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MISSION ARLINGTON®: NINJA TURTLES, ROBOTS, AND DIGNITY



I looked up in the busy, chaotic room of waiting people. Some had been there nearly an hour, many with hyper children, waiting for someone like me to grab their clipboard and call their name.

I skimmed quickly the next person's paperwork and was thankful it was written in English. It was my first day on the job, and out of the all people I had already seen, more than half spoke only Spanish. Although I could generally figure out what it was that Mission Arlington could do to help them, I struggled to hear their story or really communicate past understanding the words *necesito ropa y comida*. Between using Google Translate and kicking myself for not paying more attention during my Spanish classes in school, I was able to communicate with some form of Spanglish that could be sort-of understood by both parties involved.

But the next person, Crystal, would not need to decipher my improper Spanish, because her paper was filled out in English. I called her name and directed her and her three small children into a small room just off the waiting area.

WIGGLING KIDS:

Crystal scolded the children and told them to sit in the chairs. They obeyed for a moment before tumbling out and wiggling profusely. I told her they were fine and assured the kids that they would go to the playroom in just a few minutes, which would no doubt be both far more fun and spacious.

“There’s a freaking playroom?” one of the sons asked excitedly.

Crystal looked at me nervously before scolding the boy. “Don’t say words like that!”

She apologized but I told her it was fine.

“It’s not fine,” she said, “Everyone in their daycare curses and says bad things, but I keep telling them that they have to be better than that. Even though all the other kids are doing it, we’re not going to join in.”

I told her I thought that was a great thing to teach them. We continued talking, and even though she was timid at first, she eventually told me that she was a single mom struggling to make ends meet. She kept telling me that things had been really hard recently. She worked at a minimum wage job and was struggling to provide for her children.

‘I FEEL LIKE A BAD MOM’

She had a simple list written on her paperwork—clothes, toys and soap. I asked her if she needed any furniture or housewares. She said no. I asked her if she needed any food, and she paused. Crystal looked at each of her children. Her oldest son was leaning precariously over the railing of the chair. Her daughter twirled like a princess in the middle of the room. Her youngest son made car noises in the corner.

“It’s not that we couldn’t use the help,” she said. “I guess I’m ashamed that I have to ask for it, that I can’t provide for my kids. I feel like a bad mom.”

I felt heartbroken. I told her not to be ashamed and that by coming here she was providing for her kids. She was a good mom, because she was doing what was necessary make those far away ends meet together. While trying to make sure she kept her dignity, I convinced her to check the box labeled food.

Before leaving the room, I prayed with Crystal and the wiggling children, then she and I dropped the trio off in the play room. The youngest son was pretty upset to be left alone, so Crystal knelt down and explained to him that she was going to get some clothes and toys for him but she would be back soon.

The boys eyes lit up at the word toys. “I want a Ninja Turtle,” he said.

“And a robot,” added the older son who was lingering nearby.

LOOKING FOR NINJA TURTLES AND ROBOTS

Mission Arlington takes donations every day, starting early in the morning until late in the evening. Cars drive up to donate clothes, furniture, toys, appliances and household items. Mission Arlington people come and unload the boxes and bags of things and sort through them. The things are then taken to different parts of the campus so that they can go to someone like Crystal.

Whatever is donated on any given day is what Mission Arlington can give out to people in need. Although we try to determine the broad things that people need, it is difficult to provide them with specifics. Mission Arlington could easily provide Crystal and her children with toys, but providing them specifically with Ninja Turtles and robots was a harder task. There were a lot of toys donated each day, but unless someone specifically brought in Ninja Turtles and robots, I was afraid that Crystal’s kids would have to settle for something else.

“I promise, your mom will bring you back some great toys.” I assured.

The two little boys looked at their mom with puckered lips.

“Mommy will try the best she can,” she said before hugging them and leaving.

As we walked around gathering up the things Crystal needed, I continued to find out more of her story. She told me stories of funny children, single motherhood, bad daycare and phone bills.

When it was time to look for toys, we searched the shelves for Ninja Turtles and robots but had no luck. There was a bin on the ground next to the shelves with toys in it, as well. It had been donated so recently that the toys had not even been put on the shelves yet. As we peered in we saw more than one robot and Ninja Turtle sitting at the top of the bin as if they were waiting for Crystal and her kids.

As we went to pick up her kids, their faces lit up when they saw her large bag of goodies. Their eyes got big, and their mouths formed into a tiny smiling O's. Crystal was overwhelmed by their joy when she showed them the Ninja Turtles and robots.

GOD PROVIDED

Before she left, I told her that she was a good mom. I told her that she had provided for her kids today, and that God had provided for her. She nodded and smiled proudly as she left with her dignity fully intact, and with a hopeful joy that radiated from her being.

God cares about the little things. The Ninja Turtles and robots were more than toys to Crystal. Her kids did not need them and would have survived if Crystal brought back cars instead. But the Ninja Turtles and robots gave Crystal the feeling that she had provided for her family in a normal way like a normal mom. They gave her dignity. They gave her joy. They gave her hope. Her parental love and will to provide reminded me of God who often grants us the small requests of our hearts. God wants to give us those things that seem insignificant, and yet are deceptively important. Things like Ninja Turtles and robots.

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