

(BP)---FEATURES

News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

produced by Baptist Press

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September 14, 1971

New Leg For Rosa Affects
Lives on Two Continents

by June P. Carter

CUCUTA, Colombia (BP)--Rosa Rolon looked like any pretty 14-year-old hurrying to the store for her mother, except she had only one leg.

Still, she moved swiftly, for she had a crutch made of two broomsticks and 10 years' experience in using it.

Several times, the crutch had broken, but each time her father, Polo, who had made it, was able to wire, patch or nail it back together again.

There was no hint in the warm South American sunshine that this errand would be the beginning of a long journey, no hint that at the journey's end there would be a new leg for Rosa. She had no notion that her life was about to touch lives on two continents.

Suddenly, as she hobbled along, the much nailed wood of the crutch split, and Rosa fell sprawling. Retrieving the broken crutch, she struggled to regain her footing, hoping desperately that no one had seen her fall. She had learned through bitter experience the pain of humiliation.

A few nights later, James H. Stiles Jr., missionary pastor of the little Baptist church in Cucuta, Colombia, sat down at his ham radio set and fiddled with the dials. He was thinking of Rosa. Sunday morning, while she and her family were in church, he had noticed her crutch had broken again, causing another fall.

Stiles switched on the set and spoke into the microphone. "CQ, CQ, CQ, CQ... This is HK2MU in Cucuta, Colombia, standing by."

In Durham, N. C., Tim Heflin, a member of the radio club at Duke University Medical Center, heard the unfamiliar voice in Colombia announcing its availability. "HK2MU, this is WB4BIK in Durham, N. C.," he responded.

Neither man had any notion that this, their initial conversation, would be of such consequence.

Heflin, who was involved in Project MED-AID (Medical Assistance for Isolated Doctors) at Duke, chatted with the missionary about how the project worked. He suggested that Stiles call on the group for help if he ever needed it.

Wondering if it would be possible to get a metal crutch for Rosa, Stiles told him about the girl.

"How about an artificial leg?" Heflin responded. "There's a foundation in California that might donate the limb, if you could get her to the States."

Excitement gripped the missionary, but both men were realistic. Transportation was only one of the obstacles they could foresee. The Baptist mission in Colombia had no money for such a project and Rosa's family was exceedingly poor.

Polo Rolon, once a bus driver, had been paralyzed in his legs for seven years. To earn a living, he and his wife, Ana, operated a small pastry business from their home. With the help of the children, she made cream-filled solteritas-- "little old maids"--which were sold in the streets. Their monthly income was roughly \$50, and besides their own three children they had taken in two others.

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It was the family's poverty which, indirectly, had cost Rosa her leg. She was only four when a swelling in the limb, unattended, developed into gangrene. The doctor whom Senora Rolon had finally sought in desperation shook his head and pronounced that he would have to amputate.

On learning of Rosa's need, the Direct Relief Foundation in Santa Barbara agreed to furnish an artificial leg, but because of the distance Heflin began making contacts at Duke. Stiles went to work on transportation.

The two major hurdles tumbled miraculously. Within days Heflin had found doctors and technical personnel at Duke willing to donate their time and skills to provide a leg for the girl in faraway Cucuta.

Meanwhile, Stiles talked with his friend Tulio Fuentes of Avianca airline. Stiles had once accommodated Avianca by translating for some English-speaking tourists. Later, he had voluntarily taught a crash course in English to the airline's office staff.

Still, he knew his chances were slim when he requested round trip passage for Rosa from Cucuta to Miami. The airline, by policy, did not become involved in personal problems. Yet, in a few days, there it was--request granted!

Success-inspired, Stiles and Heflin hammered away at remaining details. Missionary colleagues agreed to meet Rosa in Bogota and accommodate her for the night.

There was a change of planes in Miami. A ham radio friend of Stiles, M.R. "Andy" Anderson, director of religious education for University Baptist Church in Coral Gables, Fla., offered to help.

Anderson found two Spanish-speaking pastors who agreed to be on call for Rosa's arrival. Next he called the president of the Coral Gables Lions Club, and the club readily agreed to provide Rosa's round trip fare between Miami and Durham.

Two hurdles remained: hospitalization and sponsorship. Doctors at Duke had no way of knowing the condition of the stump of Rosa's leg. She could be fitted as an outpatient, but if the stump required surgery first--a very real possibility--then she would have to be hospitalized. Heflin learned that room and board could not be furnished to any patient there without charges.

Nor could Rosa get a tourist visa without a letter of sponsorship from a person in the United States. Heflin advised Stiles to get in touch with Malbert Smith Jr., pastor of Grey Stone Baptist Church in Durham, N.C.

Smith received Stiles' request on a Monday morning. Within the hour a notarized letter was off to Colombia. In it he agreed to take full financial responsibility for Rosa while she was in the States. "I did it on faith," he declared. "I knew the church would back me up."

The congregation agreed to assume responsibility for any hospital expenses and there were so many volunteer "parents" that Smith had to plead for a halt. He accepted the offer of Leonard and Mary Rigsbee, active church members who enjoyed working with young people.

Another member, an orthopedic surgeon, volunteered his professional services to meet needs which might arise apart from the medical center. Ladies volunteered to take Rosa shopping for whatever clothing she might need; a high school Spanish teacher agreed to interpret. Durham's Exchange Club, which sponsors a facility for training the handicapped, offered financial help.

The Rigsbees, who didn't know a word of Spanish, bought a dictionary.

It now seemed to the missionary in Cucuta and the ham radio operator in North Carolina that everyone wanted to help bring the miracle to pass. To Stiles, it seemed evident that God was intervening.

On Nov. 17, Jim Stiles drove the Rolon family to the Cucuta airport. He warned Rosa that there would be new and perhaps frightening experiences. One awaited her in Bogota.

Tommy Norman, the missionary who met Rosa there, gave her the choice of using the terminal stairs or taking the escalator. She hesitated. Steps were no problem for her and she had never seen an escalator. Then she sighed, "I will have to learn to do a lot of things I've never done before. I'll go down the escalator."

In Miami, Rosa was met by Mr. and Mrs. Anderson, Daniel Rodriguez, pastor of Miami's Gethsemane Baptist Church, and the two Rodriguez daughters, Margut, 14 and Aselea, 12. Rosa visited in the Rodriguez home near the airport and when it was time to leave, all three girls cried. The sisters said they didn't know you could learn to love someone in such a short time. Rosa did not want to go. Hugging her, Mrs. Rodriguez declared, "You will find the same love in Durham because it is the Lord who makes us feel this way."

"Yes, I know," sobbed Rosa.

She spent her first night on the North American continent with Tim and Evelyn Heflin. Evelyn, a soft-spoken Guatemalan, reassured Rosa in her native Spanish. When the Heflins got up the next morning their guest had already made her bed. She showered without help and washed out a few clothes.

At 8:30 a.m., only 15 hours after arriving in Durham, she was being escorted into the vastness of Duke University Medical Center.

A member of Duke's amputee clinic team made the initial examination. He expressed concern at the shortness of the stump--2 3/4 inches from the hip joint--but felt it was in good condition and that Rosa would not need surgery.

The next day Rosa received her temporary prosthesis, a strictly functional device called a pylon. It looked much like the leg of a life-size marionette. Rosa cried when she saw it--until a physical therapist who spoke Spanish explained its temporary role. During the eight weeks she was to wear it, her stump would shape up and shrink in the socket, in preparation for the permanent limb.

There were two physical therapy sessions each day. One day Rosa asked the therapist from Puerto Rico, "?Que es nieve?" ("What is snow?") An intern had remarked, in Spanish, that if she stayed in Durham through Christmas she might see her first snow. Rosa, who had never even heard the Spanish word for snow, had no notion of what he was talking about.

On meeting Rosa, Malbert Smith's immediate impression was that she needed some dental work, and he set about making arrangements. A dentist from his congregation volunteered, but so extensive was the decay that an oral surgeon at Duke assumed the task. Discovering that many of her teeth were only shells, he pulled 10 of them.

Despite her physical handicap, music filled Rosa with joy. The Rigsbees bought her some Spanish records and she delighted in playing them. As the Christmas season approached, she sang the familiar carols and to American ears the unfamiliar language of Rosa's homeland was suddenly comprehensible.

Mrs. Rigsbee still reminisces of the day Rosa bought her first pantsuit. A principal desire of this girl who had been "different" for as long as she could remember, was to be able to pass unnoticed in a crowd. The pylon, in all its sturdiness, did not look like a real leg. And then Rosa tried on the pantsuit. When she caught a glimpse of herself, resplendent with new hip-to-floor solidarity--her face was transformed.

On January 13, Rosa received her permanent prosthesis. As closely as possible the skillful Duke team had matched the shape and coloring of her own leg. The physical therapists had completed Rosa's arduous training program and helped her realize as nearly as they could the goal of a normal gait with the least possible body motion and expenditure of energy.

Now it was almost time for Rosa to return home. She had her final dental appointment and she was to fly to Miami on Feb. 13. On the Wednesday before she left, the Grey Stone congregation staged a farewell-birthday party. She would be 15 on Feb. 28.

Rosa posed for pictures standing straight and tall; she flashed her new teeth, laughed--and cried. She didn't yet know her whole neighborhood would turn out to welcome her back to Cucuta, nor that 18 young people from her own church would give her a party.

She cried for three days. On Saturday, Leonard Rigsbee, looking almost as forlorn as Rosa, walked his little "daughter" to her plane. Because it was raining she used her cane, but just three months earlier she had crossed the pavement in a wheel chair.

Behind her, waving farewell at the fence, were the people of Grey Stone Church. She knew their love went with her.

Loren Turnage, the missionary in whose home Rosa had stayed, met her in Bogota, She got off the plane smiling.

A photographer and reporter from El Tiempo, Bogota's leading newspaper, were there. Rosa posed for pictures and talked to the reporter "like a machine," as Turnage later remarked. She talked about the United States, her "family" there, the dental work, and the kindnesses people had shown her.

Three months earlier Turnage had noted her fear and withdrawal. When he had asked a question, she had simply answered "si" or "no." He had expected the physical change, but he was unprepared for Rosa's remarkable personality change.

A few hours after her interview in Bogota, she bounced off the plane in Cucuta, astonishing Stiles with her first words, "Hi! How are you?" in perfect English.

Stiles says now that even the neighborhood has changed. While Rosa's trip was in the planning stages, some of her neighbors had termed it a "gringo trick," pronouncing that the promises would never be kept. After she left they predicted she would not be allowed to return. Now that Rosa is back and walking, their attitude is beginning to change.

Grey Stone Church has changed too. Malbert Smith says his congregation has an awareness of missions and of people that it could never have developed without Rosa. "She has a deep sense of gratitude," he adds. "We were richly repaid--10,000 times over."

Rosa's formal education has been brief, but now she wants to finish school and become a secretary. A private tutor coached her so she could re-enter school at the beginning of the semester. Two members of Grey Stone church paid for the tutor, and they wish to underwrite whatever expense is involved in getting her through high school.

Rosa says someday she would like to study in the United States, and it may be possible; the stone church in Durham has started an education fund for her.

Small wonder that Rosa Rolon tells her friends that everyone in the United States loves her.

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Texas Writer Named Editor
Of California Baptist Paper

9/14/71

FRESNO, Calif. (BP)--Donald T. McGregor, associate editor of the Baptist Standard in Dallas since 1959, has been elected editor of the California Southern Baptist, weekly publication of the Southern Baptist General Convention of California.

McGregor succeeds J. Terry Young, who resigned in June to become associate professor of theology at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. Young had been editor eight years.

He was elected to the California editorship by the Executive Board of the convention in session here. The appointment is effective Oct. 11.

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The 47-year-old native of Waco, Tex., is a veteran of more than 15 years on the staff of the Baptist Standard, weekly news publication of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

He served under three editors of the Southern Baptist Convention's largest newspaper, beginning under David M. Gardner. He became associate editor during the tenure of E.S. James, who was succeeded in 1966 by the current editor, John J. Hurt.

A graduate of Baylor University, Waco, Tex., where he majored in journalism and radio, McGregor has served as an editor, reporter and columnist on the Midland (Texas) Reporter-Telegram and the Dallas Times-Herald. He also attended Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth.

He has also served as continuity director for a radio station KCRS in Midland, and publicity director and magazine editor for an insurance company in Dallas.

Active in church work, McGregor has served several Texas churches as interim or part-time music or educational director or a combination of both. He has also served as a deacon, Sunday School teacher and superintendent, high school credit Bible teacher and supply preacher.

McGregor is also past secretary of the Southern Baptist Press Association, an elected post he held for four years.

Circulation of the California Southern Baptist is 26,500.

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1971



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