

God Rescues Ministry From Fire

It started out as a typical day—at least a typical day for those living at the Children's Vision International (CVI) compound in Bogotá, Colombia. One hundred **children** got up for school. The babies were fed and played with. Six hundred meals were cooked. And the house parents were home.

At this refuge for **homeless children**—many rescued from the streets of Bogotá, where almost 13,000 children roam each day without shelter—founder Jeanene Thicke Sanderson and her husband, Richard, are mom and dad to them all. The **children**, once rescued, become permanent members of the CVI family. Their impoverished parents, who may be addicts or delinquents, are required to visit their children every two weeks to maintain contact.

But on that November afternoon in 2011, all the kids were home from school. Jeanene Thicke Sanderson was in “Mama Jeanene’s kitchen”—her bakery, where she personally prepares birthday cakes for every child in the home.

Suddenly, she heard three loud explosions in the attached factory building next door. Running outside, she found a group of the children screaming and crying, “Our mom! Our mom! She’s in the fire!”

“I looked up, and there was this red ball of fire standing above me,” Sanderson says, her voice breaking.

As the blazing fire quickly spread to the kitchen and beyond, dozens of staff members and neighbors went into action, carrying the frightened children to safety.

Sanderson and her husband were devastated.

“We’re standing there looking at each other with tears running down our faces,” she says. “You have built this whole dream with 20 years of your life, and it’s all melting before you, and there’s nothing you can do.”

If there were angels attending the scene, nobody saw them. Yet firefighters later told Sanderson that two massive kerosene tanks in the factory never exploded during the two hours the buildings burned. The blast of the tanks would have flattened the entire neighborhood, they said.

Nobody was hurt, though the fire destroyed one building and damaged others nearby.

Yet while the flames literally melted the brick wall of the prayer chapel, miraculously the carpeting and wooden ceiling in the chapel were not even burned.

“It was like God put His hand and said, ‘To here, and no more,’” Sanderson says.

Ann Thicke, who handles CVI’s finances and donations stateside, says a shipment of brand-new kitchen items was already on its way to the compound a month before the fire. Mama Jeanene’s kitchen was quickly rebuilt while the daily routines continued.

“We never skipped a beat,” Thicke says.

This year, as those at CVI prepare for the **Christmas holidays**, they’re wrapping up presents as well as their 20th year of life-transforming ministry. Since the organization’s humble beginnings, when Sanderson took in her first homeless baby, the ministry has added 60 staff members and built three residential homes, a pre-K-12 school, a medical facility and a guest house. They evangelize, feed and educate hundreds of additional children and provide humanitarian aid from the streets of Colombia to the jungles and beyond.

“Success now is not giving up in a crisis and always believing that God is a god of miracles,” Sanderson says.

Even as shepherds and wise men welcomed a lowly baby born in an obscure stable in Bethlehem, each new child brought into the CVI fold is celebrated as though Christ is being welcomed into their doors.

In fact, just before Christmas 2009, the Sandersons opened their arms and their home to a newborn preemie with medical issues.

“There’s always room at our inn,” Sanderson says.

As the baby’s mother, a prostitute, gave her child over to them, she said, “You name her.”

So they did.

And they called her Emanuela, meaning “God with us.”

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