

NO ONE TOLD THE CHILDREN

By Donna R. Jensen

Meg, my slender young neighbor in the dilapidated houses known as “Hadley’s Row,” tugged on a section of the old plank fence piled at the back of my lot. Accustomed to doing the job herself, she was on her way with it before I could help. One section of fence wouldn’t keep anyone out of my yard, but it would serve as a reminder to children not to run through my garden as they played in the open space behind the group of fourteen houses where we lived.

The families who called this place home were the bottom rung of society and considered to be a blight on this other-wise pristine little village. I lived among the destitute group by choice with my four young children, expecting to make a difference by the way we lived the gospel.

I’d taken the children from our home in Texas a few months before, because my husband had become abusive. With no money left after purchasing our tickets, we boarded the bus with two fifty-pound cardboard boxes a-piece and carry-on bags. We headed for my brother’s home in N. C. when our word fell apart, thinking that was our only choice. When things didn’t work out there, in response to my prayers, God showed me that we should go to “Hadley’s Row” in Pennsylvania. We had previously lived in the village where it was located, before we moved to Texas. Money I had earned substitute teaching in N.C., allowed us to take the next step in our journey.

My garden was the talk of the “Row” and the rest of the village. No one thought it was a good idea. One reason after another for its ultimate failure was thrown at me daily as I turned over the rain-drenched sod with a spade.

The village saw no hope for us, but far worse, hope had died in the “Row”. That is, except for the children. They hadn’t been told, and so they continued to play and fight and dream.

In the middle of the “Row” Meg and I lived side-by-side in the two largest houses a few feet off PA State Highway 219. Heavy traffic rolled by from sunrise to sunset, rattling the loose boards on the houses. The children, tattered and dirty, waved their arm signals to the truckers and grinned as air-horns blasted in response.

This row of houses had been constructed sixty years earlier to house the workers of the tannery and their families. The bright white paint had long ago chipped off and never been replaced. As the years passed, the green shutters began to hang at odd angles as screws loosened in the aging wood. Climbing roses and sweet peas no longer clung to the rickety porches. Only one thing remained the same, the water. It flowed cold and pure from deep inside an abandoned mine shaft, and it ran only to the “Row” houses. Was it a sign that we had not been forsaken by God?

To my knowledge, no one from the local churches had ever set foot in their homes to reach them for Jesus. Now some came to visit me at my invitation. One evening I attended a meeting of

an organization in the village. It was not known where I lived. Some villagers, gossiping about the “Row” suggested that they ought to invite us all to a B-B-Q and burn the place down.

The first of June, I was delighted to meet Marian Mills, when I answered a knock at my door. She was from the Department of Agriculture and had come looking for a home in our area where she could hold classes on nutrition. Over a cup of tea we discovered our shared faith in Jesus. All summer she met with several women in my kitchen. Soon a Bible study and time of sharing followed each week.

As Marian and I washed the dishes after cooking class one day, I mentioned that I missed my piano. She looked at me thoughtfully then said, “You know, Donna, I have a piano that I want to give away. There’s no one I’d like to see have it more than you. Please say you will accept it!” Four neighbor men brought it to me. Once in place, I polished it, made some refreshments, and invited my neighbors over for a sing-a-long. That night a new sound was heard in “Hadley’s Row”. Or perhaps it was an old sound, one that was heard sixty years ago...

One August morning as I came downstairs to start breakfast. I heard a faint tapping on our front window. Pulling the curtain to one side, I found Joey, Meg’s youngest, grinning up at me from our glider. “Oh!” I gasped, thinking of the danger he was in, outside alone so near the highway. Fifteen months old, clad only in his diaper, he had slipped unnoticed from his house and stopped on our porch on his way up the road. I decided to keep him until his mother came looking for him. Joey and his four siblings, like baby chicks, roamed at will around the area. Each morning they were left alone while Meg walked to the post office. Daddy Bill was on the road long hours in his coal truck.

Our house became the gathering place for the kids in the “Row” as well as those who came home from school with them. As fall turned into winter, my family became a bridge into “Hadley’s Row” over which villagers timidly wandered to explore relationships with people they’d held at arms-length.

A few days before Christmas, on a visit to our home, my seventy-six-year-old mother suffered a stroke. When her doctor informed us she would have difficulty walking and would require a wheelchair and quite a bit of help with the tasks of everyday living, my brother suggested putting her in a nursing home. If she could be cared for at home, I wanted her to live with me.

It had been my privilege to lead both of my parents to a personal relationship with Jesus on the same night when they were in their late sixties. And, amazingly, my brother and I had assisted, one on each side when Mom was baptized in the creek that summer.

To my children’s delight, Grandma moved in with us. Before she came, we painted the back room off the kitchen for her. Its window looked out on our garden. Allyson, my six-year-old daughter and budding artist drew some pictures to hang on the walls with the “help” of April who was two.

In early summer, a truck rumbled along the unpaved road that ran behind “Hadley’s Row.” It was Bill in his coal truck. The dirt clouds rose on all sides as he rolled to a stop and backed into the yard we shared.

“What was he thinking to drive that truck in among all these children?” I couldn’t believe it!

After breakfast, I walked around to the back of the house with a basket of clothes to hang on the line. I stopped in astonishment at the sight of the truck. The bed, jacked up as far as it would go, reached hulkingly skyward! Monstrous!

Bill was hosing it down. I called out to him, “I’ve never seen anything so big!”

“Pretty impressive, huh?”

“Impressive is the word!” I called back over my shoulder.

“Like to keep her cleaned up. Hey, want me to get rid of that old TV on your porch? I can throw it in the back and dump it for you.”

“Yeah, thanks, that would be great.” The former tenants had left it and I had no way to dispose of it.

Later as I took down my laundry, I heard Bill start up the truck. Slowly it rolled back-ward. I dropped what I was holding. *“My God, he’s backing up between the houses!”*

Eight children played there, unaware of the danger. I yelled to my children, “Stay on the porch!”

Waving my arms at the children by the truck, I ran, hollering at them to get out of the way. I could hardly be heard over the roar of the engine. Amy, his three-year old, stood behind the truck looking down at a ball. “Jesus!” I gasped a quick prayer. With a burst of speed, I caught her up in my arms and stepped to safety.

Meg was standing a few feet from me, showing no more concern than Bill. I was livid! I thought, *We’ve all been worried that these children would get killed on the road and look at this, they could get killed right here in their own yard!*

On our porch, my nine-year-old Melissa began to scream and fell to her knees. A chill swept through me. “What’s wrong Melissa?”

One arm wrapped around her stomach, she pointed limply in the direction of the truck with the other. “Joey! He ran over Joey!!”

I went numb from head to foot.

Bill, hearing Melissa’s high-pitched screams, stopped. Jumping out, he ran around the front. Joey lay under the wheels. Turning, he caught Meg in his arms. She struggled to break from his hold and go to her baby. “Don’t look... the words caught in his throat... he’s dead!”

It took several hours for the coroner to arrive. All that time Joey’s little body lay there under a blanket someone threw over him. A doctor came and sedated Meg. She was put to bed. I gathered the other children and took them to my house for the night.

That evening I held Melissa on my lap and cuddled her in my arms as a State Trooper gently questioned her about what she had witnessed. After he left, I prayed for a healing of the memories of that day, for all of us. Jesus will heal our memories just like he heals our injuries and diseases, if we ask him too.

When it was time to go to sleep, the children and I brought blankets and pillows down to the living room and snuggled together on the floor, comforting each other. I prayed with them and sang to them and our Heavenly Father, held us all...

Joey was laid to rest privately. I never knew where. Neither the “Row” or the village got to say good-bye.

Ten years later, “Hadley’s Row was declared unfit for habitation and condemned. Its tenants scattered over three counties to locate affordable housing. The empty houses stood there for a year before a local church bought the land and board by board dismantled it as the members volunteered their time over a two-year period. The “Row” died hard.

Several more years passed before the church blossomed forth on that site. My son, David who was five when we lived in “Hadley’s Row”, started a construction company when he returned from military service in Iraq. It was he who was hired to complete the work on the church by siding it.