

Caroline Mission

By Caroline Frame

As I walk into the medium-sized room and remove my shoes, I see her. When I approach, she cracks a little grin at me and I embrace her closely, happy to be reunited with my friend. That smile--it emanates with the light of the entire city. Her little roly-poly hand grasps my finger and it's as if I am the only thing in the world that matters to her. Her fragile head, covered in a variety of wisps and twists of fine hair, rests on my chest as we saunter around the room in circles while the children's music plays, occasionally bouncing and giggling. Never did I think one of the closest friends I made during my college years would be a 5-month-old child named Chloe.¹

When I first started my Micah service at the daycare center Caroline Mission, which provides low-cost daycare for young working mothers living in the run-down South-Grand area of St. Louis, I was nervous to say the least. As a nursing student, I have thoroughly studied various aspects about the human child, but would I be able to translate that knowledge into practice? Because I am the youngest in my extended family, I have not had much experience with taking care of tiny, fragile infants. The only babies I had cradled before were made of cloth and filled with stuffing. Sure, I had studied the proper ways to put a baby to sleep and the various inborn reflexes found in infants, but that didn't guarantee I wouldn't make a disastrous mistake with a living, breathing baby. Consequently, upon walking into that brick building on Caroline Street the first day, I felt unprepared and incompetent to be caring for the children in the baby room. However, my fellow volunteer Bridget encouraged me to venture to her favorite spot at Caroline Mission.

¹To protect identities, all names in this essay have been changed.

"Here's a bottle for Tiffany. She may take it, she may not." The four women of the baby room had been working since 8 am with all these rascals aged twelve months and under. Not that you could tell, though, because their energy was still sky-high. I took the bottle from the kind woman and attempted to feed the infant lying in front of me, but it was unsuccessful. She started to spit up the contents of the bottle and the sticky formula got all over her little bib. The second time I tried, she wouldn't take to the bottle and started to cough a little. An overwhelming feeling of guilt and embarrassment hung over me and I couldn't shake it off. I must have looked upset because one of the women uttered to me from across the room "No, you want to lay her back on your arms and prop her up a little." After I did this, the infant felt much more comfortable in my arms and she took to the bottle as if I had been the one feeding her for months.

I became especially nervous when the babies would start crying, fearing I would get into trouble if I didn't fix the problem soon. To my surprise, the women in the room were very calm and let me figure out what the child wanted on my own, which was a learning experience in itself. Does she want a bottle? Does he want to be walked around? Am I holding her head up correctly? The first day, one of the infants I was caring for would not stop crying, and I had to be corrected by one of the women working in the room after it became almost unbearable to listen to anymore. But I didn't really mind, caring for the infants was all so new to me and learning any way to give them comfort or to show them love was imperative.

When the women would explain what I was doing wrong, they always did it with a smile. Their joy in their work was most apparent to me--always dancing around the room with the children, hand in hand, or singing along with the cartoonish music that would blast at a slightly too-loud volume through the old stereo. I desired to have this intimate connection with the children that these women

had-- and I knew that would only come by pushing past the fact that I wasn't perfect at caring for them quite yet and by building those relationships through visiting with them every week.

In this world, we are often pushed to be constantly working, always striving to achieve more and be more. We do not consider a task accomplished until the goal has been reached. As a nursing student, I am continually in the library drilling the growth patterns of infants into my brain or identifying on my friends the various anatomical structures on their bodies. This incessant studying is something that is crucial to my success as a student as well as a future nurse, and it is an unavoidable and strenuous part of my daily life. It is at Caroline Mission that I am finally freed of the sometimes overwhelming stress of my student life, so the tranquility I find even amidst a room full of crying babies is something I cherish every single week. It is here I encounter the peace and serenity that is extremely difficult to find in the life of a student living on a busy college campus.

However, I believe through my limited time at Caroline Mission that the goal is a continuous effort to show love. Caroline Mission is truly a light in the somewhat desolate area of South-Grand in the city of St. Louis, as well as a light in my life and in all those it has touched. The Mission radiates God's love and hope for the most vulnerable of his children. This love is unending and it penetrates hope into one of the most seemingly hopeless situations--unexpected pregnancy. God's love is not simply revealed through those who care for the children, but in their tireless effort to display the children's worth and dignity. I have not only discovered this love through the skills he has built in me, but also in the ways he has changed my heart through this work. Most of all, I have come to see God in the precious faces of the ones he has called me to serve.

It is also here that I have realized, even in my short time as a volunteer, that I am capable of more responsibility than I imagined. As I am growing more confident in my skills with the infants, I have become more aware of my potential in my future profession as a nurse. As our relationships grow, I have learned more than just techniques. I have learned how to have patience with others, but most importantly with myself. It is my desire that through this service, I come to know more fully what God is calling me to in this life as well as what it means to truly love him in the guise of the smallest children-- through not only the times they spit up on my shoulder but also when they fall asleep in my arms.