



# A Home for Robby

Abandoned at three years old, a young boy was saved by the kindness of Covenanters. | BOB SMIETANA

One of Rob Mitchell's earliest memories takes place in 1958. He is three years old and his father has walked out on his family. His mother takes him on a train ride from their apartment in Chicago to the Covenant Children's Home in Princeton, Illinois. After spending the night, the two eat breakfast in the main dining room. Then they go upstairs to another room, where a young boy is playing with blocks while a woman in a long dress watches.

"Why don't you go over there and play?" the woman asks Mitchell, pointing to the blocks. When he hesitates, his mother grabs him by the arm and hauls him over to the play area, then drops him on the ground. He reaches for a toy, then turns to look for his mother.

She is gone.

The woman in the long dress tells Mitchell that his mother is sick and needs to be in the hospital. "She'll come back to see you again when she gets better," the woman says. When he begins to cry, she tells him to stop, and spans him until he does.

The next morning, Mitchell wakes in a strange room, in a strange place, in a wet bed. The other boys begin to tease him as a "pee-pee baby." It is a scene worthy of *Oliver Twist*.

But instead of ending up in a Dickensian orphanage, Mitchell landed in

the care of the Covenant Children's Home, and especially the care of a housemother named Nola. Sustained by her love and the consistent day-to-day care of other Children's Home staff, the prayers of his grandmother Gigi, a relentless work ethic, and more than a little bit of grace, Mitchell found a way out of his family's nightmare—a story he recounts in his recently published memoir, *Castaway Kid*, and in a recent interview with the *Companion*.

## Rescuing Robby

Not long after Mitchell, who was then known as "Robby," arrived in Princeton, Nola became housemother for the "Little Boys," including Mitchell. At three, he was one of the youngest children ever to live at the home. While the other boys went off to a nearby elementary school, he spent his early days with Nola, helping her deliver dirty clothes to the "Laundry Ladies," a group of volunteers from the Covenant church in Princeton, and soaking in her attention.

Every night she gathered the boys around her for a Bible story, then sent each of them to bed with a prayer and a kiss on the head. One night, unable to sleep, Mitchell walked down the hall to the bathroom and overheard Nola praying. When he asked her why, Nola said, "I pray that God helps me find

something in each of you to love," then carried him back to bed.

The other constant in Mitchell's life was Gigi, his maternal grandmother. In her sixties and living alone on a fixed income, she didn't have the wherewithal to raise Mitchell. But she visited him, took him home for short visits, sent letters, and prayed for him without ceasing. "She didn't begin to see the fruits of her consistent, persistent prayers for seventeen years," Mitchell says.

When he was five, Mitchell's refuge at the home was disturbed by the arrival of his mother. She was not well and was showing signs of the psychological problems that would haunt her the rest of her life. Agitated and angry, she took Mitchell off campus for a few hours, then returned later to berate the staff before disappearing, leaving him scared and bewildered.

The most frightening moment of his childhood came three years later, when Mitchell was eight. His mother showed up late one January night and snatched him out of the home. Despite the dangerously cold weather, they spent the night sleeping on benches at the unheated train station—they had missed the last train back to Chicago.

His mother had come into some money; her father and sister had been killed when a train hit their car, and she got a \$10,000 insurance settlement.

## One of the enormous struggles—and the staff worked and worked with us on this—was to get us to realize that we weren't castaways.

Mitchell's mother blew through the money within weeks. At first, she and Mitchell holed up at Chicago's Palmer House hotel, ordering room service and spending the days wandering downtown. Once the money was gone, they retreated to his mother's one-room apartment, where she spent much of the time drunk. Almost every day she would call her mother, Gigi, and taunt her—promising to let Gigi see Robby, and then never following through.

One night Mitchell asked her, "When will Daddy be well enough to work and take care of us?" His mother exploded in rage. Until that time, Mitchell didn't know what had happened to his father. His mother told him the awful truth: not long after leaving them, he had put a gun to his head. The failed suicide left Mitchell's father permanently brain damaged and in need of constant care in a mental hospital.

"That's why he's never called or written us, Robby," she told Mitchell. "He can't. The only way we'll ever be a family again is in heaven."

Her answer frightened Mitchell, as he recounts in *Castaway Kid*. "I wondered whether she planned to kill us so we could all go to heaven and be together."

Eventually, Gigi tracked them down. She told police where her daughter's apartment was, and one night they rescued him, taking his mother away in handcuffs.

### A grandmother's prayers

By the time he returned to Princeton, Mitchell knew he could never go home. He felt somehow at fault. "One of the enormous struggles—and the staff worked and worked with us on this—was to get us to realize that we weren't castaways. We were not abandoned because as a three-year-old we were bad kids. But it's so hard for a child to internalize that."

Mitchell says that kids at the Children's Home also learned another lesson. "Love is a four-letter word spelled T-I-M-E." Mitchell says his childhood was filled with people who gave of their

time to show him love—what he calls "theology with shoe leather."

Besides the Laundry Ladies, there were other volunteers who invested time with the kids, taking them on outings and caring for their most basic needs. As he grew, Mitchell moved on to the "Big Boys" group, with a new houseparent. First there was Jim, who taught Mitchell how to use a Ham radio. "Swaney," who worked weekends, took the boys canoeing and camping in Minnesota's Boundary Waters and hung around with them at the pool. Mitchell noticed something else about Swaney. His wife had cancer, and when he wasn't with them, he was caring for her at home.



Happier days for the Mitchell family: Robby with his parents

Mitchell says that the staff never failed in their belief that the boys mattered—that they were children of God, not society's castaways.

"They weren't preaching, they weren't street corner evangelists," he says. "They were showing up and doing what they could do for kids who would never know what they'd done, much less say thank you."

All those acts of caring made it possible for Mitchell to believe that perhaps God might be real. While the Children's Home staff took Mitchell and the other kids to church and taught them Bible stories, that wasn't enough, he says. He and the other kids weren't able to hear the gospel until they'd seen

it lived out. It would take more than a dozen years of shoe-leather love before Mitchell came to believe.

### A way out

Along with her faithful prayers and visits, Gigi did one other thing for Mitchell. She protected Mitchell from heartache where she could. That included shielding him from the truth about his father's family. The Mitchells were a wealthy Atlanta family who could have easily raised him. But his paternal grandmother considered Mitchell "a social embarrassment" and preferred that he stay out of sight at the home. A few times his Atlanta relatives, including his uncle Arnold,

hinted that he could come live with them. But his grandmother Mitchell overruled them.

"What I came to understand—uncomfortably and I would say distastefully—was that it had nothing to do with me," Mitchell says. "She was simply so self-absorbed that she didn't care. Apathy is its own abuse."

His father's family did offer one source of support, however. Because of their connections, he was eligible for a scholarship at Guilford College in Greensboro, North Carolina. If he could keep his grades up, and scrape up enough money to pay for room and

Bob Smietana is features editor of the *Companion*.

board, books and expenses, the scholarship would cover his tuition.

Knowing that he would have no other means of support when he left, Mitchell went to work. The first step was landing a job at the local lumberyard when he was twelve years old.

From there, he took on any work he could find. "I mowed yards, I bailed hay, I shoveled snow—I prayed for snow," he says. "There were times I went to school covered in snow because I didn't have time to go back to the home and change clothes. I washed cars—I did whatever I could to make money."

By the time he was sixteen, Mitchell had \$3,000 in the bank (about the price of a new Ford Mustang). Still, he worried that it would not be enough.

Upset that his money was earning less than 1 percent in interest at the bank, he started complaining to Gigi. "Why don't you put it in the stock market?" she asked. She introduced Mitchell to a neighbor who knew something about stocks. Through the neighbor, Mitchell met his first stockbroker. When Mitchell asked him what stocks to buy, the broker told him, "Buy at least two stocks whose products you like."

"Being a sixteen-year-old, red-blooded heathen American boy, I bought two Illinois companies whose products I liked—McDonalds and



**Rob and Susan Mitchell and their children, Alicia and Luke**

Playboy," he says.

His stocks did well, yet despite his financial success, something was missing in Mitchell's life. He was angry, got into fights with townies, and started drinking and smoking marijuana.

Then, it seems, God intervened in his life. Because he was a lifeguard, Mitchell was invited to work for the summer on the waterfront at Covenant Harbor Bible Camp in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. He saw it as a chance to get away from the home and chase girls. Instead, the girls talked to him about Jesus. By the end of the summer, he was willing to at least listen.

When he got back to the home, he began reading the Gospels, or what Mitchell calls the "Jesus books." Though he'd heard a lot of talk about God and Jesus for years at the local Covenant church, where the kids from the Children's Home worshiped, none

of it had sunk in.

"I know we had a couple of excellent pastors at the Princeton Covenant Church—but kids like us, who were so full of anger and bitterness, we could not hear it," he says. "How can you be expected to hear when the noise inside is too loud?"

But some of that noise inside Mitchell had begun to subside. When he picked up the Bible, he found Jesus was different than he expected. He discovered that Jesus got angry and hungry and thirsty. His feet were dirty. And he knew the pain of being betrayed by people he trusted. "That I understood," Mitchell says.

One night, after reading the Gospels, Mitchell started praying: "Jesus, if you are real, come into my nightmare."

The faith that began in that Children's Home room blossomed a few years later when Mitchell decided to take a break from college for a year. One of his contacts from the home helped Mitchell get a place as a Covenant short-term missionary in Congo. He took most of his savings and used them for his missionary support expenses.

Being in Congo gave Mitchell a chance to forge a new identity. He was no longer "Robby," the abandoned boy from the Children's Home. Instead, he became Rob, the Gemena gofer. He got

## After 90 Years, Children's Home Property Still Provides Vital Ministry

In 1917, Covenanters in the Central Conference began experiencing a kind of revival. Sunday-school attendance was booming. Congregations had new vitality as a result of moving from Swedish to English and from celebrating the 400th anniversary of Luther's ninety-five theses. This prompted the Sunday School Association of the Central Conference, especially a lay leader named Lars Gelin, to look for a project that would channel that new energy into serving others in Christ's name.

In 1919, the association voted to open a home for orphans or children whose parents were unable to care for them. Pastor Gust Nelson led a fund-

raising drive to purchase and renovate a house at 572 Elm Place in Princeton Illinois. The Children's Home was dedicated in November 1921, with Nelson as superintendent. When he died in 1929, his wife took over leadership. Over the next eight decades the Children's Home cared for more than 1,700 children.

By the 1980s, the home had become a residential treatment center for abused and neglected children and was renamed the Covenant Children's Home and Family Services. At its peak in the 1990s, the home had 200 employees and a \$5 million annual budget.

When state funds for residential care were cut, the home was no longer financially viable, and on February 19,

2000, its board voted to close down the residential program, and on June 30 of that year, the last child moved out of the Children's Home.

Since that time, the Children's Home campus continues to be used for ministry, in partnership with local not-for-profit groups. Those groups include Freedom House, which serves victims of domestic abuse; the Bureau County Health and Wellness Clinic; Young Life, whose weekly meetings draw as many as 100 students; and Easter Seals, which runs a preschool program on campus. The youth group from the Covenant church in Princeton also uses the campus on occasion, as does a local home school association. □

that nickname from the missionaries at the Covenant's station in Gemena because of his resourcefulness in finding whatever the missionaries needed.

"In Congo, nobody defined me but me," Mitchell says. "I had a chance to fail—and I had the chance to accomplish things on my own terms."

That new identity, forged by faith, allowed Mitchell to let go of the pain and hurt his parents had caused. He could forgive them—knowing that if he didn't, then they would continue to have power over his life.

The hardest person to forgive was his mother. She died when he was in his twenties, not long after he graduated from college. She was living in a shelter at the time, and was buried in a pauper's grave. Despite years of treatment, she never found peace from the demons that haunted her life.

"I eventually got to the place where I could hurt for my mother's emotional and psychological problems" he says. "I could hurt for her, and although I have forgiven her, there were so many

wounds that I can't understand why she did the things she did. I can be both sympathetic but not accepting. She was too complicated to put in a box."

### **Finding a home**

His mother died around the time Mitchell had met a young woman named Susan David at a Bible study. The closer they got, the more he worried. Would she push him away when she found out about his childhood? Could he risk loving her—what if something went wrong?

"One my great fears is that I was going to marry someone who was going to turn out like my mother," he says, "so God smacked me upside the head. I realized Susan was taking just as much a leap of faith as I was."

Mitchell's memoir, published this past May, ends not long after he and Susan got married. In the years since, they've had two children and Mitchell has become a successful financial consultant. But he has never forgotten the Children's Home, and the people who

watched over him as a child.

When his business prospered, Mitchell gave back to the home until it closed in 2000. During a visit in 1994, he got access to his records, and saw his childhood from a different perspective. At times, he could hardly believe what he read. But he came away grateful for all that Covenanters had done to rescue him from a nightmare.

"I was once one of the least of God's people, a castaway kid," he says. "But Covenanters started the Children's Home, women from the Princeton Covenant Church gave unselfishly, Covenant Harbor Bible Camp gave me opportunities that eventually started me on the road to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and Covenant World Mission gave me a chance to learn that a relationship with God is not limited by race, language, culture, or upbringing. I will never know, on this side of eternity, who all to thank for the giving of their time, prayers, or financial gifts, but I do sincerely want to say, on behalf of kids like I once was, thank you." □