*Wok & Roll by Peter Kwong, (Frederic) Inter-County Leader*

**Learning from James, a 10-year-old with a big dream: Part 1**

A few months ago, I got an email from my barbershop buddy, Ken Gonske. He sings right next to me in the chorus, but a different part. I sing lead and he sings tenor, which is the higher-pitched part.

Anyway, he was helping his grandson raise money for a project which I found intriguing, to build shelters for the homeless in Guatemala. Many questions came to my mind including, what, why and how in the world would he be able to do that?

So, I asked Ken during our next practice just what this was about. Then he told me that James Ronaldo Meyer is his adopted grandson from Guatemala. He came to this country when he was a 1-year-old. He never forgets his roots.

With his parents’ encouragement, his dream is to raise money so the folks back home can have a better life, whether it be having some pigs or chickens to raise at their homes, or better yet, to have a place they can actually call home.

“That’s a big dream,” I thought to myself.

So I called Ken and asked him how much money his grandson was hoping to raise. “$10,000,” he said.

“What, is this kid out of his mind? Raising $10,000 for people that live in places that we have no idea where it even is?” I asked.

“Yup,” Ken said, “That’s what James would like to do, and we’ll do what we can to help.” That was four or five months ago.

I did some consulting work in Guatemala, 10 to 15 years ago. It is a beautiful country, yet kind of disturbing in many ways. While the rich are very rich, the poor are very poor.

I was there to help a company starting a new restaurant concept. Yes, the owner wanted to serve Chinese cuisine to the Guatemalans. So, my challenge was to create recipes and to teach the locals to cook Chinese food.

It was a challenge indeed. But we did start the business with a big bang. Folks just love it.

I was in the city of Guatemala for about a month. A beautiful place indeed, with a lot of interesting history. I didn’t have time to visit all the ancient sites with pyramids and statues from the Inca Empire.

I spent a lot of time visiting the local marketplaces searching for the right ingredients for the recipes. I never forgot about the sight of the local dump where people dumped their trash, ready to be picked up later by the city officials.

The trash included the waste from local merchants and included vegetables, fruits and meat. The sight of 40 or 50 kids, aged 3 to 10, salvaging the waste and searching for food just broke my heart. And I thought I had a rough childhood!

Another interesting thing that I noticed was that every place I went, there would be a guard bearing a shotgun in the front, whether it was a restaurant, a bank, a grocery store, any business.

I stayed at a hotel and just across the street was a primary school for kids aged 6 to 10. I couldn’t help but notice that every morning, two limousines would pull up and five or six bodyguards would accompany one young child into the school. “Must be a rich kid!” I thought.

Then I was told that the rebels would kidnap folks in broad daylight. I laughed at the silly thought, until I heard what I thought were firecrackers going off outside one morning. It was when the front-desk clerk told me that it was actually a machine gun from the guerrillas that I decided it was time to leave.

I left that afternoon and have never set foot again in Guatemala. Then here comes James with his dreams.

I told Ken that I would love to help his grandson James with his dreams, but money, I have none.

“However,” I said, “I could donate my cooking service to help. I have done that many times in the past, to do a cooking demonstration at their homes, and to sing a few songs with my guitar afterward.”

Ken took my idea and came back a few weeks later with a smile, saying, “Yes, Peter, you’re on. We’ve raised $500 for you to cook for us.” And so I did, for the family of 18. What a joy indeed, to help a young boy fulfill his dream.

A few weeks later, I asked Ken about the progress of his grandson’s project, how he was doing with his goal of raising $10,000.

“Oh, he did well,” he said. “He has raised $17,000 for his project.”

What? I thought to myself, a 10-year-old kid raised $17,000 on his own? I needed to find out for my own sake. I had no idea what I was doing when I was 10 years old, and now this kid raised $17,000 to help others? How did he do it?

I arranged a meeting with him and his mom, Arlaina Meyer, and learned so much more about how his dreams unfolded. A really touching story indeed. It all started out when James was brushing his teeth and left the water running. His mom told him to turn the water off, as it is a waste of water usage when thousands could use it, especially in Guatemala, where he is from. James was adopted when he was 1 year old. His birth mother gave him up for adoption as she couldn’t raise him the way she wanted with her mere wages, with so many other mouths to feed. So, Arlaina and Damon Meyers adopted him with help from the Faith in God’s Mission agency and a beautiful relationship began.

James’ first goal was to get a water pump for a family in need in Guatemala, so they could get fresh drinking water. It would take $285 to get a pump and James started his own fundraising. Instead of bringing gifts to his birthday party, he asked his friends to bring coins. They all did and the water pump was installed in his honor.