

Lois Prater's Childhood Missionary Dream Is Fulfilled—at Age 76

God called a great-grandmother to leave her comfortable home in Seattle and become a mother to Filipino orphans

Lois Prater had reasons not to be a missionary and reasons not to say goodbye to family and friends and go overseas. This great-grandmother was busy enjoying her golden years, but she heard God's call and answered.

In 1991, at age 76, and after having been a housewife much of her life, Prater sold her Seattle-area home, and her car, furniture, and other belongings to become the unlikely outstretched hand to orphans in the Philippines.

"I didn't know anything about business, about building an orphanage," she said. "All along, I've just trusted in God, and He's answered my prayers."

Now 89, she's pricked by the memory of ignoring God's call as a young girl to be a missionary and has become an unlikely lifeline to 98 orphans. On a 5,000 square-foot, white-stucco orphanage on 12-1/2 acres of land covered with banana and mango trees, Prater works to replace neglect in these young lives with hope and a loving home environment.

The orphanage—located just outside Orion, a town of about 9,000—is named King's Garden. In August, the Assemblies of God agreed to take over the facility from Prater because of her health, but she plans to remain involved despite having undergone heart surgery in November.

She became a widow in January 1988, and six months later her childhood desire of becoming a missionary returned while she watched a Christian TV program about an outreach taking place in the Philippines. She didn't know what to do.

"I said, 'Lord, I'm too old to go now,'" Prater told Charisma.

On that program, missionary Nora Lamm was asking people to join her for an outreach to the Philippines. Prater signed up with 230 other volunteers and flew to the South Pacific country to work in three weeks of evangelistic tent meetings.

Soon after she returned to the United States, she went back to the Philippines with 11 other women. A third trip followed in 1990. This time, Prater went by herself and spoke at churches throughout the island for a year.

After one service, a shabbily dressed man came to her holding his 4-month-old daughter. He offered to sell her for 1,000 pesos, or about \$40.

Prater pushed 300 pesos into his hand and later helped him find a job. But she couldn't forget his face. It was then that she began thinking about building an orphanage.

She returned home with plans to build an orphanage in the Bataan Peninsula. She didn't know how she would do it. "All I knew was that it was going to take money," she said.

In spring 1991, she sold almost everything she had.

"I struggled, but I knew that what I was trying to do was something much more important than hanging onto [my] faded couch," Prater said.

First she had to buy land for the orphanage. After several months of searching, Prater got on her knees and prayed in desperation: "God, if I'm going to do this, You're going to have to do it."

Two days later, a woman offered her the land near Orion. She wanted 450,000 pesos, or \$17,500, for it. Prater couldn't buy the land because she isn't a Philippine citizen, and it was purchased through the Assemblies of God.

The first phase of the orphanage was built in February 1994, three years after she returned to the Philippines with the hopes of starting. It has eight bedrooms, a classroom, a large kitchen and a laundry. Today, the second phase has doubled the size of the orphanage, which now includes a school.

The Orion police call Prater "Mama," and their chief, who is a Christian, asked her to lead a Bible study on Monday mornings. During the first two years of her orphanage, officers brought eight physically abused children to the orphanage, including one 7-month-old boy whose mother had put out cigarettes on his legs because he wouldn't be quiet.

Prater's suffered a broken leg, been hospitalized with pneumonia and tuberculosis, and has been ill with intestinal worms during her tenure in the Philippines. The hot weather, the spicy food and the distance from family add to her hardships.

It's been 68 years since she first said she'd become a missionary. Said Prater: "My only regret is I didn't start earlier, when I was young."

Gail Wood