

## Memphis Magazine

### Life Changer

*A gift granted her as a child helped Grace Fragoso find her calling*

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When she was 10 years old, living with her many sisters and brothers at the orphanage her parents founded in Brazil, Grace Fragoso met a Memphis man who admired her love of reading. "I had gotten a dictionary as a gift," she recalls, "and I was trying to memorize English words. He was with a mission team who visited our home. He knew a lot of Americans came to see us, so he sent me to a school to learn English."

His name was Jerry Hughes, and Fragoso has never seen or heard from him again. But his investment in her education, and her parents' commitment to orphaned children, were factors that shaped her life. Fragoso earned an associate's degree in foreign languages and went on to work as an interpreter and translator for such corporate giants as Enron and American Express. But in the late 1990s, this 39-year-old daughter of a Baptist missionary was compelled to move in a new

direction. "I asked God to close every door but the one he wanted me to walk through, and a lot of changes happened." A romantic relationship ended, the company she worked for relocated, and on a trip back to her parents' home, she met yet another man from Memphis — Wayne Sneed, an ordained minister who in 1997 founded Orphanos, a Christian-based organization providing assistance to orphanages around the world.

"He had taken a mission team to our home," says Fragoso, who was still working for American Express at the time. Gradually she got to know more about Sneed and his organization. When he asked her to come to Memphis as a volunteer, Fragoso accepted. After a year, she became one of the organization's three employees, based in Cordova. Describing her position as "social butterfly," she explains how Orphanos works. "We visit the homes, learn their needs, then find donors tailored to each one."

She remembers her year as a volunteer, when she gave up the big bucks and benefits of corporate America to live with a couple she calls her "Memphis parents." Each month, from an anonymous donor, a bag of \$200 in quarters would arrive at the Orphanos office, addressed to Fragoso. "Every month I'd roll those quarters and take them to the bank and that's what I lived on," she recalls. "That helped me decide I should need less and depend on God more."

Her work with Orphanos — the Greek word for orphan — has taken her to the Colombian rainforest, where she helped feed indigenous children "who just wanted to be talked to, touched, and held," and to Costa Rica, where a mission had set up a sports center near a city dump. "It was the only green patch in the area," says Fragoso. "Workers would assist the children with their homework, and the child could then play soccer in the green patch. For some, that was a dream come true."

She also saw the staggering poverty of Calcutta, "people so devoid of hope, they were convinced nothing will change," she says. "I can see why Mother Theresa had to go there." On a brighter note was Rwanda, where Fragoso went with a team teaching ethics and good government. "The people were celebrating the 15th anniversary of the end of the genocide that left so many children orphaned," she recalls. "I witnessed such joy and hope and eagerness to learn how to better structure their country so such a tragedy would never happen again."

Describing how Orphanos tailors donors to children's needs, Fragoso tells of a student who dreamed of going to college and a woman who paid for that education. When the student had received her bachelor's degree, the donor then funded graduate school. "Today that student has a job in Paris," says Fragoso, "and she and her husband are one of the largest donors to the [orphanage] where she grew up, bringing that blessing full circle."

Speaking of full circles, Fragoso feels her life has moved that way as well. But she regrets not finding Jerry Hughes, who launched her education. "I've reconnected with a lot of people since I've lived here, and looked for him in different places. I'm so grateful to him." Then she concludes with a smile. "Maybe he was just an angel."