

DESERT BLOOMS

September 2013

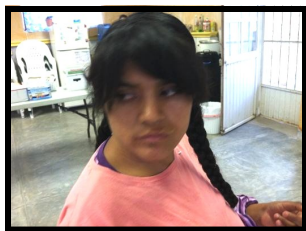


Sebastian, age 13, and his mother Adela arrived at Santo Niño on a recent Tuesday morning. It was hard to tell whether son or mother was more anxious. Sebastian has a diagnosis of autism. The unfamiliar environment of the center, already buzzing with activity, heightened his agitation. Adela was worried that he would get into trouble, touch something, knock someone down, make too much noise or otherwise disrupt the routine. Little did she realize that we are used to being disrupted!

Cristina Estrada and Sister Janet did an initial intake interview. Taking the history we heard the familiar story of autism: misunderstood, recognized too late, lost opportunities for early intervention. Sebastian had been dismissed from school after school, even those specifically for children with special needs, because he was too aggressive. We're not sure how Adela heard about the Santo Niño Project but she did and she decided to try to find us, though it meant several buses from where they live. That indicated an essential quality in our special mothers: HOPE!

Cristina Coronado has a special interest in autism because her niece has the diagnosis. She took mother and son to the room we reserve for work in quiet with our easily distractible children. She repeated to Adela what she has said about Miriam and Nena and other children with autistic behaviors: "They are not the problem. We are the ones with the problem because we cannot communicate with them. We must find the key!"

Adela is constantly vigilant for Sebastian's behaviors and worried about how others will react to him. She sometimes appears as agitated as her

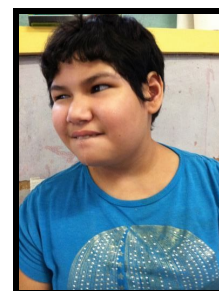


son. She was also concerned about how much we charge for our services. When we told her that there is no fee to attend, she was incredulous. She wasn't expecting that answer. Nor was she expecting to be invited onto one of the massage tables for a relaxing treatment while Cristina worked with Sebastian.

We told Adela not to worry about Sebastian darting here and there in the center. Just be sure to keep him away from the stove and refrigerator and- oops! too late: the Jacuzzi! He dove in clothes and all, right on top of Reyna who was enjoying her turn in the tub. (He did get his chance later and absolutely loved it.) Otherwise,

everyone at Santo Niño keeps an eye on our special ones with autistic behaviors. We are conscious not to make a big fuss, not to shout or scold, and to be generous and gentle in our interactions. We also stay on the lookout for those little keys that allow us entry into the mysterious world in which they live. With Sebastian we have discovered that music is one of those keys. He lies quite still and permits some therapeutic touch when the classical harp cd is playing.

Last Tuesday when it was time for lunch which is always preceded by a prayer together, the first to arrive



at the circle were Sebastian and his mother, Nena and Miriam. Maybe it is the fact that the call to prayer ("Oracion!! Oracion!!") signifies that food is close at hand. Or maybe they had a jump on the rest of us in the "thanks-to-God" assignment. But there they were, our three special friends who live in a world we struggle to understand, ready to pray. As we closed the circle and gave thanks for the blessings of the day and the food we were about to receive, Nena and Miriam walked inside of us, circling and stopping now and then to touch or tap or kiss or hug until the great "Amen!" One day maybe Sebastian will feel accepted and secure enough to join them. On that day we will rejoice!

