

A Life Transformed

by KIRSTEN GRUBB

ONE WOMAN'S JOURNEY FROM BROKENNESS TO WHOLENESS IN CHRIST

“FIVE YEARS AGO . . . WOW,” ELENA* SAYS WISTFULLY. “IT SEEMS LIKE YESTERDAY.” YET THE CHALLENGES, breakthroughs, and accomplishments that this young woman has experienced in just five years are nothing short of remarkable.

For Elena, the journey of transformation actually started a decade ago, when as a typical 18-year-old, she began to question her family’s Catholic faith. Her priest made a suggestion that would change the course of her life: “Why don’t you buy a Bible and start reading?” And so she did.

By the age of 20, Elena was attending Bible studies, visiting churches, and asking questions. Within a year, she concluded that the Protestant

church “practices what the Bible says and what I knew in my heart to be true.” Her new faith was put to the test when she took steps to escape a physically abusive husband, moving more than 900 miles from northern to southern California with her three-year-old daughter, Isabella*, in tow. But Elena’s new faith and sense of self-worth did not come without significant challenges.

Suddenly a homeless single mother, isolated from her family and their faith, she was terrified. She moved into Pacific Lifeline, a long-term transitional shelter ministry sponsored by the Brethren in Christ Church and located in Upland, Calif. She also started attending Cristo la Roca, a



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Spanish-language Brethren in Christ congregation that met next door to the Lifeline facility.

On the face of it, Elena didn't have a whole lot going for her. She was frightened. Her English language skills were limited. She had no home, no job, and little education. Yet she possessed a very strong desire to become a teacher and to follow God's will. Despite the obstacles in her life, Elena was confident that with God's help she could accomplish anything.

Elena took college courses while in Pacific Lifeline's program, and despite her struggles with English, she did well. She also began to work as a teacher's aide at a local elementary school—an experience that strengthened her passion for helping others fulfill their own dreams of learning.

As she gained work experience, her income and independence increased, enabling her to graduate from Pacific Lifeline and move into a home owned by the Pacific Conference of the Brethren in Christ Church. This was an incredible challenge of her reliance on God. Elena had always been afraid to live alone, feeling that

she needed her family in order to be safe.

In fact, the security of family life repeatedly drew her back to northern California, despite the pain she had experienced in that setting. She even returned briefly to

her abusive husband before gaining the courage to leave for good. As difficult as it was to make a new life on her own, God gave Elena the strength to return to southern California and

the supportive community she had found through Pacific Lifeline. “In Him I can do anything,” she decided. Elena finished her junior college courses and was accepted into the teaching program at Azusa Pacific University in Azusa, Calif.

But just when it seemed that she was making good progress toward her goals, Elena discovered she was pregnant. She was crushed, feeling she had jeopardized the blessings God had bestowed upon her. She says, “All the time we try to be close to God and do our best, and so I was very sad.”

In her sadness, Elena turned to Proverbs. In His Word, she was given the promise that God was with her even in this difficult situation. “Many are the plans in a man's heart,” she read, “but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails” (Proverbs 19:21). God provided her with a spiritual awakening that assured her that He still loved her. “He was the only one,” she says, “who was with me all of the time and did not judge me.”

Elena was eight months pregnant when she started her university courses. People told her she could not do it, and she almost believed them. Continued difficulties with the English language, combined with the exhaustion of her pregnancy, made Elena wonder if the cynics were right. She pleaded with her friends, “Please, always pray for me.” And they did. As prayers were lifted on Elena's behalf, the Lord sustained her. If it was not for a caring professor who insisted she take a week off, she would have gone to class just two days after her son was born. During her entire course of study, she only missed two days of classes. Her dedication paid off—she graduated in July 2005.

The Lord has used Elena's persistence to encourage others. One of her classmates, Jenny, also had a newborn. When Jenny's family suggested she drop out of school, Elena went to her house to offer encouragement and help with assignments. She told Jenny, “If I can do it, you can do it! When you are discouraged, just think about me!” Months later, as they sat together at their graduation ceremony, Jenny leaned over and said with a smile, “If it weren't for you, I wouldn't be graduating today.”

In the days leading up to graduation, Elena and her friends often talked about their plans for the future. Many of her classmates were unsure of their futures, but not Elena. She has already been accepted into Azusa

Pacific University's credentialing program, through which she is earning her master's degree in education. She tells her friends, “God wants me to be a teacher!”

There are still moments when Elena is discouraged, when she is frustrated with her language skills or overwhelmed with her commitments to her children, job, and studies. She recently cried as she poured out her heart to her mentor and friend, Karen. After listening to Elena, Karen told her, “You cannot see the changes in your life because you have been working so hard. I am so proud of you. Stop and look at how far you have come!”

And so she did, and she was able to see God's miracles in her life.

“He has given me the strength that I need,” Elena says. “This is not me. I am so brave right now that this must be God. I don't have the words to describe all that God has done for me. He is always with me, and He has helped me become who I am.”

It is amazing what God can do with five years.

Through Cooperative Ministries, we have all had a part in Pacific Lifeline's ministry to Elena and other women. To learn more about Pacific Lifeline, go to www.bic-church.org/ministries/other.

**Names have been changed for their protection.*



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Servant Congregations

Ministry to persons in need isn't reserved just for organizations like Pacific Lifeline. Every church, regardless of its size, location, or resources, can be involved in extending God's love to hurting and broken individuals. Congregations with an outward focus share the following characteristics:

1. They are convinced that good deeds and the good news can't and shouldn't be separated.
2. They see themselves as vital to the health and well-being of their communities.
3. They believe that ministering and serving are the normal expressions of Christian living.
4. Externally focused churches are evangelistically effective.

From The Externally Focused Church (Group Publishing, 2004) by Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson

A resource bibliography and helpful suggestions for extending your church's witness through compassionate ministries can be found at www.bic-church.org.

