

For The Children

Since 2007, For The Children Brazil has been using surf lessons and Bible studies to share Christ and disciple kids amid a slum culture of drugs, prostitution, and crime.

Story by Debra Smith
Photos by Athena Scott

The festively-decorated room was crowded with families, many of whom were from one of northeastern Brazil's most infamous slums: Moura Brasil. To celebrate Christmas together, others from nearby slums had crossed into Moura Brasil—an uncommon journey, according to missionaries Alex and Erika Piagetti of CC Miami Beach, FL. Because of gang rivalries, they explained, people are typically afraid to enter other slums. But many had made the trek for the 2008 Christmas party of For The Children (FTC), a ministry begun by Alex and Erika.

Program participant Pablo dos Santos Lima's name was called out, and he walked to the front of the room. Months earlier, 10-year-old Pablo had handed Wagner Menezes, FTC's onsite director, a letter addressed to Jesus. In the note, Pablo expressed his dream of owning his own surfboard. With a tight budget, Wagner knew he could only pray for this to happen. He prayed fervently. Soon Wagner himself received a Christmas gift from a friend: a brand-new surfboard.

There in front of the gathering, Wagner explained Pablo's letter and his own subsequent prayers. Then he presented Pablo

with the surfboard. "Everyone was moved to see how God cares even about little things," Alex said. "That answered prayer inspired many."

For The Children began four years ago by offering surf lessons and Bible studies in Moura Brasil, one of Fortaleza's more than 600 slum neighborhoods. FTC has since added tutoring and lessons in literacy, theater, and martial arts. Hundreds of children attend at least one class weekly, and dozens come to learn skills and study the Bible almost daily. Wagner is a Brazilian who came to Christ on the Piagetti's first mission trip to Fortaleza; he partners with Youth With A Mission to teach many of the classes. Alex, Erika, and their four children, under the leadership of CC Miami Beach, intend to join Wagner by moving to Brazil later this year.

Now when they [the Jewish leaders] saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus.

Acts 4:13

"I'm so encouraged by this verse," Erika said. "We're not trained either, but God doesn't need that. All He wants is a person willing to be filled with Him."

Watching Grace Change Lives

Pablo, who is now 12, spent his young childhood frequently visiting his father in prison. When he enrolled in the surf program three years ago, the young boy was shy and somber; but he soon gave his heart to Jesus, and Wagner said that his countenance now reflects deep joy. Unable to read when he began, Pablo told his mom that he wanted to learn so he could read the Bible. In addition to surf lessons and Bible studies, Pablo now faithfully attends FTC's after-school tutoring program—where he learned to read. "Pablo is a great example to others," Alex commented. "He never misses class and is so happy he can read his own Bible."

Pablo's older sister Deise also surfs and attends thrice-weekly Bible studies, where she got saved. "Deise is polite and disciplined," Alex commented. "She has a servant's heart and constantly offers to help. At 14, she stands out because most slum girls



Left to right: Alex Piagetti, Sidney Reese, and Wagner Menezes visit Pablo and Deise's parents. Their father, right, who was recently released from prison, gave his life to God due to his kids' influence.



A young surfer catches a wave. The boy has been part of For The Children's surf lessons and Bible studies since Wagner began teaching the classes in 2007.



Alex, kneeling, and Sidney of CC Miami Beach, FL, share Christ with a drug addict in an alley where violence is common.



Sidney, Alex, and Rogerio, a local grocery store owner who is a believer, pray for Barbi. The 11-year-old requested prayer because, although she had recovered from a nearly fatal case of meningitis, she still barely remembered anything. She regularly attends For The Children's Bible studies, and her memory has greatly improved.



Juliana Batista of Youth With A Mission teaches morning literacy class. For The Children holds the lessons at a community center in the Moura Brasil slum.

her age—even many as young as nine—are already prostituting themselves for drugs.”

Pablo and Deise's mother, who is now pregnant with the family's seventh child, has followed Christ for years. Their father, a former drug addict and bank robber released from prison in 2009, recently became a Christian as well. The family lives together in a 200-square-foot hut. “We frequently hear from the parents,” Alex said. “They thank us because they see Pablo and Deise helping around the house, praying, and reading their Bibles. God is growing them.”

Ten-year-old Nathaniel Feitosa Souza was derogatorily called “Sataniel” by neighborhood children before he entered FTC's classes. “He was a fighter, a hustler, a type-A kid who kept getting thrown out of school,” Alex said. “We announced to the kids, ‘We’re

not calling him Sataniel, but Nataniel’—which means blessed by God. His behavior has improved immensely since he got saved during a Bible study. God is working dramatically in his life.”

A Surfer for Jesus

Alex and Erika met Wagner in 2007. Desiring to share Christ with those caught in a culture of drugs, prostitution, and crime, the Piagetti family was visiting Brazil and the coastal city of Fortaleza to explore ministry opportunities. “We were asking God to open doors for us to serve Him as a family,” Erika said. “We went to the northeast because that seemed to be Brazil's least-reached area.”

Alex and Wagner first spoke to one another under a surf-school tent on the beach. Alex had come seeking places to hold Bible stud-



Alex leads a Bible study just before a surf session. Despite potential gang violence between communities, youth walk from local slums to attend weekly Bible studies.

ies. Wagner was collecting equipment for his humanitarian project: teaching slum children to surf. Alex, a former criminal experienced with a lawbreaker's mindset, disagreed with Wagner about such a program's effects. “You're going to make things worse,” Alex said. “You teach these kids to surf, and they'll have a new need—surfboards,” he continued. “Then they will steal to get them, just like they get everything else. They need Jesus.” Wagner became offended and sarcastically invited Alex to come to the slum and teach about Jesus.

“Two days later,” Wagner remembered, “Alex showed up. I was surprised he came to the slum.” As Alex shared the Gospel, Wagner said, “He spoke about God like I had never heard before. Two days after that I got saved.” The Piagettis committed to support Wagner and his family financially if he read his Bible daily, invested himself full-time in the surf school, and found someone to teach participants the Bible. “I saw the love of God at that moment and continue to see it today,” Wagner said. “The Scripture that touched me and still works in my life is from 1st Corinthians”:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have

not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. ... Love never fails. 1 Corinthians 13:1, 8a

When Alex returned after six months, Wagner's program was training more than 100 youth in surfing and Scripture. The missionaries he had invited to teach the Bible, who had labored long in the area but felt they were having little impact with the youth, were delighted to serve alongside a Brazilian. The partnership carries on almost four years later, but Wagner now teaches most of the Bible studies. A recent lesson was on Romans 12:1-3; the first verse reads: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.” Wagner does so by continuing to live in a shack in Moura Brasil with his wife and young son.

Criminal to Missionary

Alex, who is originally from Brazil, spent parts of his childhood there and parts in the U.S. After dropping out of school in 9th grade to care for his ailing mother, Alex's habit of petty thievery grew until he was adept at smuggling money and goods internationally. Eventually prosecuted at age 23,



Sidney and Alex visit the grandmother of a literacy program student. The woman suffers from vertigo and was unable to get up. They prayed with her and she accepted Christ as her Lord and Savior.

Alex spent 6½ years in a Florida state prison. During this time, he came to know Christ.

Nearing release at almost 30, Alex prayed for a wife. He met Erika three weeks later while



Believers pray together prior to an ocean baptism.

applying for a job at her workplace. Though not hired due to his criminal record, Alex's first date with Erika was to church that weekend—and in time, she said, “He got the wife instead of the job!” Alex still needed work, though, and his only vocational skill was international smuggling—a field he could no longer pursue as a disciple of Jesus. “But it’s amazing how God works,” Erika commented. Alex had exercised intensely while incarcerated. Shortly after his release, she continued, “A man approached him asking, ‘Can you help me look like you?’” With a yes, Alex began training his first client in what became a personal training business. He is currently seeking to sell the company in preparation for the family’s intended move to Brazil.

But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty.

1 Corinthians 1:27



Fortaleza, one of Brazil’s largest cities, is located on the northeastern coast.

“Wagner and I frequently discuss this verse,” Alex said. “To society we are losers and outcasts, but to Jesus we are conquerors—praise Him!” ↩

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