

GOD'S WELCOME TO THOSE IN NEED

CALVARY CHAPELS IN PITTSBURGH, PA, REACH OUT TO REFUGEE FAMILIES WITH THE LOVE OF CHRIST

Story by Carmel Flippen
Photos by Micah Martin unless otherwise noted

During the winter of 2018, Jason Catizone of Calvary Chapel Pittsburgh, PA, knocked on a door in a refugee community near the church, hoping to visit a family living there. To his surprise, a neighbor's door opened first, and a little Nepali girl's face peeked out. Jason had visited her home before, but seven-year-old Lia* had always been standoffish. "Jason!" she cried delightedly, running to hug him. From then on, when doing home visits, he often saw Lia waving happily from her window. She began attending Sunday school at Calvary Chapel Pittsburgh;

on her first visit she looked up inquisitively and asked, "Can I come here every day?"

Lia's parents always welcomed Jason during his visits, but over time he saw signs of serious alcoholism and abuse. One morning he received a tearful 2:30 a.m. voicemail from Lia wanting him to come, saying her parents had been drinking and that her dad had hit her and broken her arm. Jason took her to the emergency room and told hospital personnel what had happened.

Jason continued visiting. He tried to get Lia's mom to address her drinking problem, with no success. On June 1, 2019, Lia grabbed ahold of him as he was leaving and refused to let go. "Don't leave! I'm scared!" she screamed uncontrollably as Jason tried to quiet her. Her parents ran in, furious. Her stepfather grabbed her by the hair and yanked her off Jason while her mother lunged at her repeatedly, beating her with a broom. "I'm taking her outside," Jason said firmly, and was able to take Lia despite the attempts to restrain him. Jason held Lia's hand as they sat on an outside bench waiting for the police; her mother screamed death threats at Lia from the balcony.

Lia and her baby brother were placed in temporary foster care. Her church family at Calvary Chapel Pittsburgh gave the children several care packages, including a bejeweled crown made by her Sunday school class as they studied the Old Testament story of Queen Esther.

Though in most cases the help Jason offers is less intense, it still has deep meaning for those who live in the neighborhood. Beginning in 2009, Jason has invested in and even temporarily lived among the families placed there by the U.S. State Department, who hail from a patchwork of nations and religions. "God wants us to be farmers, not fast-food cooks," said Jason's pastor, Kevin Mallon. "That takes an investment in people. It's a challenging ministry because most of these people are not Christian—if you



Photo by David Ralston

Top right: **Jessica McCall of CC South Pittsburgh (left) speaks with a woman during a monthly Fun Day for refugee families.**

Bottom: **Jason Catizone plays a game with refugee children on a Fun Day. Jason oversees a CC Pittsburgh ministry assisting refugee families in the city.**



Photo by David Ralston

THE STRANGER WHO DWELLS AMONG YOU SHALL BE TO YOU AS ONE BORN AMONG YOU, AND YOU SHALL LOVE HIM AS YOURSELF.
LEVITICUS 19:34

alienate them, you'll miss your opportunity. Jason is so well-known and respected in the community that they have an ear to hear what he has to say. He's careful not to be offensive, but also bold in declaring the Gospel."

From Dead Ends to Open Doors

Jason's ministry centers primarily around one dead-end street. He likely would never have arrived there if his own ministry plans had not dead-ended at the Russian border in January 2008—after years ministering in the nation's southernmost region, he was suddenly and inexplicably refused entry. "God works in funny ways," Jason laughed. "In my life, He literally closed a country."

He returned home to Pittsburgh. Near the end of 2009, another church approached Calvary Chapel Pittsburgh about partnering to reach a nearby refugee neighborhood. Pastor Kevin hand-picked an initially reluctant Jason to lead the new ministry. "I firmly believe if there's a need in front of you," said Kevin, "you put your hand to it. We saw God had put a need at our doorstep, and my wife Krista and I saw from the beginning that if anyone's going to lead this, it's Jason." Monthly refugee outreaches at CC Pittsburgh offered children's activities and connected adults to needed resources that cultural, language, and income barriers made difficult to access without help. After a couple years, when the other church moved on and

volunteers tapered off, it looked like another dead end. Instead, Jason seized the opportunity to relocate the ministry to the refugees' home turf.

The neighborhood's residents represent many nations—Nepal, Uzbekistan, and Honduras, to name a few—but one thing they have in common is their hospitality. In Russia, Jason learned that while Americans feel more comfortable participating in events, in other cultures home visits are a more acceptable way to build relationships. Once or twice a week, Jason visits neighborhood families. Children run excitedly from all directions to meet him. Whether Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, or Christian, some of them can recite Bible verses they have learned. When the children argue, Jason asks, "What did Jesus say?" and many respond—if reluctantly—"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you" (Luke 6:27b).

During home visits, "Any of five thousand things might happen," Jason said. "It's very different from visiting an American family. I bring games based on Scripture for the kids and help the parents with whatever they need. As spiritual things come up, the Gospel gets shared in bits and pieces." The crucial difference from the original outreaches is that Jason—and by extension, those who minister with him—has become an insider among people who often feel like outsiders. This trust enables him to see



Bottom left: Women in the neighborhood watch children and the games during a recent Fun Day.

Top right: Children enjoy playing with Jason when he makes regular home visits to the refugee families.



Photo by David Ralston

struggles the neighborhood keeps behind closed doors—rampant alcoholism, abuse, and suicide—and step forward to offer help in Jesus' name.

An Iraqi woman confided that her husband—on a trip to Iraq at that time—was violently abusive. Now he was calling home, threatening to kill her and the children when he returned. Jason helped her by burning onto a

CD already recorded phone calls, found a trustworthy translator to help the police, and advocated for her with the authorities. Due to his intervention and the church's prayers, the man was arrested and eventually deported—a very rare occurrence, according to the sergeant handling the case. In the aftermath, when stress and cultural guilt for reporting her husband caused her to contemplate suicide, Jason talked her out of it. Though she

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still struggles, she realizes she can reach out to Calvary Chapel Pittsburgh when she needs help.

The apartment buildings' leasing manager asked Jason to speak with a Nepali family whom she would have to evict if they did not stop neglecting their children. One of the young boys had even been seen eating from dumpsters. Jason visited the family with a Nepali Christian translator and learned that the mother's medication was making her sleepy. Jason firmly stressed how close they were to losing not only their apartment, but their children—yet he also returned, week after week, helping the boys with schoolwork and monitoring the situation. Since the family were professing Christians, he posted Nepali Bible verses on their walls. With this encouragement, the family is back on track, and the mother is even working now.

[God] loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. DEUTERONOMY 10:18b, NIV

The World in Your Backyard

Partnering in this ministry is Calvary Chapel South Pittsburgh (CCSP), providing the majority of manpower for the refugee children's monthly 'Fun Days.' On an asphalt patch behind one apartment building, small tents

are set up to provide shade. Up to 60 children of varying ages and nationalities come running for water balloon fights, relay races, and to drink up volunteers' attention. Other helpers visit with the parents gathering to watch. A Christian song and a brief Bible lesson are taught to the kids.

In one lesson, two children took turns trying to navigate between plates of shaving cream dropped haphazardly across the ground. One was blindfolded, the other not. One's lack of success illustrated the need for ***"the light of the world,"*** as Jesus called Himself in John 8:12. Often only 10 to 20 children participate in the Bible lesson, as many are of Muslim background. "I'm fine with that," Jason said, "We're not here to beat them over the head with the Gospel, but we are going to talk about Jesus."

Teenagers participating in Narrow Way, CCSP's summer discipleship program, were also heavily involved in July. After a downpour had ruined plans for an outdoor Fun Day for the neighborhood's children, Narrow Way teens split into groups and brought the fun indoors instead. Inside a small apartment eight teenagers danced, sang, and played on the floor with four Nepali cousins, ages seven and under. "It was really cool to see our teens get out of their comfort zones, and to see barriers come down between different cultures," testified Olivia Green, this group's leader. "We didn't even have to leave our city—the Lord brought the world to us."

One teen folded a piece of paper and began making seemingly random cuts, sharing the Gospel as he did. When he unfolded the paper, one seven-year-old girl started jumping up and down, shouting joyfully, "It's a cross! It's Jesus' cross!" Not having revealed that part of the story yet, the surprised teen asked, "How did you know that?" She announced, "Jason told me about that."

"What God is doing through Jason is truly amazing," testified Calvary Chapel South Pittsburgh Pastor Tim Green, Olivia's father. "Looking around, you see lots of people

from different faiths, but they know Jason will consistently be there proclaiming Jesus' name."

"I love short-term missions," said Kelly Luteran, CCSP's administrative assistant and the catalyst for their partnership with Jason's ministry, "but we're not called to be missionaries one week out of the year. How can we make more of an impact where we're living the other 51 weeks? There are 10 to 15 countries and many different languages and cultures represented in this one neighborhood. The Lord has brought international missions to us."

Kelly began helping with the refugee ministry years ago when Jason was her Bible study leader in a home group. CCSP is Calvary Chapel Pittsburgh's 2014 church plant; both churches continue to overlap in ministry, strengthening each other's evangelical efforts.

After only a few visits to one Hindu family, their teenage son reflected to Jason, "When we first came here, we were crying. But then you came and visited, and we were so

happy." Jason hopes to someday be able to do full-time ministry there with more helpers who can offer God's welcome to those in need.

"I think this is a huge unrealized mission field," Jason declared. "When you're overseas you're the foreigner; people's lives are generally comfortable and normal. But here, they're out of place, in need of friends, and that's an opportunity to reach them with God's love." 🙌

"Bring My sons from afar, and My daughters from the ends of the earth—everyone who is called by My name, whom I have created for My glory." ISAIAH 43:6b-7a

* Name changed to protect the identity

CC Pittsburgh, PA
calvarychappittsburgh.org



Top left: A volunteer illustrates a Bible lesson for the children at a Fun Day.

Bottom right: A Nepali family welcomes Jason into her home with warmth and a hot cup of Nepali coffee.

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