

MERIDIAN MAGAZINE

Saving Lives — One Loan at a Time

By Erika Dahl Price

The fifteen-year anniversary of the Enterprise Mentors International (EMI) program could have been overshadowed with names like Lloyd Newell, Elizabeth Smart, and the First Presidency on program. Friday evening's spotlight could have easily wandered from the 330,000 poverty-stricken individuals whose success stories have given EMI reason to celebrate. But staying true to EMI's mission, Friday night's focus was not on the prestigious, but on the millions who, as co-founder Menlo Smith states, "Don't deserve what they have — they deserve something better."

EMI's focus on poverty began in 1990, when a small group of LDS businessmen decided to confront the worldwide poverty epidemic, armed with their business skills and humanitarian sensibilities. EMI's goal was simple: to offer a hand up, not a hand out. With help from the LDS Church's Humanitarian Aid Fund, EMI began a not-for-profit program of offering small loans and mentoring to individuals who had no credit, no collateral, and no way of obtaining business seed money without resorting to the wiles of loan sharks.

Fifteen years later, EMI and its partnering foundations have granted more than 77,000 loans to families in Brazil, Guatemala, El Salvador, Mexico, Peru, and the Philippines. With all administrative costs underwritten by the Board of Directors, 100% of all donations to EMI goes to the program itself. Resulting loans average \$178 but can range as low as \$40. It may not seem like much, but for people like Mike Espinilla of the Philippines, the money and mentoring have meant the world.

When polio struck Mike's life, it crippled his legs, but not his spirit. After scouring garbage heaps for discarded fluorescent light bulbs, Mike would take the glass home, wash it by hand, and gently transform the bulbs into delicate glass figurines. Thanks to EMI and its partner foundation, Philippine Microenterprise Development Foundation, Mike received a loan that has enabled him to increase production of his art and improve his family's quality of living.

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Family members look on as Mike Espinilla works in his glass studio.

Mike and others like him are living parables — proof that teaching a man to fish can indeed feed him for a lifetime. But the success story doesn't end there. EMI has started a ripple effect of people helping people, helping people.

Former EMI Board Member Frank Johnson and his wife Maralyn have started ripples of their own. Following Frank and Maralyn's example of dedication to the foundation, the Johnson's five children, 24 grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren voluntarily decided to donate to EMI instead of exchanging Christmas gifts with one another last year. "It was so much more meaningful than the gifts we'd give each other that we don't need," explained their son Kelly.

It only seems fitting that everyone attending the EMI banquet, including the Johnsons and their children, each received a small glass swan handcrafted by Mike Espinilla from the Philippines. Mike's wife and daughter packaged each swan into the cardboard boxes that would make the 8,000 mile journey to the evening's banquet tables — two-inch, tangible reminders that EMI has made a difference in someone's life. And sometimes, at least at the Johnsons' table, that ripple of influence has come full circle.

Speaking of those who have spearheaded and sustained the foundation for the past 15 years, President Gordon B. Hinckley said, "I thank the Lord for the generous hearts that beat within these dedicated souls."

Their dedication has touched lives around the globe, including those in El Salvador.

"We believe in miracles," said Carlos Rivas, visiting Executive Director of EMI tributary Fundacion Mentores Empresariales of El Salvador. "I can see in my people that the prophecies of the Lamanites

will be fulfilled.”

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President Hinckley visits with admirers. Carlos Rivas from El Salvador is at top left.

President James E. Faust of the First Presidency concurred. “I expect we have only seen the beginning,” he said.

But as impressive as EMI’s statistics are, including more than \$11 million dollars in loans with a 95% payback rate, President Thomas S. Monson added that it’s not about the numbers. “It’s one thing to save money,” he said. “It’s another thing to save lives.”

And that’s exactly what EMI will continue to do — save lives, one loan at a time.

For more information on Enterprise Mentors International and their partner foundations, visit their website at www.enterprise-mentors.org.

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