



URBAN CURRENT

Love in any language

I'll never forget when Lydia got mugged. "He hit me in the head and grabbed my purse," she said. In the language of Lydia, "head" has two syllables. I could have pounded those thugs to a pulp for assaulting such a sweet lady.

Lydia was a hillbilly (this is what dhese dhem dhose Chicagoans call people who aren't from here). No, seriously! Hillbilly with a capital *H*. I mean Hillbilly smothered with gravy and grits on the side. From the hills of West Virginia, she never claimed it was almost heaven. I don't think she finished grade school, but she sure was "bwernd-agn" and she could play a mean gee-tar. Hard times marked her face. But you know what? The love of Jesus had her smiling more often than not. Before Jesus, her live-in boyfriend abused her girls. Her only son was troubled. She worked in a factory. Her working life ended when some person with a forklift knocked her in the head. It severely affected her balance. Even after she recovered from the blow, she couldn't work. The company told her there was nothing they could do. The lying, thieving cheats knew she was just a poor single mother and they didn't have to cough up anything.

What a servant she was. For many years our afternoon Sunday school crew would wrap up ministry at about 4:00 in the afternoon and then go to Lydia's house. She fed the crew of 10 people every Sunday. Pork chops, greens, ham, home-made biscuits, gravy. Mmm mm mm, I can taste it now.

She applied to live in Logan Vista. Logan Vista was a 9-story building that a non-for-profit called Hispanic Housing had bought and renovated. It was a block north of our church next to the Logan Square subway station. I said "Lydia, you're not going to get in there. They're filling it with Puerto Rican grandmothers." "I'm a

trustin' Jesus. I need a place," she responded. I turned around twice, and don't you know she was announcing she got in Logan Vista. I know, what with federal funds and all they had to have ethnic quotas to fill. Somehow Lydia became the filler of all quotas non-Hispanic. It was nine floors of Puerto Rican grandmothers with a few grandfathers thrown in. There wasn't another black or white person in the whole building. If they spoke any English at all it was *poquito*. Lydia, who loved to talk to everybody, found she couldn't talk to anybody. She smiled a lot.

The great Chicago heat wave of July 1995 caused power outages across the city. One knocked the electricity out at Logan Vista. No lights, no power to pump the water to upper floors, no elevator. Darkness, silence, oppressive heat. Lydia went apartment to apartment, floor by floor with knocks, gestures, and smiles, checking on the elderly residents' well-being. She was an instant hero. Everybody knew Lydia as the lady who checked on everybody in the dark swelter of the blackout. She still couldn't talk to anybody.

Every time I turned around Lydia was bugging me, "We've got to get a Spanish speaker over to Logan Vista to start a Bible study." "Yes, Lydia, yes," I would say. One day Lydia announced to me she had started a prayer meeting. "A prayer meeting," I exclaimed, "how are you doing that?" She said she started leaving the door open while cooking. The scents wafted up and down the hallways. Residents would follow their noses, find the open door, stick their heads in to be met by a cheery, Jesus-powered hillbilly woman. She would offer samples and invite people to come back for dinner, pointing to her clock. While doing this, she got the idea of starting a prayer meeting. With gestures she began to gather a group of Puerto Rican grandmothers to pray on Friday nights. This

went on for weeks. I never had the heart to tell her that the repeated mention of "Maria, Maria" probably meant that they were not praying with one accord. Turns out, love is its own language. Kindness, service, and some down-home cookin' can forge deep bonds. With the prayer meeting going, Lydia became more and more insistent that I get a Spanish speaker to start a Bible Study. She was now having 10 women every Friday night in her small apartment.

I finally found someone available on a Friday night. The first night the Spanish-speaking leader held a Bible study, five or six of these women trusted Christ! Talk about picking the fruit someone else has planted and nurtured! Talk about riding over a bridge someone else built!

The thing is, Lydia couldn't have spelled *cross-cultural communication* if her life depended on it. She certainly never went to a seminar or read a book on the subject. She was full of Jesus and His love. Oh, the power of the simple things.

Lydia's in heaven now, along with some of those Puerto Rican grandmothers and a whole lot of other people she helped win to Jesus. She's my heroine. Without trying, she taught me love is the ultimate bridge over all barriers and service is the key to people's hearts.

by Charles Lyons, Pastor
Armitage Baptist Church,
Chicago, Illinois
charles.lyons@armitagechurch.org

