

# Brazil, Senior Style

**As Bob walked** across the open plaza, his wife Ruth and friend Marcia dropped behind. It was a gorgeous, blue-sky, cool, sunny day in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, and we were returning from lunch to continue our English lessons. Suddenly a young man in a black leather jacket slipped up behind Bob and with one swipe lifted the wallet from Bob's pocket. Just as quickly, Ruth leaped forward and grabbed the young man by the jacket, screaming at him to leave her husband alone. He wrenched himself away and took off down the street emptyhanded.

"What was that all about?" Bob asked, more confused than worried, as he picked up his wallet from the ground.

"He was taking your wallet," Ruth laughed. "The last I heard he was yelling something that surely was the equivalent of 'crazy American witch.' I just grabbed him by the coat." By then Marcia, Kelsey, and I had caught up with them and joined in the laughter. A white-haired grandmother tackling a teenage pickpocket was a scene I wouldn't have missed for anything.

Our team of five lived in this large Brazilian city of 15 million people for three weeks as we gave free English conversation lessons using stories from the Gospel of Luke. Marcia, Bob, and Ruth, all in their 60s, and I in my 50s, had answered the challenge when my 18-year-old daughter Kelsey wanted to form a team. Each of us had always wanted to do mission work in a foreign country, but the time had never been right. God had plopped this opportunity into our laps and we felt compelled to respond. Four seniors and a teenager—what a combination! Only God could have made this work.

## Getting Started

Another short-term mission team had preceded us. They met with us before they left to tell us about their experiences with the readers we would be assisting. There were only three on that team, however, so we had the challenge of finding more readers. Our quick and easy source was an English school nearby. These students who were paying for English lessons from Brazilians were delighted to supplement their classes with free ones from Americans.

Kelsey, Marcia, and I had a quiet routine, but it was Bob and Ruth who had the adventures. They were living in a small building behind the house of one of the American missionaries, but they still managed to get into trouble. The first morning there, Ruth started out the only door in the small outbuilding. The doorknob

came off in her hand. Bob was sure he could make it work so they could get out. Not so! They tried getting to the high, basement-type windows to call to someone, but were unsuccessful. They banged and yelled until finally their hosts heard them from their bedroom and came to rescue them.

We took public transportation to the church building where we met our readers. Bob and Ruth were always the first ones there, but one morning they didn't show up. When they finally arrived, they looked a little dazed. "We got on the wrong bus. We saw parts of Belo we didn't know existed, and nobody on the bus spoke

English!" Bob said. "We finally decided we'd just have to ride the whole route until we got back to where we got on and then get the right bus. It worked. It's a good thing we had no readers scheduled early today."

## Building Relationships

We used the terms "reader" and "worker" rather than "teacher" and "student" to promote equality in our relationships. We spent several

minutes of each session conversing about personal activities and current events. Then we turned to a workbook with stories from Luke's Gospel. We had spent several months training in a program sponsored by Let's Start Talking Ministries. It was reassuring that what we had learned in our weekly sessions was so helpful as we met with our readers.

One of Marcia's readers was an elegant, wealthy woman named Graca, who adored Marcia. On our last week there, Graca and her husband Francisco had our team and the local Brazilian minister for dinner at their lovely high-rise apartment. The beautifully prepared and delicious food gave us a different slant on life in Belo Horizonte—one not common with our usual readers. She also gave each of us a gift of carved soapstone with notes of thanks. Still her heart was not touched by Jesus Christ during the nine weeks she studied. We realized we were only seed planters.

My reader, Maria, was my age and like me had taught elementary school, so we enjoyed our conversations immensely. When we got to the lesson of the seed falling on different types of soil, I asked her the question we'd been taught in our training: "What kind of soil are you?"

Earnestly, she said, "I think since I have been reading these lessons, I have changed. Now I think I am the good soil!" I agreed, for I could see how she had changed and grown in her love for Jesus.

One of my favorite readers was Daniela, who had

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taught herself English through American movies and songs. As we read that Mary would give birth to Jesus who would be a blessing to all people, I asked the question I'd asked many times before: "Do you know what 'blessing' means?"

"Oh, yes!" Daniela smiled, eyes gleaming. "It is when the light of God is on you!" I realized the Lord had brought to me a student who would teach me more than I would teach her.

## We realized we were only seed planters.

As Maria entered that day she said, "I was reading the signs in the hall. They are just what we have been studying!" I was gratified that important connections were being made in her mind.

Being in a culture where few people spoke our language was a challenge for all of us. We seniors ignored the excuse of age and chose to use our time, our life experiences, and our talents to teach the gospel of Jesus Christ. And we received immeasurably more than we could ever have imagined. ■

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### Adjusting to the Culture

One of the first skills we had to master was speaking slowly and distinctly so our readers could understand us. Bob and Ruth, originally from Texas, and Marcia, originally from Kentucky, had no problem speaking slowly. My Tennessee background put me in the same situation. It was the careful pronunciation that was a challenge, but one we all met. Two days before we left, Ruth was explaining to me where she had placed the unused half of an onion.

"I . . . wrapped . . . it . . . in . . . plastic . . . wrap . . . and . . . put . . . it . . . at . . . the . . . edge . . . of the sink," she said, then stopped and laughed. "Sorry! I guess I don't have to talk that slowly to you, do I?"

A friend who often traveled to third-world countries advised us to take two antacid tablets 30 minutes before each meal to prevent stomach problems. We stuck to this routine carefully and stayed in good health. As we were leaving Brazil, Marcia said, "I'm going to miss my little pink tablets. I think I'm addicted!"

Our training encouraged us to have in mind a "seed thought" for each lesson—the basic idea we wanted each reader to understand when the lesson was completed. One day I wrote the first few seed thoughts on colorful paper and posted them on the walls in the hallway where our readers entered. I thought perhaps seeing basic principles such as "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God," and "Jesus was concerned about the physical and the spiritual," and "Jesus is the friend of those who need help" would solidify the thinking of our readers.

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