



My Family-Finding Journey ... As an Adult

By Alex Chisholm Guilbault

My earliest memories are of being 5, 6... maybe 7 years old, alone on the streets of Guatemala City. Alone, but not alone. There were too many children just like me. Abandoned? Lost? Thrown away? I don't remember my beginning. No mother or father — no one. I was wearing only a pair of dirty underwear, bare feet and carrying a piece of cardboard. It was my only possession. I did not have a family.

After a number of years of suffering to survive, almost dying many times, I was picked up unconscious by a police officer and taken to a hospital. When I recovered enough I was sent to a government orphanage. I ran away and months later I was found again and sent to a large private orphanage outside of the city. I was given a made up name, a birthdate and told I was 8 years old. I have no idea how old I really am. My new birth certificate said I was abandoned. That's the short version of my childhood.

When I was around 10 years old, somebody at the orphanage introduced me to "Santa Claus." I needed to believe right away that he was

real. I don't want to kill anyone's dreams for those who believe in him. When I heard that he goes around the world and delivers all his gifts to the kids who are good during the year I started to cry because I was always told that I was bad. I was told I was the reason that my birth mom abandoned me — I was bad. That year the director of the orphanage gave the children three little papers to write down three things, and we might get one of our wishes for Christmas if we were good during the year. I got my three papers and I went to the main office and asked for the full address of the orphanage and double checked that it was the right address not wanting a mistake. I went to my room and wrote the address on the three papers with the message, "Dear Santa, please tell my mom to come visit me and whatever I did to her to make her abandon me, I just want to say I am sorry. I promise I will be the best kid if she comes."

I was happy and hopeful that my mother was finally coming. I saved my best pair of shoes, jeans and nice T-shirt to wear when I met her. When Christmas day finally came, I went to the main door of the orphanage to wait. Many

kids had family visit that day. I was faithful. With the biggest smile, I watched families start to come, I waited and waited. No one came for me. When it didn't happen, I knew that Santa Claus thought that I wasn't good enough. No one thought I was good enough. I had to accept that Santa was right. He knew that I was bad.

When I was 11 years old I asked the director of the orphanage if I could be on the list of the adoption kids because I was tired of waiting, feeling alone and sad. The answer from the director was that parents only adopt good kids. They want babies. Parents do not want to adopt somebody like me. He said I was bad, I was not good enough. He said I didn't know how to behave. The last thing he said was that God never makes mistakes but he did by making me. He told me to forget the idea of being adopted — "it will never happen."

Growing up in an orphanage is like growing up in a prison but with a different name. I grew up with no feelings. I learned to shut down. I learned recently I was good at "disassociation." I felt angry when I saw families

together even though most were families visiting kids in the orphanage then leaving, leaving their kids behind. It still looked better to me than having no one. The whole world was against me. It always was. I have the scars inside and out.

At age 17 I was kicked out of my orphanage. At age 19 I met my forever and only mom. That Christmas my mom was in Canada, but she made me an online Santa Claus video. It was personalized and Santa even said my name! I thought that it was the coolest thing ever! The video was perfect. I cried and I smiled over the video. Santa Claus told me that I was a good kid during that year. I was a child again, not just a child but a happy child — a loved and protected child.

I can say that for me, life didn't begin when I was born. I can say that at 19 I feel like my life started when I met my mother and she adopted me in her heart. Then I started to meet my sister, brother and dad. Cool and amazing family we are. I can say that I am getting a few qualities of each. I cry easily now like my mom. I was never allowed to cry before. I am a business man like my dad. I am strong like my sister and active and loving like my brother.

I recently received a Visitor's Visa to Canada. I arrived in Nova Scotia on Sept 9, 2015 with a two-month plan to meet more family and friends. I wanted to see the life and people I missed. I had nothing to compare before. I realized I have lived in three worlds now. I lived on the streets with no family. I lived in an institution. I now live with my family. With a family I feel like a new and better person. I belong. I am accepted. I am not perfect but I know I am not bad. I still have a lot to learn. I am 23 years old but my new life is still that, new. My past haunts and affects me but now I have people who listen, who hear me and guide me. They care enough to try to help me heal and to learn to trust.

I always had in my mind that the strongest force on earth is "family." My birth mother brought me into this world, I do know that. Reality is, it was my adoptive parents who gave me life. Crying and emotions are now a part of my life now. It was hard to understand

the first time I realized I had tears. I was a little child on the streets. I didn't know what was happening. Water was coming out of my eyes! It was scary! I had no one to explain to me what was happening, no one to wipe those tears. I tried hard to make sure water did not come out of my eyes often, especially in front of others. I learned it was to show weakness. Today I have a mom to wipe my tears.

The memories of my trip to Canada will be in my mind forever. It was the best experience in my life. Flying in an airplane...wow! It was amazing to see so many levels of clouds. I used to dream I could fly — dream I could be above the clouds — above the walls of my orphanage. I was so happy to travel and have my mom beside me, again to guide me. Everything is so much easier when my mom is around. I think it's awesome to travel to see and learn about other people and cultures — my new culture!

Before I met my mom I knew that if I ever left Guatemala, no one would care or notice, no one would be there to say goodbye. I knew that if I died, no one would care, no one would go to my funeral if I even had a funeral. Reality at that time was painful. It made it hard to have hope and to continue with my dreams. Today I have hopes and dreams. I have a family.

I want to make this special thanks to everyone who supported my trip. I met hundreds and hundreds of good people. I shared my life and my work. People listened! My favorite presentations were to students. I am thankful to my family and friends for being a part of my life now. I now understand "friends who feel like family." I am happy. I belong. I am living all my dreams. I can laugh and cry. I can love and I am loved. I feel pride! I am Alexander Chisholm Guibault and I now know why I was born.

Alexander Chisholm Guibault is a 23 year old Guatemalan. After a life without family, either on the streets of Guatemala or in orphanages, at 19 Alex found a family and his voice. Today Alex is in the adult adoption process in Guatemala and is a partner in OUR Guatemala: Travel with Purpose.

