Lives are transformed when someone sponsors a child, youth or elder across the world.

Children and youth pursue their educations. Their mothers support each other and develop livelihoods through small groups. Elders experience greater access to medical care and less hunger and loneliness. And it’s not only the lives of those sponsored that are changed. Sponsors find that they, too, grow in myriad ways. In this issue of Spirit, you’ll learn about the impact of sponsorship at both ends of the relationship.

Father Paulus Marandi was sponsored as a child growing up in India. Sponsorship made it possible for him to continue his education. He’s now a Claretian priest serving in the U.S. On visits home, he talks to students at the school he attended as a boy to encourage them in their studies.

Mimi Murray first sponsored a child in 2003 when she heard a
visiting priest speak about the work of Unbound. Now, she and her husband sponsor several children and an elderly woman. She sees her involvement as an expression of her Catholic faith, and a way to learn about the richness of other cultures and the similarities between people of different backgrounds.

Unbound social worker Yenifer Valencia Morales was sponsored as a child and today works with elders outside Medellin, Colombia. Her deep connection with elders garnered her a special opportunity to participate in a book project with Pope Francis and travel to the Vatican to meet him.

What all these stories have in common is people expanding their opportunities, worldviews and faith lives through participation in the Unbound community. They show that when you open your heart to make room for another, good things abound. 🌱
When Father Paulus Marandi was a boy growing up in eastern India, he would walk nearly 5 miles to school every day. During those treks, he would dream about going to the church-run boarding school in Lalmatia, two hours away from his home village of Babupur.

“I had always wanted to study in the boarding school,” he said. “It was so difficult for me to go to school, back and forth every day.” A member of the Santhal tribe, one of the largest indigenous groups in India, Paulus was raised Catholic and attended the parish church in Lalmatia. The pastor was familiar with Unbound. When he saw how much education meant to the boy, he tried to get Paulus into the sponsorship program.

“He wanted to help me,” Father Paulus said. “He wanted to make things easier for me because he knew that I was a good student and I wanted to study, but I didn’t have enough resources.”

Paulus did enter the program and became sponsored. That sponsorship, which began when
he was 11, made it possible for the boy to finally attend the boarding school he wanted to go to. It was the beginning of a journey that’s now taken him much farther than the distance between Babupur and Lalmatia.

Paulus loved life at the school. He missed his family (besides his parents he has two brothers) but he was able to see them once a month and go home for vacations. With the rigors of the daily commute behind him, he was able to prosper as a student, and the routines of boarding school life seemed to suit him.

“We would get up early in the morning and do our prayers, go to Mass, go to school and come back,” he said. “It was always a joy to be part of that program.”

A CALLING
In addition to his academic development, there was something else beginning to stir in Paulus during those years — the realization that he might have a religious vocation. He finished his high school studies with the support of the Claretians, a Catholic religious order, and joined the community after completing novitiate in 2009.

“I told them, ‘You know, I was one of those kids you’re helping.’”

Children walk to school in Bhagalpur, India, not far from the town where the young Paulus Marandi made his daily hike to school. Now a Claretian priest living in California, Father Paulus talks to young people whenever he returns to India, encouraging them to make the most of opportunities for education.
“Later on, the province asked me if I wanted to work out of country,” he said. “And I said I would want to, to experience what life is like in other countries. The moment they told me that they wanted to send me to the U.S., I said yes, I would go.”

After finishing his seminary studies in Chicago in 2016, Paulus returned home to be ordained. Then he was assigned to the San Gabriel Mission community, a Claretian parish in the Los Angeles area. He’s still serving there, though as of this writing he was completing an intensive course in Spanish language studies in Guadalajara, Mexico.

It wasn’t long after arriving at San Gabriel that Father Paulus met some parishioners who were Unbound sponsors. They told him about the program and were surprised and delighted when they heard his story. “I told them, ‘You know, I was one of those kids you’re helping,’” he said.

Father Paulus remains grateful for the opportunities sponsorship provided, and he continues to be an advocate for education.
“Every time I go back home for vacation, I visit that school and I talk to the children,” he said. “I try to tell them to make use of the time they have and the opportunities they have. It’s always a joy. Every year, you have more than 100 children there sponsored by Unbound.”

Like many who’ve benefited from Unbound sponsorship, Father Paulus is eager to share the blessings he received through sponsorship with a new generation. He keeps close to his heart the memory of the boy who walked 5 miles to school every day and daydreamed about better opportunities. Now that he’s living out those opportunities in his ministry, he’s filled with gratitude.

“I’m so happy to be a priest,” he said. “It is such a joy to serve and also to learn from others. When I help people and people appreciate it, that makes me feel worthy to have been ordained. When I see people happy because of what I am or what I do, that makes my life worthwhile. And so far I have had a wonderful experience working with people. They have been very loving and very kind.”
Mimi Murray describes herself as having a “fire in the belly” for helping children, youth and elders around the world overcome poverty.

That fire was enkindled when she sponsored a child through Unbound in 2003, but it has been stoked over the years in a way that’s enhanced her personal faith journey as a Catholic.

Mimi began as a sponsor while visiting her parents in Illinois in 2003. She went to Mass at the parish church she attended as a child and heard a visiting priest share the Unbound story and the need for sponsors. After Mass, she selected a child to help.

The girl Mimi sponsored eventually graduated from the program. She then chose another child to help and, after that, another. Each new relationship was one more step on an ongoing journey into the heart of human solidarity.

Her deepening participation with Unbound was concurrent with two other significant events, one of them personal.
“My mother came out from Chicago to live her last five years with us,” Mimi said. “She was very much faith-based. Just having her here strengthened my faith.”

The message of Pope Francis, with his emphasis on recognizing Christ in the poor and marginalized, also helped galvanize Mimi’s faith.

“I saw the faith as a living and active faith, and as something that would allow us to connect with others through the social justice part of it,” she said. “I became more active in Unbound with the letter writing, because I saw it was a profession of faith in a different way than just going to Mass on Sunday.”

By the time Mimi and her husband, Mike, decided to go on an Unbound Awareness Trip in April of this year, they were sponsoring two teenaged girls and an elderly woman, all from Costa Rica. They were eager to visit, but what they didn’t anticipate was that by the time they returned home, their number of sponsored friends would double.

“It’s about meeting the people, and not just seeing things that are different between our lives and our cultures but seeing things that are similar.”
On their awareness trip to Costa Rica, Mike and Mimi Murray share a moment with their sponsored friends Kathia and Yubelki (top row, from left), Dorotea (middle), Elias, and Jariff and Delvin (front). Yubelki has since left the sponsorship program.
“It was so moving, we asked to sponsor three more during that week we were there,” Mimi said. “So we grew from three to six and [the new ones] were all little boys.”

The Murrays are veteran world travelers who’ve spent extensive time in parts of Asia and Europe. Their visits to churches, mosques, temples and other religious and cultural sites have helped them better understand the foundations of various faith traditions and societies. But Mimi says it’s not the buildings and locales that she finds most illuminating.

“We like to engage with the people in a place, so it’s not just about the scenery. It’s about meeting the people, and not just seeing things that are different between our lives and our cultures but seeing things that are similar.”

They brought that desire with them to Costa Rica — a place they had, in fact, visited twice before as tourists. “We were a little bit familiar with one view of the country, but certainly not the view that we got on the awareness trip,” Mimi said.

That view was an honest glimpse into the realities of people who engage in a daily struggle against need. But it was also an eye-opening immersion into a world of gratitude and hospitality, and a life-changing communion with the Christ who dwells within and among the poor of the world.

When she and Mike returned home to San Diego, Mimi began sharing her story with friends and family members in an effort to help find more sponsors for people in need. She also wrote a firsthand account of her Costa Rica trip for The Southern Cross, the newspaper of the Diocese of San Diego.

In it she wrote, “Why are we committed to Unbound? The biggest reason ... is because Unbound inspires both sponsors and their sponsored friends to make a difference in each other’s lives.”
Shining a light on elders

Two recent events highlighted Unbound’s sponsorship program for elders. In September, an Unbound survey of 600 elders found that, compared to their peers outside the program, sponsored elders enjoy greater quality of life and access to needed resources.

In October, Pope Francis’ new book, “Sharing the Wisdom of Time,” was released. The book features stories of elders from around the world, including many from the Unbound community. Yenifer Valencia Morales, a young social worker in Colombia who works with sponsored elders, was also featured.

It’s because of dedicated staff members like Yenifer who affirm the gifts of the elderly, and sponsors who make room for them in their hearts, that the Unbound program succeeds.
Health topped the list of challenges most frequently cited in an Unbound survey of sponsored elders and those on a waiting list for sponsorship.

66% of sponsored elders said they receive needed medical care, compared to 40% on the waiting list.

59% of sponsored elders report getting needed medicine, compared with 32% on the waiting list.

Yenifer receives a copy of “Sharing the Wisdom of Time” from Pope Francis and presents him with a gift from the community in Tarso, Colombia. The gift is a notebook with messages from sponsored elders, Unbound staff and others from the community filling its pages.
Sponsored elder Christine from Uganda enjoys a lighthearted moment with her grandchildren. Christine grows seasonal fruits and vegetables to sell, but she struggles to get by. After a lifetime of hardship, her Unbound sponsorship now helps ease Christine’s burdens by providing food, medicine and household items like bedding, as well as social contact with others in her community. Christine is one of 23 Unbound sponsored elders featured in Pope Francis’ new book, “Sharing the Wisdom of Time.”
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