be as good of a steward of what the Lord gives me as you and Uncle Jim have been. We shall all be together forever with Jesus someday.

I shall take the love of Jesus that you have given me and carry it with me forever, telling everyone I can about God's love.

Paul (not his real name), is happily married, and is very active in his church. He teaches a Sunday School class, and ministers on Saturdays to street children. He also plays a guitar and sings. Occasionally he visits Sunshine Acres, and preaches and sings for us.

Just one life totally turned around is worth all of my 42 years at Sunshine Acres! God says that one soul is worth more than the whole world.

So many people work at two jobs just to get a better house, a bigger car, or other luxuries. When we leave this world we can't take any of that with us. My favorite motto is: "Only one life, twill soon be past, only what's done for Christ will last."

Here are a few more favorite letters:



Dear Aunt Vera and Uncle Jim:

I have been praying for you and everyone at Sunshine Acres. I just want you to know I still love all of you for what you did for me.

I thank God for what He has done for me by putting me in such a beautiful place like Sunshine Acres. I have to think what would have happened to me if you had not taken me in. God wanted me to be loved by the nicest people on earth and I really mean that.

Love,
Sam

Dear Aunt Vera and Uncle Jim,

I often think of Sunshine Acres and the lessons that I learned there. I don't think anyone could ask for better surroundings as a child. Please keep me in your prayers.

I really can't emphasize enough how much my life and morals were molded by what you taught me from Bible stories, your example, and your prayers.

Love,
Mona



Dear Aunt Vera and Uncle Jim,

I know you let me come to Sunshine Acres because you loved me. I am so thankful for that. I felt so loved when I was with you. I still believe in Christ as my Savior. Right now He is my very best friend. When I feel sad and discouraged I remember some of the Bible verses we learned.

I am glad you prayed all of those years for a home for children and that I was able to live there as long as I did. We were like a family. I want to live for the Lord from now on. Please keep praying for me.

Love,

Peter

Dear Aunt Vera and Uncle Jim,

It is a difficult thing for me to express my feelings sometimes, but I want you to know I will always think of Sunshine Acres as my home and I will always love it. I am so thankful I could grow up in such a beautiful place.

Thanks for the very firm Christian background given to me. I have a foundation to build a good life on.

I am so glad that my husband could see Sunshine Acres, it was the atmosphere I wanted for him to experience.

Love,

Ann



Ann and Bob have three lovely children, and they are wonderful parents. They served as directors of the youth program in their church for awhile.

Their pastor wrote to tell us that they were the very best youth leaders they ever had.

This next letter is from the mother of one of the boys we took in:

Dear Mrs. Dingman,

Bryan has only been with you a few months, but God has managed to work through your home more miracles in Bryan's life than I ever thought possible. From the first day I toured the Acres I could feel God's presence. I came home knowing it was the right place to put Bryan.

Bryan had so many serious emotional and behavioral problems, he was in a treatment center last year. I never had any peace of mind the whole time he was there. I have had such peace since Bryan has been at Sunshine Acres, I can't begin to explain it.

I used to be a Christian, but due to many pressures and family problems I had drifted away from the Lord. Since Bryan's stay at the Acres I have come back to God, so you see God is not only working in Bryan's life but in my life, too.



I would like to give you a few examples of the changes in Bryan. First of all, Bryan had a very hard time saying the word “love,” but now it flows from his mouth with great meaning. You feel love just pouring from him just being in the room with him. Each letter he writes to me instilled with love for me and his brother and sister.

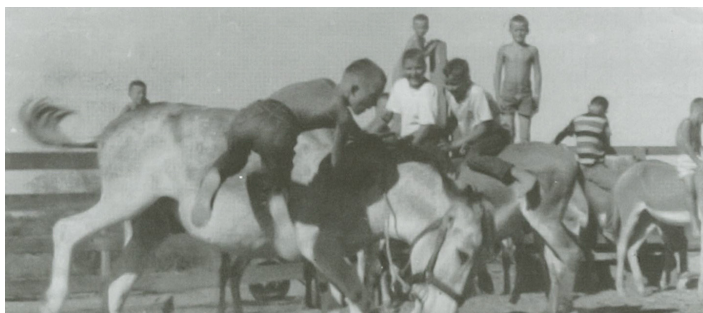
When Bryan lived at home he never wanted to do dishes. He always felt it was a woman’s work. This last home visit he insisted on doing the dishes.

Sunshine Acres has done more for his self-esteem in the few short months he has been with you than I have been able to do in thirteen years. Bryan really likes himself now and it is a good feeling knowing others like him, too.

I thank God that some one told me about Sunshine Acres.

Love,

Alta



*One of many afternoons spent learning to ride - and stay on
- the horse and burros.*



Chapter 11

God Has a Plan

By Carol Whitworth

In 1960, my husband, Jack, and I, and our three little children, ages three, four, and five, stopped by to see my parents at Sunshine Acres to let them know that we were moving back to the area. We found that my father was living in one house with 20 teenage boys and my mother was living in another house with 24 younger boys.

My parents, looking very tired, asked, “Instead of looking for a house right now, would you be willing to move into the house with 20 teenage boys for six weeks, to give us time to find houseparents?”

At that time, I was 25 and my husband, Jack, was 28 years old. Jack had been working for the Arizona Highway Patrol for four years in Globe. We were being transferred to Flagstaff, Arizona, and Jack had decided to resign, because he wanted to finish his education in Industrial Arts at Arizona State University – which he did in 1966.



My first thought was a little panicky: How can Jack and I possibly take care of 20 teenage boys? He will have to continue working, since there will be no money to pay us a salary, and attend college at the same time. I seemed to be very busy just taking care of our own three children, so how could I manage 20 high school boys also? Jack would have to be gone a big part of the time, both working and going to school.



*Carol and Jack
Whitworth, 1995*



Jack and I looked at each other and decided we would go ahead and help them out for the six weeks, so we moved into the original home that had 12 small bedrooms, and which was not in the best of shape. It had no kitchen and children wanted to eat all day, so I was wondering how we could survive, but we went to a main dining hall for our three meals a day. Our three-year-old, Patrick, wanted a snack quite often, and the home was so big he felt insecure a lot of the time. When I read to my children each evening, as usual, Pat would cry that he wanted to go home. He kept insisting, “This is Grandma’s home!”

However, it did not take long for our children to adjust and it wasn’t long until they thought this was a great place to live, as there were so many things to do. Our teenage boys were always looking for lizards, huge scorpions, and snakes, and it wasn’t too long before our children were doing the same.

Sundays, we went to church and in the afternoons we would have chess and ping-pong tournaments to keep the boys busy. We had a devotion time every evening, and snacks, showers, and homework, etc., so our evenings were busy. All the guys who had their shower finished by 8:00 could then watch television for one hour. In those days, there was a majority of good programs on television.



The six weeks went by in a hurry and my parents had not found a replacement. We were getting along with the boys better than we had expected, so we decided to stay a while longer. Jack started to fix up the building and we settled in to make it home. I missed having a kitchen and Jack didn't have the time to build one, because he was working each day and going to college several nights a week. A dear friend of our family, Gus Shroeder, came out Monday through Friday, and built a kitchen and bathroom onto our house. What a blessing it was to now have a kitchen and another bathroom. Mr. Shroeder later moved his mobile home to Sunshine Acres and spent almost 30 years with us, doing volunteer work. He was a great blessing!

Jack and I felt overwhelmed at times, but it was always so rewarding to see a child become secure, happy, and having hope for the future.

I had 23 pairs of socks each day to sort, and sometimes I waited a couple of days to do it, so I would soon have a bushel of socks to sort. Bud and Kay Lemmel (who volunteered many hours at Sunshine Acres) would help me catch up on these kinds of things.



One day I heard some loud noises in one of the boys' bedrooms. The door was closed and I kept hearing loud banging noises. I tried to open the door and found it was locked, so I yelled for them to open the door. I just knew a big fight was going on, so I kept knocking and knocking, but they still wouldn't open the door. Finally, when they opened the door a young boy, Lance, exclaimed, "I'm sorry we couldn't open the door, but we were killing this rat," which he was holding up by the tail. I was glad then that they hadn't opened the door!

One evening, the boys asked me if I would take them to the local drive-in theater, since it only cost one dollar (in 1960) for each car. Jack had an evening class at Arizona State University and the boys were bored. I made Kool-Aid and popcorn while the boys tied lawn chairs on top of the Volkswagen bus. They all piled in. It was a tight fit, but we all made it. We arrived at the drive-in and found a place to park. All 23 of us started piling out of the bus, when one of my boys asked, quite loudly, "Mom, why is everybody looking at us?" I heard a lot of laughter from the people in the cars around us.



The hardest part of living with so many teenagers is that many of them were in sports or music at their school, so Jack and I had to do a lot of driving: delivering and picking up boys at different events, at different times. Some of the boys had outside jobs, which meant driving them back and forth to work. We allowed the boys to have their own car if they kept average or above average grades, had a job, paid cash for the car and kept up with the insurance. We usually had two or three boys who were able to meet these requirements and have their own car, and that was a big help.

You had to be very creative in disciplining teenage boys, yet you have to be consistent with consequences when they do not obey. We had a lot of house meetings and asked for their input on what we should do when they didn't follow the rules.

Several Saturdays, while the others went to the lake, I stayed home with some of the boys who had not obeyed the rules. After a few Saturdays, I felt like I was the one being punished, so Jack and I came up with a solution.



We owned a boat and Jack taught all the boys to water ski, so we would take the boys who were being disciplined, but they would not be allowed to get into the water or ski and they would have to help me fix the food and clean up. I would talk with the boys and tell them how badly I felt that they had to miss all the fun and hoped and prayed that it wouldn't happen again. We seldom had any of the boys act up enough to miss our Saturday fun times after that.

One year, several of our boys were asked to paint the infirmary, which needed to be painted in the worst way. Afterwards, they had me come and look at what a good job they had done. I was a little shocked to see that they had painted their initials on the roof! They said they wanted everyone to know who had done the painting.

It was always hard to get 20 teenage boys to go to bed at night. Someone was always needing something, or they just “had” to iron their shirt right at bedtime (we didn't have permanent press shirts in those days.) One night, after they had been especially hard to get settled down, one of the boys yelled, “Aunt Carol, there's a rattlesnake in the hall!”



I thought it was just another ploy to put off bedtime and called back, “Come on, there is no rattlesnake in the house. Just go to bed.”

They kept hollering, so I went to the hall and sure enough, there was a three-foot rattler slithering down the hallway. I told the boys to get into their beds and stay there, and I called my brother, Rolland, to come over to catch it. He came right over with a pillowcase and a snake stick and caught it in a few seconds. The next day he sold it to Arizona State University. They bought it to milk its venom.

In the beginning, we accepted a few children from the state and they had a caseworker who came to see them once a month. George had been there with us for several years, when one evening his caseworker came to our home and said she was there to take him to a foster home. I was shocked, and so was George, that she would come without notice and want to remove him.



The Dining Hall with Chapel in background, Circa 1980



He sat down in a chair and refused to move. “I am not going with you. This is my home,” he insisted. After half an hour of trying to persuade him, she finally left. He stayed with us until he was grown and able to live on his own. He lives in California and we keep in touch. He comes as often as he can to visit.

I was accused by several caseworkers of treating the boys as if they were my very own and they would remind me that they were not my boys. One of the very reasons that Sunshine Acres has been so successful with the children is because we have made them feel that they belong, and we are a family.

We are always happy when a parent can get their lives straightened out, so they can take their children home. Unfortunately, this does not happen for all of the children and they stay until they can make it on their own. We hear from many children who have lived at Sunshine Acres for a year or more that it was a very positive experience for them.

Our six weeks at Sunshine Acres has now turned into over 36 years! We have done many different jobs over the years, from being houseparents, relief houseparents, cooks, and leading chapel services to whatever else needed to be done.



Jack was Director of Sunshine Acres for 10 years, and I have been the Director for the last 15 years. Jack is now doing what he loves the most in his position as Facility Manager. He gets to use his talents in building, cabinet making, remodeling, etc.

We have seen many miracles at Sunshine Acres as well as in our own lives. Jack smoked when we came to Sunshine Acres, though he never smoked around the children. He prayed with my father, made a new commitment to Christ, and God took away his desire to smoke. Jack was baptized, by my father, along with several of the children.

When my parents asked us to move into the office apartment to take over some of the administrative duties, the apartment had a pink stove and a brown refrigerator which didn't work very well. I made a comment to my husband one day. "It sure would be nice to have a pink refrigerator to match the pink stove." A couple of days later, a man came into the office and said, "I have a pink refrigerator in my truck. Could you use it?" I felt that this was just another one of the many miracles I have seen at Sunshine Acres.



Our children are now grown and happily married and they have blessed us with nine grandchildren. Three of the grandchildren are attending college – that makes us feel old at times! They all live nearby, so we get to see them often. Our oldest daughter, Cindy Humphrey, worked at Sunshine Acres for several years, when she was first married.

Yes, God does have a plan for our lives. We cannot take our possessions to heaven, but when a soul is saved, we can see them in heaven. This is why it has been a privilege to work with these precious children, to show them a new and better way to live.



Chapter 12

He Heals the Broken-Hearted

By Carol Whitworth

Sunshine Acres received a call from a social worker, saying that she had a 12-year-old boy, named Shane, whom she had been unable to place in a home. He was currently living in a shelter in Phoenix and, because he had lived in 13 different homes and had been adopted twice, there was no foster home that wanted to take him. I must admit that we had concerns, hearing all this, but we still always interview a child, and if they want to come we usually take them. The social worker brought Shane and said she would leave him for a couple of hours before coming back to pick him up.

I took Shane for a ride on the golf cart. We went through the homes and then drove over to the corral and looked at the animals that we have in our 4-H program. He seemed to be very depressed and not interested in anything. He asked no questions and only answered my questions with a “yes” or “no.” This is not the norm, as almost all of the visiting children like what they see here; the homes are very nice, and they especially like the swimming pools, Bower’s Hall, which is the gymnasium, and the animals.



Being aware of his background, I kept thinking that I, too, would be depressed if I had gone through what he had, and I prayed silently, “Dear Lord, what can I say to this young boy?”

I looked over at Shane, and with tears in my eyes, I asked, “Shane, what would make you happy?” He looked at me and answered, “If I could have my very own dog.” I aid, “If you decide to come and live with us, Shane, you can have your very own dog. The day you come, we will go to the pound and you can pick out a dog.” I gave him my card and said, “You call me if you want to come and live with us.”

The very next day, Shane called and said that he wanted to come and live with us. We picked the day that he was to come and I said, “I remember my promise that you can have your very own dog, Shane.”



*Aunt Vera and children in front of Dining Hall,
giving visitor a tour in her golf cart “tour bus”*



I then had the job of telling his future houseparents about Shane and the dog I had promised him. Thankfully, they said it would be no problem to have another dog. We agreed on the importance that the dog be fed in his room and should even be allowed to sleep on his bed if Shane wanted. I felt that it would take something rather special for Shane to make it with us, as he had been hurt so many times before.



Aunt Vera has devotion with the children before they go to school.



The day that Shane was scheduled to come to live with us, an attorney from Mesa called and said that he had a wonderful black Labrador Retriever named O.J., that was great with children, and wondered if we would like to take him. I told him about Shane and that I had promised to take him to the pound to pick out a dog. The attorney said, “Why don’t you bring him to see my dog? If he doesn’t want O.J., then you can go ahead and let him check out the pound.”

We did this and Shane immediately fell in love with O.J., and the dog took to Shane, so we brought O.J. home.

From that first day, whenever Shane rode his bike, O.J. would follow him, and when he watched television, the dog was always right next to him.

One day, Shane came rushing into the office, crying, “Aunt Carol, there is something awfully wrong with my dog!” My brother, Chuck, and I ran out to check on O.J., and we could tell immediately that the dog had been bitten by a rattlesnake. It was already having difficulty breathing. Chuck picked up the dog and Shane went with him to the nearest veterinarian. The dog was in the hospital for about a week.



When the veterinarian called and said the dog was ready to be picked up, Chuck and Shane went to pick up O.J. together. Chuck told me that on the way home Shane said, in wonder, “You people even care about my dog!”

We found a couple who wanted to be his “grandparents” and Shane spent time with them. They grew to love Shane and he enjoyed visiting and going places with them. Grandpa has since died, but he still spends time with his Grandma and she said Shane has been a great comfort to her.

Shane has worked for a big company for eight years now and is manager of one of the departments of a store. He lives on his own and drives a red convertible, of which he is very proud.

We thank God that he gives us a chance to love these hurting children and tell them of our loving Savior. Jesus will never let them down, and can heal their broken hearts and bind up their wounds.

Betty's Story

We always tell the children how special they are and that God loves them and we do, too.

One day, I stopped by the dining hall at lunchtime. There were about six children, ages six to ten years old, sitting at one table. I gave them each a hug and said, "You know, children, you are the most beautiful children in the world. God always sends us the best!"



*Children's Choir with the digman's grandson Joshua Wilson,
1992.*



A few minutes later, one of those girls, a very talkative eight-year-old named Betty, with beautiful brown eyes, came up to me and said, “Aunt Carol, I just want you to know that what you said in the dining hall is true!” I smiled and gave her another hug.

Betty also sings in our choir and she seems to grab people’s hearts. She was telling some people for whom they were singing how much she loves to sing. She shared with them that her mother was in prison and that she wished she would get her act together. She then asked if they would call the Choir Director at Sunshine Acres and talk him into letting her sing a solo. They did call and related the above story to me. A mobile home park was having a talent show the next week, and they wanted to know if she could sing a solo one night. The director taught her a song and she did get to sing her solo after all.



“Happy faces.”



One day, I was taking a gentleman on a tour and Betty came up to me and announced, “I just learned the Star Spangled Banner. Can I sing it for you?” I asked the gentleman if he had time to hear her song and he agreed.

Betty sang the song, not missing a word. The gentleman had tears in his eyes as he sat down and wrote a sizeable check for Sunshine Acres. I think this little girl is going to go far!

Two Sisters and a Brother

A school nurse called and told us that she had three children who desperately needed a home. She related this story to our social worker.

The oldest girl in the family came to the school nurse and said that her father hadn’t picked them up from school and could she please take them by the last park where they had been living, to see if they could find him. She drove them around the park, but there was no sign of her father. It was dark by this time, so she took them to her home and called the police.



She was told that their father had been arrested for writing bad checks. She found out that their mother had died, and so now they only had their stepfather to care for them. Sometime later he lost his job and eventually they were evicted because they could not pay the rent. They began to live in their car, but he continued to drop them off at school each day.

We hear that he has been out of jail for some time now, but he has not attempted to see the children. The children are glad to be here and the oldest girl is very close to her brother and sister, and likes to spend time with them. The school nurse keeps in contact with them and they sometimes spend a week-end with her. What a joy, when we see these hurting children become secure and happy, and having hope for the future.



Chapter 13

Don't Always Follow Your Heart

By Phyllis Decious

As I write this, I'm sitting on an airplane enroute to Boston, Massachusetts. Wayne, my beloved husband and companion of 33 years, and I are about to attend the college graduation of our two younger sons, Greg and Peter. Also, during our one-month vacation, we will drive to Pennsylvania to visit our son Cris and his family, then back to Martha's Vineyard, where many more family will gather for Greg's wedding.

Wow! Fifteen years of "adventures in the desert at Sunshine Acres" have passed. My biological children have grown up and we have added many more onto our family list. God certainly had a wonderful plan for our family that included Sunshine Acres Children's Home!

For 17 years, our family lived comfortably and we re happy with our living situation. Then, for some reason, Wayne and I became restless, believing that the Lord was leading Wayne to a different job with higher pay and much more responsibility in the business world. After much prayer, involving many friends, Wayne left the children and me to sell the house as he moved to a central location of his work.



The months continued to go by, yet our home didn't sell. Why did God allow our family's separation to continue? Then one day Wayne, tired, lonely, and discouraged, decided this job must not be God's will, so he quit "cold turkey." November through February was spent on our knees in prayer, having faith that God would speak to us.



Phyllis Wayne Decious

At the same time, 1,500 miles away in Mesa, Arizona, a place called Sunshine Acres Children's Home needed houseparents. My sister, who lived in Mesa, and had toured the home, called me saying she had given our name to the home as possible houseparents. Sunshine Acres began calling to inquire about us coming to see the home. However, we were not receptive to the calls. We felt that to even think of moving from Iowa to Arizona with our four boys was out of the question.



Our Father in Heaven is so gentle and patient. He just waited us out, letting us argue with ourselves in what we thought would be best for our lives. Finally, in February, following another phone call from Sunshine Acres, we asked God to show us some physical evidence if we were to check out the children's home.

Wayne carefully calculated how much gas we would need to drive to Arizona, and added all the other expenses. Then we got down on our knees and asked God for a specific dollar amount if we were to look at the place.

Guess what? Less than 24 hours later, in the next day's mail, we received many gifts and checks in the amount of only 25 cents less than that for which we had prayed! So off we went to Arizona to check out Sunshine Acres.

Later, on our way home after our visit to Sunshine Acres, we thought of all the reasons why it would not be God's will for us to work there. But the moment we drove into the driveway at home, Wayne looked at me and said, "I believe God us at Sunshine Acres."



Wayne called the realtor and told him to take our house and sell it, lease it, or rent it, because we were leaving town. The realtor said that it was strange that Wayne had called, because just the day before someone had asked if our house was still for sale. He brought the people out the next day and they bought our home.

We had a garage sale the following week, to sell most of our possessions, saving only a few things that we could not seem to part with.

After the sale, Wayne called and reserved a small rental truck for the move the following week. The next week, when Wayne went to pick up our truck, the man said that they needed his biggest truck in Phoenix, and if we would take the bigger truck, he would let us have it for \$700 less than the one we had ordered! So we took the bigger truck. Well, as it turned out, God knew we needed the bigger truck, because we filled it up to the rear door, and off we went, down the road to Arizona.

The trip was a long one. Wayne drove the truck, with one of our sons and the family dog, and I followed with our other three sons in the car. Many tears were shed as the miles increased between us and our friends and our home, into unfamiliar territory.



I need to say this: If you truly want to obey God, following your heart doesn't always come into the picture. This move was against Wayne's and my personal desires. But, as we followed step-by-step, we knew that it was God's plan and we chose to be obedient to Him.

After the first year at Sunshine Acres, we decided that we were not cut out for the job of being responsible for ten young men's lives. We went to talk to our supervisor about resigning. She was busy, and while we were waiting in the office, the mail was delivered. Wayne picked up our mail, and opened a letter and began to read. Then, with tears streaming down his face, he looked at me and said, "I don't think we will need to talk about leaving."

It seemed that Aunt Vera, while on a trip to California, felt moved to write Wayne and me about having faith to stick it out when things get tough. Using herself and her husband, Jim, as examples, she said, "Please don't quit."

Wow! God taught us another side about Himself. He will sometimes use others to speak directly about his plans for us.



Looking Through the Photographs

I wasn't in a sleeping mood this past night. We are in New York, between our son in Boston, whose wedding it is to be, on our way to Pennsylvania, and another son. All of our sons lived some years at Sunshine Acres.

Looking at some of the snapshots I had brought along, I see our boys with their steers at competition shows and remember how Wayne and our boys of the past started the Sunshine Acres 4-H program about 12 years ago. 4-H is a lot of hard work, yet the results have proven very successful. It doesn't matter whether a guy wins or not. It's the accomplishment of raising and finishing an animal to the point of being in the contest.

As a boy walks out into the show ring, his steer groomed and shining, Wayne is humbled with the gratitude he has toward our Father for letting us see miracles unfold which led to this point.

Now we are in the process of a barn being built for our 4-H work, which will spark our program even more. Wow, God is so good!



What of Rewards

I could never begin to tell you the full list of rewards or fulfillment. But, I will tell you that “you can’t outdo God.” We have learned that if we are willing to follow His ways, He will make sure that we are more than fulfilled.

We have spiritually adopted many of our wonderful kids. We are so thankful that at Christmas and other celebrations so many of our boys come home. They come with their loving wives and some have already had their own children, now our spiritual grandchildren. “Our cup runneth over!”

We’ve learned so much about life from all of our children. Some of it has been very painful. We’ve learned what it’s like to be in the middle between divorced parents, and for the child to feel it’s his own fault, or the frightening experience of our boys from Vietnam who bravely escaped that country for a better life in the United States.



We've learned by watching the parents of our children die needless deaths, and how children adjust to life after being cruelly beaten by a parent or stepparent, and then how a child can be affected for the rest of his life from the emotional abuse of a parent. In all these situations, the best way we could offer help was to show them Jesus, to tell them about His agape love for them individually, to give them all the time and love we could humanly give.



Palo Verde Dorm Boys, 1985

Our own four precious guys have their own perspective of living and growing up at Sunshine Acres. Through all of their unselfishness in sharing their parents with ten other boys year after year, God has rewarded them. They have graduated from college, along with many of the guys they grew up with here.



They all have a hands-on way of working with God for others. They have an understanding, compassion, and love for young people that far exceeds that of most people. Our only explanation to this is that our precious Lord worked with our guys while we were working with His hand-chosen children.

As I finish writing this, I am looking forward to a wedding at Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts. Many of our boys have made the effort to come and stay the week of the wedding at an estate at Chappaquiddick Island. The list includes Erik, our spiritual son who took our last name, with his dear wife. Erik graduated from Grand Canyon College.

Monte, along with his precious wife and daughter (our only granddaughter so far), was born on Wayne's birthday. Monte is a graduate from Southwestern College and is now in the ministry to other college young people.



*Chris, Jenny and Elijah
Decious, 1996*



*Mike, Katherine, Timothy and
Matthew Decious, 1996*



Son and Le, our Vietnamese boys, came to us at 13 and 14, by surviving a dramatic escape in a small boat. They spoke very little English when they arrived at Sunshine Acres. They have since graduated from college. Recently, they went back to visit their home in Vietnam, after 15 years. Now they are building a home for their parents and helping their families in Vietnam.

Jae, our Korean boy, is presently attending Liberty Bible College in Lynchburg, Virginia. Jay lived at Sunshine Acres for seven years.

Nick, our black American, who made a commitment for the Lord, has completed two years at Moody Bible College in Chicago. Nick has been Class Chaplain both years at Moody and works in the young men's prison ministry.

Esayas, our Ethiopian boy, whose mom and dad parted with him for political reasons, sent him to us, feeling it was safer for him in the United States. Esayas has been attending Mesa Community College and working successfully as a security guard.



These and more are the dear brothers of our blood sons. They are real in their support and love for one another. What more could a parent want? We have already experienced more than enough reward in our lifetime. We praise our Lord and humbly thank Him for allowing us to be part of this work at Sunshine Acres! We pray that as long as life continues, Sunshine Acres' work will go on and many, many more children will know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.



Chapter 14

Who's in Charge

By Wayne Decious

Over the past 15 years, my wife and I have been asked a zillion questions on how we do it, or how we handle a certain situation. I will endeavor to write about some situations that have happened, and how we dealt with each one.

First, I must make it known that we would not have been here more than a year or two, at the most, if it weren't for our Father in Heaven. Not only did He put events in their proper perspective, He gave us a sense of humor and love, love, love for kids in their teens.

When a boy reaches 14, he knows it all, has done it all, and is ready to face the world – and is in a hurry to move on before he forgets all he knows! In reality, he does not know it all, has not done everything, and is definitely not ready to face the world. In order to prove that to him, we must meet him at every turn in the road and talk about it. We must be ready to spend a lot of quality time with them. He must know that we are there for him, whenever he needs us, even if it is at 1:00 in the morning (which it usually is!).



All children need limits. They don't think they do, but actually they are begging for boundaries. They will test us to these limits – and beyond. We must not change from situation to situation, but stand firm and be consistent. For example, if we tell a boy that he must be home by 11:00 at night, that does not mean one minute after 11:00. If he arrives after 11:00, something must happen to prove that. Once we have established our boundaries, things will run more smoothly, and we will be in charge.

I hold to an old saying, “As long as your feet are under my table and you sleep in my home, I am in charge. And when you decide you can't abide by that any longer, then it is time for you to make your own way if you can.” I have had a few test me on that, and after a few months they have returned and asked to come home.

One boy left three times and returned three times. He is my buddy to this day, not only because I let him try it, but I was forgiving each time and understood he had to find himself. Sometimes, it is necessary to let them try life out there. It is difficult emotionally for all of us, but they have to learn, even if it is “the hard way.”



Another, most important factor in becoming in charge is that the children see us in devotions and prayer. There's a saying that rings true: "A child is not likely to find a Father in God unless he finds something of God in his father." It is so important that sometime during the day your family comes together and spends time with God. It doesn't have to be drawn out and long. Quality time in the Word of God can be a real form of bonding.

Times of Sadness and Love

It was the middle of April, and still so many unsolved mysteries since Christmas. It came to a head when one of the boys had been caught stealing. The guys in our dorm had finally discovered why so many things had been vanishing.

After he had been caught, the boy stood in front of me, hard and cold, eyes looking down. I learned that he had told the guys earlier that he wanted to leave anyway.



What to do? Naturally, he was expecting me to rant and rave about the “wages of sin is death” and all that stuff, but I just looked at him and quietly said, “Son, we love you very much, and we want you to stay and work out your problems. We don’t want you to leave.”

He looked up, surprised, tears came to his eyes, and he started to cry. Now he was ready for a big hug from me and all the guys, and we could start to build a relationship where he would listen and learn and trust.

Four on a Joy Ride

We were taking a night off one time, just resting, when all of a sudden there was a loud banging on the door. At this point, our restful evening came to a halt and a seeming nightmare began.

Four of our boys had taken a truck belonging to Sunshine Acres for a joy ride. What started as an exciting prank ended in a nightmare of fright! They had taken the truck out onto the street and only gotten about a half a mile up the road before trying to make a turn into a parking lot at 50 miles per hour. The truck had hit the curb, went airborne, and the two boys in the back were launched out and fell down a 15-foot ditch onto river rocks below. The truck came to rest so close to one of the boys that his shirt was caught under the box of the truck.



As we drove up to the scene it looked like a sea of flashing red lights and what seemed like dozens of fire trucks and ambulances. We searched for our guys and just kept praying, “Please, Lord, make them be okay.”

We finally found all of them. Two were in serious condition and two had minor injuries. One of them was being loaded on a helicopter and we rushed to him, not knowing if he could even hear us. All we could say was, “I love you. It’s going to be all right.” Each guy responded with, “I’m so sorry!”

Within three days, all of the guys were home, ready to discuss their mistake and ask for another chance. There was, however, another little side issue. Five other guys had known that they were planning to take the truck, but no one had said a word, which is normal. After all, you don’t rat on your friends. Of course, the way I looked at it was that if just one of them had said something, all the pain and thousands of dollars spent on ambulances, a helicopter, and hospital bills could have been avoided. What were we to do?

We decided to keep all of them together over spring break. No home visits, no privileges. All nine were restricted to base, as it were, for the entire week. We decided to show them a real family week. They were not to leave our sight. We ate out and had special meals at the dorm, and even traveled to the Grand Canyon that week. They never left our sight for a minute.



How can this be punishment, you ask? Sometimes being glued to one's parents can be devastating to a teenager. It worked! We stayed with them until they finally decided we really did love them.

Reflecting

As I'm having my devotions, I'm reminded of the tremendous love that God has for me, as is demonstrated through Jesus Christ. I'm also aware of Jesus talking about the disciples and He being one, as Jesus and God are One. Therefore, I so desperately want to be part of that union of "One."



Palo Verde boys 1995

Also, we've been shown how whoever lives in Christ and He in them produces a large crop on that vine of which we are the branches. Apart from God, we can do nothing.



We have lived in the desert with teenagers for more than 15 years. Many wonder how we can go on this way, year after year. Sometimes I question what we are learning from our desert experience at all. It seems funny. We feel no different than when we began, yet others have remarked that they see the growth of our branches.

Where better can we work hands-on with the new generation than in our work as “dorm parents”? Our prayer is that we are willing and able in spirit and attitude, as long as our Father wants us here. If we become ineffective with the guys, if we become a deterrent, we pray that we will be sensitive to our Lord to go into the next phase of our lives.



Palo Verde boys visit Dan Rather, during his interview with Aunt Vera for the CBS Special, “The Killing Fields” January, 1995



Palo Verde boys 1995



Chapter 15

Peter's Perspective

My name is Peter Decious. I am the youngest son of Wayne and Phyllis Decious. At the age of eight, my parents, my three older brothers, and I packed up all our belongings to move to a place where cacti grew wild and coyotes chased roadrunners. At least that was the perception I had of the Arizona desert. Fifteen years later, the Arizona desert has taken on a new name for me: “Home.”

Looking back at the years here, my most memorable experiences have been that of the 4-H program. This is a program that my dad founded here at the home, with a lot of prayer and hard work. After being given the opportunity to build the facilities for a barnyard, we began praying for animals.

Well, that was a prayer that God answered immediately and abundantly! Within days, we had six sheep, two goats, five steer, and a horse. As our yard was already filled to capacity, Aunt Vera suggested it was time to quit praying for more animals! In the years of my involvement with the program, this is just one example of God's awesome answers to prayer.

The memories of my experiences in the 4-H program and the years of showing steers creates a good analogy of my memories here at Sunshine Acres.



If we focus on the end result to see if it has been a successful year or not, we fail to see all the growth along the way. It is hard to imagine that each event along the way, either the ones that bring back the joy of victory or the tears of pain, could each be a part of God's plan. However, if we look at the accumulation of the years, it is easier to see all the accomplishments and the learning that took place. Only then may we catch a glimpse of the larger plan God has laid out for us.



Peter and Greg Decious, 1996

To be a part of such an organization as Sunshine Acres and to be able to call it home, brings about such a pride. There's not a friend of mine who hasn't heard stories from my home life at Sunshine Acres.



I am often questioned by people, wondering if it was difficult for me to give up my parents when we moved to the home, but I never saw it as giving up my parents. I saw it as gaining a lot of brothers! In fact, my list of brothers is no longer limited to my three biological brothers but now includes many more who have shared my home, from all different walks of life.

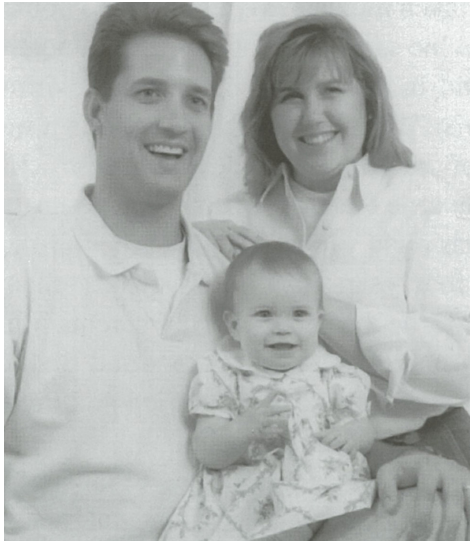
As I grew older, I realized I, too, played a significant role in my parents' work. Together, we were giving others the opportunity to see how different a family that includes Christ can be.

I have learned through the years that if you give everything to God, He will take care of your every need. With each individual that God places in the care of my parents, I am shown that there's not a life that can't be changed, if they choose to accept Christ. I have seen many lives pass through my home while growing up at Sunshine Acres. There are some who we may never hear from again but many will remain life-long friends. Best of all, there are some who will forevermore be a part of our family.

Chapter 16

Testimonies and Poems From Teens

My Life as an Acres Kid



The Coffman's Pastor Monte, Veronica and Baby Victoria

There is one day, unlike any other, that literally changed the course of my life. That day was February 7, 1983. It was my first day as an official “Acres Kid.”

Life before that February 7th was an average life as the victim of divorced parents. It was normal in my home to live in a state of turmoil: parents fighting for the sake of fighting, the children to be used as a weapon between the fighting parents, the children pitting the parents against one another, sibling rivalry due to desires for parental affection. This tends to be the common consequence of a divorce violating a marriage.



As a kid in my earlier years, life was pretty confusing. I didn't understand what true love meant, or if it was possible for a couple to be married for a lifetime, as the vows taken indicate. My home was a home that was built upon the sand, and not the rock foundation that is only found in a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Without a "rock" foundation, it was merely a matter of time before the inevitable destruction would come. The time that destruction came to my home was when I was eight years old, and in the third grade. For the next four years of my life drastically changed, and would never be the same. For my parents, life changed also. My mother married again, and divorced once more. My father, in turn, remarried and divorced two more times and is married again.

It was during those four years that confusion, depression, anger, and bitterness became my emotional makeup. Between the ages of 8 and 11, I personally blamed myself for the divorce. It was not until the age of 11 that I realized I was not to blame. The breakup of our family was my parents' fault. I then became an even angrier young man. This anger manifested itself in many ways: a lack of achievement in school, being a monster at home, and being mean to my sister, for instance.



In addition to these aggressive feelings, immediately following the divorce there began a series of moves for me. I moved to my grandmother's house, to my mother's apartment, to my father's house with his second wife, to my mother's house with her second husband, and to my father's house with his third wife, which was the last stop before coming to Sunshine Acres Children's Home.

The seventh of February, 1983, is a day that is permanently etched into my memory as by far the most difficult day I had ever encountered. Watching my father drive away, as I was left in my "new" home and knowing that I was not be allowed to contact any of my family for 90 days (so I could adjust), brought the biggest tears I have ever cried in my entire life! For one solid week I cried myself to sleep every night due to the incredible feelings of rejection. I also felt fearful living with nine other guys who were bigger and older than me, since I was the youngest boy in the dorm.

I look back now, in 1996, understanding that the only way I ever made it during those first tough years was the divine and loving hands of the Lord. God knew that I needed to be in surroundings that were focused completely on Him, where His name meant more than just a cuss word.



God knew that I needed a visual representation of two people who would remain committed to only each other, in the confines of marriage, which I received in my houseparents, Wayne and Phyllis Decious, who are still houseparents in the dorm in which I was raised. God knew that I needed the freedom and the direction to come to know Him, which happened on the 22nd of July, 1987. Each of these valuable things would not have happened if it were not for the home called Sunshine Acres.

Because of the privilege of living at “the Acres” from the age of 12 through 20, I no longer had to move from place to place with no stability or roots. I was able to graduate from the same high school at which I started. I was also given the emotional and financial encouragement to attend and graduate from Southwestern Bible College in north Phoenix in order to become a pastor in the Lord’s service. By going to Southwestern Bible College, I was able to meet Veronica, now my wife of five years. Through my marriage to Veronica, I am most proud to have an addition to our little family in the birth of our daughter, Victoria Raelyn, who is now 15 months old.



Living at Sunshine Acres has proven to be an invaluable tool that the Lord Jesus Christ has used time and time again to reach and touch the lives of many hurting children, just like I was hurting during those tough years. I will always be grateful for the eight years that I lived in my home at Sunshine Acres. Until I die, I will always be proud to be known as an “Acres Kid.”

My deepest prayer is that the Lord will continue to raise up people to support, through prayer and finances, the much-needed home called Sunshine Acres. May God bless His priceless “Miracle in the Desert.”

Nick’s Story



Nick Haefer



My mother died shortly after my birth. I lived with my grandmother for six years. She was also caring for six other siblings, and it finally got too much for her and she put me and the three other young ones up for adoption.

I was in several foster homes before a family in Tempe, Arizona adopted me, along with seven other children from four different nationalities. Those seven years are marked with wonderful memories and they influenced my life greatly, but at age 14, I was a very troubled boy with serious emotional and behavioral problems that my adoptive parents could not deal with.

After a rough transition, I was once again placed in a safe haven where I was loved. It was a place in the desert called Sunshine Acres. I was 14 years old, and for the next six years of my life, I lived with nine other teenage boys and two house-parents, who were bent on giving us a second chance. I am sure I caused them much heartache, but they did not give up on me. They kept praying for me and with me.

During my senior year in high school, I finally made a firm commitment to serve the Lord, and from that day on my life has had a real purpose.



I am now in my second year at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. I earned as much of the money as I could to help pay for tuition, and some loving Christian people in Rio Verde paid the balance. God has given me many opportunities to serve Him at college. Only three short years ago this was merely a dream, and today it's reality. Even though there have been tough times, I can't help but give awestruck praise to the One who has made all things possible.

I spend my summers at Sunshine Acres and get a job to help pay my expenses. I am now a big brother to younger boys who have since come to live at Sunshine Acres. I enjoy speaking in our chapel services and participating in our daily devotions at the home.

Eric's Story



Eric and Valinda



At 16 years of age, I was a very troubled, unhappy boy without a home. One of the boys at school told me about his new home at Sunshine Acres, where every child is loved and is special. He took me to visit his houseparents, Wayne and Phyllis Decious.

They seldom take anyone over 14 years of age, and all their beds were full, anyway. But, after hearing my story, they had compassion for me and brought in a rollaway bed and made me part of their family.

I still had many problems to work out. This was a whole new way of life for me. I heard about Jesus every day in our daily devotions and my loving houseparents showed me, by their example, that Christ was real. One day, I invited Jesus to live in my heart and my attitudes and outlook on life really began to change.

After graduating from high school, I wanted to attend a Christian college and chose Grand Canyon University in Phoenix. I earned all the money I could for the tuition and some dear Christian friends at a community church in Rio Verde helped pay the balance.

Through college, I became an exchange student in Almoty Kojahuan, a republic of the former Soviet Union, for one year starting in September of 1992.



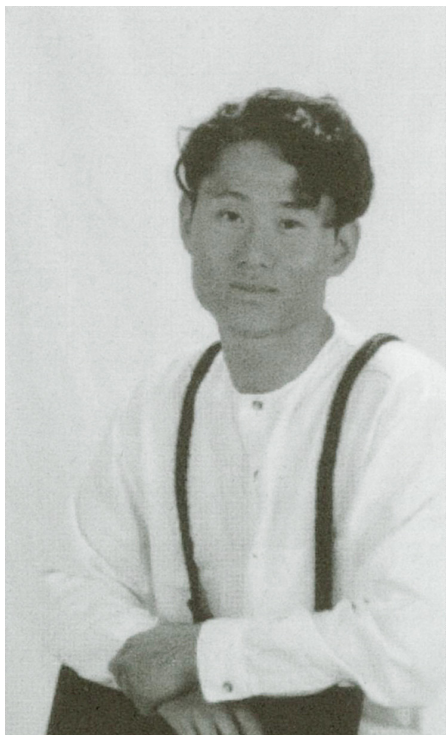
I studied the Russian language, literature, and history at the university. I had opportunities to witness about my new-found faith through Bible studies which I held in my dorm room.

God was very gracious to me and I soon was introduced to my future wife, Yelenda. After I returned home, we kept in close touch for three years through letters. I worked two jobs and was able to visit her once during those three years and we became engaged. Ours was truly a romantic story, written by the Lord, and put into action through His grace.

I worked hard and saved all the money I could to pay for Yelenda and her mother's passage to the United States for our wedding, which took place on June 24th of this year. There was no question where the ceremony would be held. I wanted it to be at my home, Sunshine Acres, in our beautiful chapel.

Before our marriage, I had changed my last name to Decious, as they have been real parents to me for ten years. They loved me unconditionally and had helped me through many difficult times. I praise God for all He has done in my life. Most of all, I thank Him for bringing me Home. I know Sunshine Acres is the Lord's home, and it was His choice to put me there, after all. He loved me long before I ever knew Him!

Different – But the Same In Christ



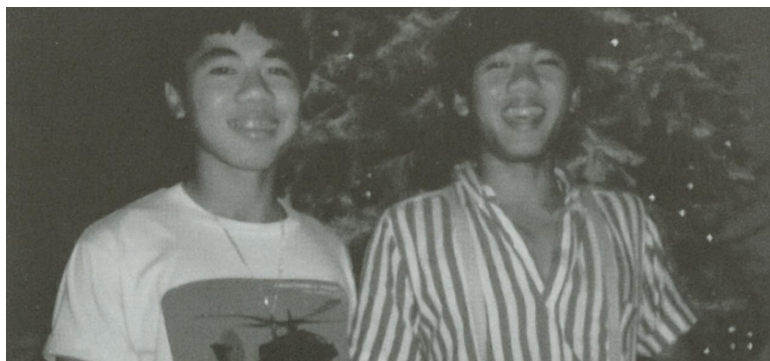
Jae Lee Haney

My name is **Jae Lee Haney**. I was born in Seoul, South Korea, in 1976, where apparently I was left without a home and parental care. I was picked off the streets of Seoul and sent to an orphanage. At four years of age, I was adopted by an American couple, Steve and Tracey Haney. I had a new home, but was a stranger in their land and times were hard for me, which made it difficult for those around me.



I realized quickly and painfully that I was different from most of those around me. Acceptance came seldom, and rejection was often. I was with my adoptive parents eight years when one day, with my emotions in a whirlwind, I ran off into the desert. I was a child who did not know where he was going; anger came easily. I had gone downhill and quickly was going nowhere.

I came to God's house in the fall of 1988 and accepted Him in 1991. I have been at Sunshine Acres for 7-1/2 years. I now have a purpose in life. I can see where I am going. God's hand is leading the way. I want to succeed in college and use myself as a testimony to God's work. I want to reach out just as Jesus did and Sunshine Acres did for me.



Brothers, Son and Thomas Le From Vietnam, 1986

Hello. My name is Thomas Le. My brother, Son Le and I came to the United States in March of 1983 by boat at the age of 14 and 13, respectively. We lived at Sunshine Acres from 1984 to 1988.

Throughout these years, I have learned so much from the most precious God-given people such as Aunt Vera, Wayne and Phyllis Decious, my houseparents, and the staff (to name only a few), who have helped me to know the Lord and to provide guidance for a better future in life and opportunity in the United States.



Besides school, I participated and really enjoyed the 4-H program, earned a brown belt and instructor assistance in karate, and am a member of the band at church. Most of all, the daily devotions, going to church every Sunday, and spending time together with the guys and Wayne and Phyllis during every summer vacation, were also the greatest things to ever happen in my life while living at Sunshine Acres.

After high school graduation, my brother and I moved from Sunshine Acres and went on to college at Arizona State University. It took me 6-1/2 years to earn a Bachelor of Science and a Master of Science in Mechanical Engineering, and since January of 1995, I have been working for Intel Corporation. For the past 13 years, living in the United States, I have to say that without knowing the Lord I would probably have not accomplished all the things that I have now. Therefore, I am very thankful for knowing a place like Sunshine Acres and the staff who have dedicated and volunteered their time to help children have a better life, and have God as part of their life.

Hello. My name is Son Le. I left Vietnam and came to the United States when I was 14. It was emotionally painful to grow up without parents in a foreign country. As I recall, in the first few years in the United States, I would feel heartbroken, or cry when seeing kids with their parents, and hearing them say, "Mom and Dad."



It was no mistake that I came to Sunshine Acres after I lived with two foster families during my first two years in the United States. Sunshine Acres has been a vital part of my life. I accepted Christ into my heart when I was 16. I am truly blessed by many loving and caring Christian houseparents, staff, and volunteers who work at Sunshine Acres, and how they all have helped me.

I am so grateful for Wayne and Phyllis Decious, who always made me feel special and loved. Their loving care is extraordinary, a wonderful role model for married people. I feel great and happy to call them my “Mom and Dad.” I love them very much and am very happy to be part of their family and all the brothers with whom I grew up. I also enjoy coming home to Sunshine Acres for birthday parties, holiday dinners, and occasional visits, simply because it is my home.

Throughout the four years I lived at Sunshine Acres, I learned many things, but most importantly having a relationship with God. Everyone is wonderful and a Christ-centered family. I have fond memories of my 4-H projects, nightly devotions, services in the chapel, doing chores in the dorm, and summer vacations to Disneyland. I treasure them all, and am glad that I was a part of it. All of those activities have strengthened my character then, now, and will in the future.



I managed to graduate from Arizona State University as an Electrical Engineer and am now working for Motorola, Inc. Recently, my brother and I went back to Saigon, Vietnam to visit our family, relatives and friends. They all were surprised and impressed by how “clean” we were – that is, not doing drugs, cigarettes, and alcohol, to name a few.

My parents are deeply grateful to Sunshine Acres, and especially to Wayne and Phyllis for my upbringing.

My most sincere thanks to Vera Dingman, Carol Whitworth, and the staff for providing the Sunshine Acres family, for giving children love and the opportunity to grow in Christ.

A Second Chance

My name is Damien Widick. I am 16 years of age and I’ve lived at Sunshine Acres since I was 12. Living at Sunshine Acres has given my life so many new opportunities to make it in the world. At home, my chances of success were very slim. The road to self destruction and failure had my number. My grandparents discovered a wonderful second chance in Sunshine Acres Children’s Home and made sure that I took it.

The love given here is always felt. Here I have found Jesus as my Savior and have given my life to Him. My old ways are no longer. With my trust in Him, and Sunshine Acres behind me, I plan to go on and be all I can be and live my life for Christ.

American Mom and Dad



Nick, Esayas and David at their graduation

Hi. My name is Esayas Netsanet. I was born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where I lived with my father, mother, two sisters, and a brother until 1989. I was placed at Sunshine Acres in August of 1990. Although it was hard to be 10,000 miles away from my family and join a new family, all the people at Sunshine Acres made the transition easier for me. Sunshine Acres opened new opportunities that I would not have had in Ethiopia.

I was placed in the Palo Verde Dorm with two people whom I now consider my American Mom and Dad, Wayne and Phyllis Decious. These two great people made the biggest change in my life because of all the positive attitudes they have toward life. Not only did they treat me like one of their own family, they gave me responsibilities to help me advance and mature faster than I could have imagined.



They helped me to know who Jesus Christ is and accept Him into my heart.

In the work field, Wayne showed me how to work with animals, operate heavy equipment, drive trucks, and how to maintain most of the property around Sunshine Acres. Working with the maintenance people at Sunshine Acres was one of my best experiences.

I was also able to see a lot of the United States while on dorm vacations. My life has been blessed beyond belief by all the Sunshine Acres family.



Poems

The following are some poems written by a
few of our boys.

Far Off Home

By Shane
Same place – just two years older
Wisdom is stronger
Temptation no longer.
The deep agony of loneliness
No one knows the hurt of separation,
Who knows if there's a chance
Only you can make that change.
No more parents to bail you out
You're far off from home.

Relatives

By Mike
My cousin visits all of the time
He overstays his welcome.
He's not very pleasant to stay with,
He eats all of our food
And drinks all the soda.
He doesn't smell very nice.
He and I always fight, but that's okay.
He's only staying ONE MORE NIGHT!

Life

By Mike
I've lived this life for sixteen years.
I have good and bad thoughts
The life I have lived has beat me up
And at the same time
Lifted me up, back up on my feet.
I still don't know what road
I am going to drive down,
But I hope my mind and my thoughts
Steer me in the right direction!



Chapter 17

Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic

The children here at Sunshine Acres have been going to the public schools for 40 years. We almost always have girls and boys in every grade, so they go to several different schools.

Some public schools are just passing children on from grade to grade, so we often get 14-year-old children who can barely read or write. Some graduates from high school cannot read, write, or do arithmetic at an eighth grade level! Our Mesa schools were better than average for many years, but now we are having more problems with gangs in our schools and drugs are becoming easier to obtain, so teaching becomes more difficult and education suffers.

We prayed for many years about starting a school here on the grounds. Often the children who come to us are several grades behind their normal grade level and children with behavior and emotional problems cannot function well in overcrowded classrooms.



About 27 years ago, a man from Scottsdale, Arizona gave us money to build a library. We have used it all these years for a meeting place, study hall, and for summer school. Two years ago, in 1994, our Governor said that people were coming into Arizona by the thousands and they could not build the schools fast enough. He said that if anyone had a suitable building, they could start an alternative school. The State would pay the teacher's wages, and we could choose our own teacher. They inspected and approved our library so we picked out 20 of our children who needed special help and started our school.



*Waiting for the bus that brings Santa Claus - and presents!
Library in Background.*



A loving, dedicated Christian teacher who had retired and moved to a home just a few miles from Sunshine Acres came to be our teacher. Since these 20 children were learning in several different grade levels, he felt they all needed individual special study carrels. If an eighth-grader is only working at a second-grade level, no one but he and his teacher need be aware of it, so he is not embarrassed and he can make as much progress as he wants.

We have had several volunteer teachers, giving the children a lot of one-on-one attention, which they all need very much. The children have responded well to this type of teaching and are making real progress, some for the first time. One little boy did not want to go out to recess, he was so excited to be learning. Another boy was so enthusiastic that he did a whole week's lessons in one day. This year (1996), we have had 30 in our school and we hope to increase the number every year so that more children can be helped.



*An afternoon story-time break with some of the children.
Circa early 1990's.*

Some of our children choose to go on to college. Many of them go to our community college in Mesa for the first two years. They can earn enough in the summer months, if they live here, to pay the tuition. If they want to go to a regular college, university, or Bible school, they earn all they can and then write for scholarships. There is a community church in Rio Verde, about 50 miles from Sunshine Acres, that generously helps them pay what they can't provide for themselves. Others also have helped to pay tuitions.

We have had children here who have been in many foster homes. We give them the security of staying here as long as they want. Some need us to help them to set realistic goals for their lives and they work hard to obtain those goals. We want every child we take to be helped spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically to become a whole person. We know this is only possible through the healing and grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Chapter 18

No Half Measures

By Martha Raby



Martha Raby

“Life is what happens as we make other plans.” Someone gave me that refrigerator magnet as I prepared for a BA-COM Selection Hearing (the Episcopalian body responsible for approving candidates to attend seminary). I was prepared for a “Yes” or a “No” answer, but not really “Perhaps,” as I had just finished college, was still raising my son, and ending a temporary stint at my parish. They wanted me to “take a year off, rest and just work, then talk to us next year.”



I had applications around the Valley, had four “sure” jobs lined up, and watched each door close, until Sunshine Acres was my only path. I was somewhat reluctant. Some sixth sense warned that this was no place for a “green” social worker to learn the challenges in reasonable stages. “Living in” wasn’t nearly as daunting a prospect as the fact that there could be no half-measures here. I sensed that at Sunshine Acres you either gave yourself openly and without reserve, or you looked elsewhere, where you could reserve a part of you for yourself.

However, I was strongly pulled by the vision of a “home” that strived to be truly homelike (and resembled nothing of orphanages of which I’d known), that truly tried to help children and families, instead of driving them toward an impersonal or overtaxed system.

My son saw the mountains nearby – and a group of boys his own age even closer – and thought life might suddenly be a whole lot better. I thought in wonder, “As a social worker, I could talk to families about God without fear of breaking any rules, of being muzzled.” In fact, sharing and strengthening faith is what would be asked of me.



In all that preoccupation, I never heard Carol say, “Oh, my husband and I came out to help for just 6 weeks and stayed for 36 years!” It probably would have made no difference if I had listened.

I was not only blessed with my own child’s response, but in coming here I realized that unique partnership with God on a deeper, wider level than I ever dreamed of. Christ said, in Matt. 7:9-11, “. . . what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone . . . If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!”

We have had to deal with increasingly fearsome odds and conditions, as our society struggles with problems never imagined 20 or 40 years ago, and we see the evidence marking the children who come to us more and more. I believe the only thing we can uniquely give, that can’t be taken from the children we serve, and when all else may fall away about them gives them a sure foundation to cling to, is a faith in God!



It's not an easy life here. One must accept there may never be sure successes, and as Carol often says, "If you come here looking for any kind of reward, it won't work. No matter how generous your gift, if done with hope of reward, your work will fail."

Often we see no visible evidence of success but must still keep trying to nurture, strengthen, and overcome distrust and despair, and above all, applaud our children and families' successes.

My years here have taught me, increasingly, to be able to thank God, even in the midst of frustration. It seems that just about the time you decide you weren't really meant for this work, or that God is blessing others with success but not you, is when one of His children entrusted to us turns a corner, or begins to catch on to what we're saying (and is able to apply it), or has an unexpected success, and keeps building on it, or it's the time the child who drove you to the edge in the past returns with wife and babies in tow and says, "Thanks for having faith in me." One can live on those experiences for weeks afterwards.



Beyond all this, I bless God for the people whose paths have crossed mine since I came here. Aunt Vera is a living lesson. I only regret that Uncle Jim died the year before I came. Carol Whitworth bore with my early frustration, as ideals collided with reality, and encouraged the best from me. Chuck Dingman, my fellow social worker, has taught me there are many dimensions to spirituality. Gary Ingle, our Assistant Director, has taught me much about my profession and encouraged me to see problems as opportunities. Phyllis and Wayne Decious, the senior boys' houseparents, started at the same time as myself, and taught me more about the care and feeding of young men than anyone else I've ever known. In addition, I've been blessed with professional relationships that have enriched my life, some becoming friendships as well, over time, and with the love and support of my extended family and my church parish.

Chapter 19

Strength To Continue

By Gary Ingle



Adrian, Gary and Noah

During the past 11 years that I have been involved with Sunshine Acres, first as a social worker and now as Assistant Director, one message has always remained constant: “Love the children as your own, just as you would want someone to love your children if you were unable to raise them.”

The past 11 years have gone by so fast and small children have turned into adults seemingly overnight. Many of my joys today come from our children who have left Sunshine Acres and have taken on responsible roles in the community.



We get regular calls from many of our former children who want to come back and visit and tell us about how much their time spent here at Sunshine Acres changed their lives. These positive examples help give us the strength to continue when times get tough, when a child doesn't respond, or responds with anger, resentment, or rebelliousness – all those reactions which come so easily to a child who has been rejected and abused. What a reward it is to see a child grow up and lead a Christ-filled adult life and to know that God gave you an opportunity to be a special part in such a transformation!

I am so thankful that God has placed me in this situation where I can see daily miracles flow. Today we are witnesses to many of our grown children becoming missionaries, pastors, teachers, and responsible adults and loving parents themselves, and having the chance to spread God's message due to the love that they received here.

Sunshine Acres truly is a "Miracle in the Desert" and continues to provide a loving home today, 42 years since Vera and Jim walked onto the grounds for the first time. Today we continue to see daily miracles and it would be difficult to ignore how much God has been faithful to each of us who has been blessed to be a part of this God-lead program. Our challenge will be to continue in the direction that Jim and Vera have set before us, to provide a safe, happy home for hurting children and to strive to always love them as our own.

Chapter 20

What Happens Then . . .



*Jim and Vera Dingman
Circa 1970*

Many people have asked me what will happen to Sunshine Acres after the Lord takes me home. We always “pay as we go,” as the Lord provides, and never go into debt for anything, so Sunshine Acres is debt free. This is a “nonprofit organization,” and it will never belong to any one individual.

I have 14 grandchildren and 16 great-grandchildren. Some of them may feel the calling and the dedication to carry on this work when my children can no longer do so.



We have several loving, dedicated workers here who have helped us for many years, and a very strong Christian board that can make sure this home will continue caring for children.

If no family member or other helpers here could continue this Sunshine Acres ministry to children, my hope and prayer is that it would be turned over to a Christian organization that would have the same goal: A Christian home to care for the hurting children of the world.

In His Love and Service,

Vera Dingman