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# INTRODUCTION

Sometimes it's necessary to speak boldly, in other words, to "get real." Well, this book gets as real as real can be. The stories you are about to read will not only make you go, *Wassup with that?* but also make you think about a God who is REAL.

Each chapter tells the story of an individual—someone just like you! But perhaps someone whose life experience was *touched* by the love and grace of a REAL God.

Some of these individuals come from the street, others from good homes; some from the *barrio*, others even from a preacher's home, but ALL of them were found by God and these are their stories—real lives in a real world.

You'll find some of the stories are pretty raw, some maybe even seem pretty unbelievable, but all of the stories are true; trust me! They are all true. You'll end up liking some stories, loving others, but one thing's for sure: all the stories will make you think and reflect upon your own life.

If you're either *hitting* the church once or twice a week or *hating* the church 24/7, it doesn't matter. Maybe you're just searching. Whatever the case, you'll end up finding how real GOD is; the stories in this book are a testimony to that.

But there is even more than that. You see, it's good to hear and read about other people experiencing and discovering God,

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but the only experience that really counts is your own and here you'll find an opportunity to get real and taste how amazing God is. And that's my dream for you!

I mean, honestly, have you experienced God in your own life? Have you really? And I'm not talking about the "being a *good* Christian and believing in Jesus" sort of thing. That is important, but not enough! We all agree believing in Jesus is very important, but are you supposed to like Christianity? I mean, actually enjoy it? I think you should; when you finally do, no matter how difficult life may be, that's when you get real with God.

Have you ever wondered why so many young Christians live much worse lives than those who are not even Christian? I know you've asked that question before; maybe your own life isn't so great right now! Those are the kinds of questions that many of the writers dealt with; oh yeah, they'll sound very familiar as you read through the book. But here is the bottom line: God loves you so much that He accepts you just the way you are. He takes you just how you are—no questions asked—because He's got the power to NOT leave you the way He found you! He's working in your life all the time. He wants you to be *changed too*.

Enjoy,  
Manny Cruz

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# STUFF GANGSTER MOVIES ARE MADE OF



## WILLY RAMOS

Pizza? *Mmm*, I sure *love* pizza. From the Chicago stuffed crust to the big ol' slices of New York-style pizzas, I like them all! It's hard for me to choose my favorite. That's like asking a parent of two or three kids which one of them they love the most! I'll even eat the five-dollar ready-to-eat pizzas, I don't care! I remember in the hood, we would wait anxiously for my father to come home from work on Fridays, like kids eager to open their gifts on Christmas, because he always brought pizza when he got paid.

If you're a part of any youth group, you know that food is a very important tool in the spiritual growth of any teenager. In fact, if there was ever a crime scene at the church, God forbid, and CSI investigators were looking for evidence on the floor, I'm certain that they would find fragments of haystacks, veggie meat, and pizza crust below the yellow "Police Line Do Not Cross" tape. Food, especially pizza, has become a part of every Christian youth's DNA!

Unfortunately, although we may smile after thinking of the many great memories we've shared after our Saturday night programs that involved pizza, I have a sad and embarrassing recollection of that word *pizza*.

Ten years ago, I was in the middle of our living room, with my hands around the neck of one of my mom's friends, trying to

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choke her lifeless, while trying to stuff a pizza slice down her throat. She thought it would be hilarious to give me a slice of pizza that had fallen on the ground, like if I was some kind of dog. Her action is no excuse for what I did; but let me try to show you where God has rescued me from, and how He's changed me.

I stood there, like if I was possessed or in a trance or something, watching her turn purple. Two to three people had to wrestle me off her and to the ground. Everyone was screaming at me to stop, including my mother.

I looked at my mom that day, and her stare penetrated my heart like an arrow. I knew for the first time in my life what the apostle Peter felt when he denied Jesus for the last time, the very moment the rooster crowed. The Lord looked straight at Peter,<sup>1</sup> but it was a look filled with love and compassion; there was no anger or judgment in Jesus' eyes, only "pity and sorrow."<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to the look that Jesus gave Peter, my mother looked at me with embarrassment and disgust. That broke my heart. Peter went outside and wept bitterly, the Bible says.<sup>3</sup> I ran out and did the same.

*¡Bendito, Mami!* If I got any regrets in life, it's making that woman suffer. Even at my birth, I caused her much pain, for she almost had a miscarriage and had to be flown in a helicopter to the hospital. Sometimes I wonder why I wasn't named Jabez! (The name means "pain" or to give birth in "pain."<sup>4</sup> I think my sisters and my brother would testify that I've always been a pain in the butt!)

I only tell you this to honor my mother. *Move over Lynda Carter, my mama is the real Wonder Woman!* And she's nothing but a short, little fat lady, too, who "looks like Happy Feet and smells like Raid"<sup>5</sup> and adobo, mixed together! My moms, like most moms, just wanted the best for us.

Moms may not have a formal education, but she is no fool. I realize that in our technological world, Moms may be considered



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ignorant because she doesn't know how to read or write or drive a car; but make no mistake, she's anything but a fool!

She sure knows how to cook! Man, her *arroz con gandules*<sup>6</sup> will beat anything Emeril or Rachael Ray could ever cook! Those who have seen my stomach are witnesses to what I'm talking about! Ha!

There are a few things my mom knows how to write—the names of her kids: *Sylvia, Joyce, Janet, Papo, Lily, Willy, and Cuca*. She also knows how to write *God* and *Jesus*. To write Holy Spirit would be a little bit of a stretch for her.

Why am I telling you this? It's sure not to further embarrass my mother, but to tell you that even when some people might think she's dumb, she's no dummy! In fact, my mother is more than smart, she's King Solomon smart. In fact, almost everything that I have ever read in the Proverbs, my mama told first, before I could even read.

Like I said, Moms didn't know much, but she knew Jesus. And, she introduced me and my brothers and sisters to Him. And because of that, I am saved! Amen!! Even when I was on the streets, after fighting or stealing, I'd get on my knees and ask God for forgiveness, because of the seed my mama planted in me a long time ago.

I'm not sure how she did it, but sometimes even after a rough night, after a fight, or a problem in the night, when no one would be watching, I'd get on my knees and ask God for forgiveness. Call it guilt if you wish; go ahead, be my guest. But let me tell you something: Moms planted a seed in me a long time ago, and it eventually grew to be a tall tree in my life.

Some of you have listened to my Christian rap CD *3:16*. (Cheap plug! Get it at [www.ghettopreacher.com](http://www.ghettopreacher.com), wink, wink.) There's a song where I tried to pay tribute to Moms, where I say, "Yo, Ma, you mean more to me than Little Debbie snacks." And all the boys in the hood know that's a lot! *For reals*.

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Moms made all the difference even when I was down in the streets. I remember I got a call from Giggles late one night. “Yo, homie, we got beef, get here as soon as you can.” Now that I think about it, all I heard was “beef,” so I quickly jumped out from my bed!

Giggles was one of our homies. He got the nickname because we were supposed to be bad and mean, especially when we took pictures, but homeboy kept smiling and giggling! He had no respect for the mean streets!

So, Giggles made the call after he realized some rival gangsters keyed the driver’s side door of his car while he was inside his girlfriend’s house. They stood outside the apartments, waiting for him to notice while they drank beers and smoked weed.

It was around one in the morning, and he’d called me for backup, so I would help him beat those clowns down. That was really not a big deal for me since we did that on a regular basis. One time I beat up a football player simply for stepping on my white Converse sneakers, although I knew he had not done it on purpose!

Remember the words from the Tupac song: “I’m down to brawl if my homies call”? That was definitely our motto at the time. So I told Giggles, “I’ll be there in a second.” I got out of bed, washed my face, threw on my Dickies, and loaded up some bullets in the clip of my gun to go blast those fools.

Then, my mom wakes up. She asked what I was doing, and in my rage, I told her, “I’m a go smoke somebody for messing with Giggles!”

She tried to stop me but couldn’t. She tried to physically force me to stay inside the house, but she wasn’t able to. In her desperation, she threw a curveball at me that eventually did stop me.

She said, “If you keep living your life like that, one day you’re going to end up dead or in jail.” I wanted to ignore her at first, so I got in my hooptie (beat-up car) and took off faster than a super-

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hero. I imagine I looked like a fat Flash! Ha!

I drove for about forty-five minutes to where Giggles was, but in my mind, all I was hearing was my mother's words. I kept hearing those words over and over in my head, just like a late night rerun of the *George Lopez* show.

So, I made a U-turn, put the gun back in my Nike's shoebox, and went back to sleep. Later on, Giggles understood. He knew what I was made of and, deep inside, he really didn't want me to go. He knew it would have been a shootout like those in an old cowboy movie!

My mama saved my life that night. My cousin Punky once told me, "The only reason why we're still alive is because somebody prayed for us." And that makes a whole lot of sense, especially growing up where I did. The locals called it Grit City. I lived on Tenth Court in North Lauderdale, Florida. But, it felt more like a small Compton. It seemed the cops were afraid to go in there. I really can't blame them, though. To be honest, if I hadn't lived there, I'd been scared too!

I remember one time some dudes barricaded the streets with toilet paper to snatch people from oncoming cars, just to jack them! When the police came out to investigate, they ended up getting a big rock smashed through the patrol car back window.

Nobody got arrested because nobody snitched. We hated cops because we thought the cops really hated us. Why was that? I'm not sure! I know we listened to N.W.A's song about dissing the police, so we adopted the same mentality. The streets don't really make a lot of sense; but, at the same time, who cares?

We had our own Warner Brothers network in my block. "Hey, yo, if you see the po-lice, *warn-a-brotha!*" Ha! (Unfortunately, I can't take credit for that. I saw it on a T-shirt at the flea market!)

My next-door neighbor was the kingpin of the hood. He sold more drugs than a Walgreens pharmacy. But we knew the rules; we never ratted him out. One day, however, his luck finally ran out.

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My sisters and I were coming home from school and the SWAT team had our apartment complex surrounded, with guns drawn.

Then, a “ghetto bird” (helicopter) landed in the middle of our block with ATF agents and arrested him. That’s the kind of neighborhood I grew up in. I feel like I have enough material to write, produce, and direct a sequel to *Boyz N the Hood*! And, instead of *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*, *Mr. Ramos’s Neighborhood* would be more like it. My hood had stuff gangster movies are made of.

I’ve been face-to-face with gangsters and their guns directed at my nose. I’ve gotten jumped, robbed, kicked out of my house. I’ve been in car accidents (one of them almost claimed my life and I have twenty-six stitches on the top right of my head to prove it!) In fact, that’s where I got the street name Crash from. And, I’ve also been stabbed with a ballpoint pen like twenty-three times.

On the other hand, I’ve been a thief. I’ve beat up people. I stabbed a guy multiple times with a ballpoint pen. And once, I even put a knife on a six-foot-something giant’s throat, when I realized I couldn’t beat him on a clean fight.

I’ll never forget an incident at the movies. We were just enjoying the movie and minding our own business. All of a sudden, six wannabe thugs sitting behind us threw a cupcake at me, and I was not going to let that slide. I got up and slapped all six of them in the face! (Not because they disrespected me, but because, how dare they waste a perfectly good cupcake! I could’ve eaten that!)

Another time, my gang and I went to a park to discipline someone. A dude called Puff was to be violated. It meant beating someone up as a way of discipline according to the gang code. My homeboy Feo and I beat him up so badly, we left an Adidas footprint on his face! All because he carved our gang name on a table at a local restaurant when he wasn’t even a member!

I think that was the first time in my life I can honestly say I felt God reaching out to me. I could almost feel the battle between good and evil for my soul. It felt like I had a good little fat

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angel and a bad little fat angel on my shoulders fighting for me as we kicked him on the ground. Half of me wanted to kill Puff. The other half wanted to stop. I felt a lot of remorse. I knew I was messing up big time.

I didn't know then, but at the same time we had Puff on the floor, giving him a beat down, Moms was also on the floor. Just a few blocks away, my mother was on her knees, in our house, praying for me. Eventually, we did stop beating on Puff, or anyone else for that matter, and that's when I started coming back to the foot of the cross.

I'm convinced that something happened to me that night. I believe it was God starting to woo me in. So, I began going to church with my parents. I started to have a new mentality, and God started changing me little by little. But, while the Holy Spirit was reaching out, Satan was trying to intercept His efforts.

It seemed like the more I tried, the worse things got. Ever been there? The more I tried to study the Bible, the more I kept on drinking alcohol. The more I went to church, the more I kept on cursing. I was getting overwhelmed with all sorts of trials and tribulations. I even got fired from my job!

I felt hopeless! I felt like the biggest loser at 428 pounds, but without Jillian or Bob to help me!!

I'm not even sure why now, but Moms and I were in the middle of a heated argument and I pushed her. I pushed her by the face so hard it almost sounded like I had smacked her. And if that was not enough, I dragged her like a caveman and locked her in the bathroom. When my little sister called the cops, I fled the scene. But, before I left the house, I pulled down my pants and mooned my own mother. That's how far gone I was.

Satan wasn't going to stop until I was six feet underground. So, he whispered in my ear, "Kill yourself!" That's exactly how the devil operates. He knows he's not allowed to kill you, so he'll try to make you do it.

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Convinced this was the only way, I had everything in place: the gun and the bullets. It was late into the night and everyone was asleep. I felt hopeless and I hated myself. But then, Jesus . . . I could write a book on just those three words *But then, Jesus*.

If you read *Changed* and *4GVN*, you know what happened next. (If you haven't, check it out! Oops. I guess that was another cheap plug.)

In case you're wondering, I did not kill myself that night. For I would have been the first ghost that got published, as I'm writing in *Changed Too*, the book you're holding in your hands, several years after. And the question remains, *Why? Why didn't I kill myself on that night?* I can think of many reasons why not based on God's love for you and me, but let me just tell you one.

I didn't kill myself because of you. Because someone needed to remind YOU how precious you are to God. No matter what you've done or how far you've gone. To remind you Jesus loves you, because I know how hard it is to believe it sometimes. I still can't believe it sometimes either!

But, He does. He reached His arm and scooped me out of the projects—alive! And now I am an international evangelist! The other day I was preaching in Alaska. And a year ago, I was in Slovakia. Me! A ghetto kid in Slovakia! Sometimes it feels like I'm dreaming. Whether I'm a good preacher or not is totally irrelevant. The point God is trying to make through me is that I am the sermon. I am a walking sermon.

Make no mistake; I was not supposed to be alive. The fact that I'm alive speaks for itself. It speaks highly of a God that forgives, a God full of mercy, a God that chooses grace instead of revenge and grants us undeserved grace always. A God so awesome that gave His only Son for you and me. Yup! And you know what? God loves you unconditionally. God has a plan for your life as well.

“Just think, you're here not by chance, but by God's choosing. His hand formed you and made you the person you are. He com-

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pare you to no one else—you are one of a kind. You lack nothing that His grace can't give you. He has allowed you to be here at this time in history to fulfill His special purpose for this generation.”<sup>7</sup>

The other day, I was preaching at a church while my mama was sitting in the congregation. Even before the appeal song started, I noticed Moms crying. After the sermon, I asked her why she was crying, and she said, “I just can't believe you are the same person. I praise the Lord because He has changed you.” She also looks at me different these days. It's a look of relief mixed with happiness, love, and forgiveness.

Pinkie promise for now on; next time I eat a slice of pizza, I'm not going to remember the foolish thing I once did back in the days. Nope. Instead, I'll just remind myself of how awesome our God is to save and change a wretch like me. And, just for that, I think I'm a eat me four more slices of pizza! (Wink, wink.)

Let me end this story by saying something that might sound like cheap plug number three. But it really isn't. It's more like a challenge. I pray to God and hope that after reading this book you just might end up being CHANGED TOO! “Someone who errs can, if he wishes, find restoration.”<sup>8</sup>

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1. Luke 22:59–61.

2. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 1940), 713.

3. See Luke 22:62.

4. 1 Chronicles 4:9.

5. Willy Ramos, *4GVN* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press® Pub. Assn., 2010), 113.

6. Traditional Puerto Rican dish.

7. Roy Lessin, “Just Think,” *Meet Me in the Meadow (blog)*, February 26, 2010, <http://roy.dayspring.com/2010/02/just-think.html>.

8. Lewis R. Walton, *The Lucifer Diary* (n.p.: Aralon Press, 1997), 21.

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