

TITLE: The Commitment

Her radiant little blue eyes and angelic Shirley Temple face struck me first. She could be no more than four. As she gnawed at her jagged little piece of beef jerky, I saw that her dimpled cheeks and matted golden locks were smudged with dirt and streaked with filth. Her soiled little dress extended down to her teeny cowboy booties. And yet, her beautiful little smile, that innocent smile, would not be suppressed. My eyes began to blur as I tried to contain my tears.

Just minutes earlier I had been negotiating a narrow levee road descending down into Beckwourth Riverfront Park on a tight appointment schedule. It was a short cut around Marysville traffic. That's when I first saw this precious little child come out from behind a trash-strewn Porta Potty with an adult at some distance behind her.

God has a way of smacking us upside the head when we least expect it – and when we need it most. I had to stop. I quickly made a U-turn back to my office to gather some food and water and was joined by my co-worker Amy. We returned to the area and navigated our way over garbage and assorted filth to a crude encampment just a ways down from the Porta Potty. A wary man approached us holding a baby wrapped in a dirty checkered baby blanket, black flies peppering the infant's face. The child I had spotted earlier tagged alongside him. We brought bottled water and some food. 'Bless you' he said to us with tears in his eyes.

He shared his story of despair and abandonment by the children's mother. He had three children in tow and was doing the best that he could. This was his final stand amongst the homeless community along the river. No money, no job, no hope.

And yet, in spite of it all, he shared one commitment he just had to keep. It seems that on this day his son was receiving an academic award at Mary Covillaud Elementary School and he wanted to be there. I was dumbfounded and humbled. Even with his family's dire conditions, he still wanted to be present for his son's academic recognition. He was so proud of his little boy, even if there was no bed for his son to come to that night. As John Steinbeck wrote in his book *The Grapes of Wrath* about the Dust Bowl migrants and the strength of a parent: 'She walked for the family and held her head straight for the family.' It seems this father was doing the same thing.

In the next couple of weeks scores of seniors will be graduating from area schools. Many evening celebrations will be held, hands shaken, hugs given, and speeches made. And through it all, many a parent or guardian will be sitting quietly on hard bleachers or dimmed auditoriums in tearful reflection over the countless obstacles and sacrifices they overcame as a family to arrive at this point. And no matter how much money they may earn, they will have one thing in common with the homeless father - their love for their children.

Indeed, as Garth Brooks noted 'You aren't wealthy until you have something money can't buy.'

(We deeply appreciate the support from the Yuba County Health and Human Services Department for following up and addressing the family's needs.)