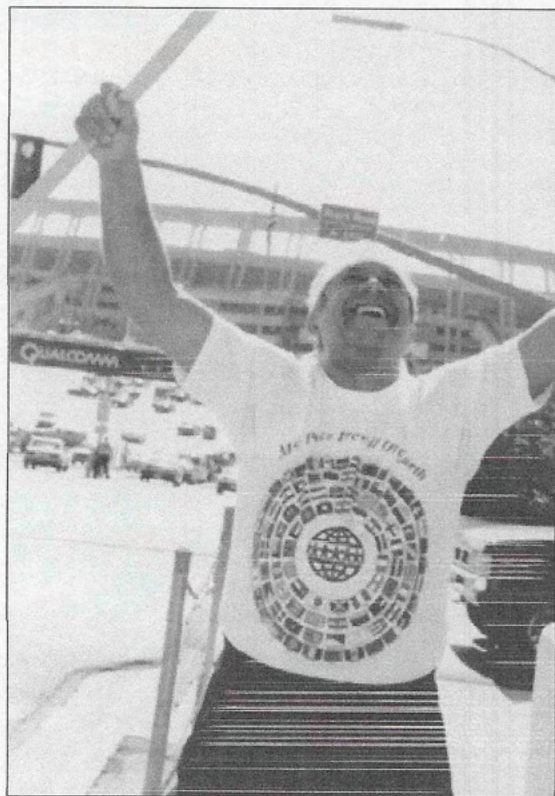




February 22, 2002

## One Step at a Time: San Diegan Walks World for Children

By Yvette tenBerge



It is the stuff of which Hollywood films are made - a story told and retold in the pages of religious texts throughout the world. A lone man embarks upon a journey. As he walks, he speaks with God. As he walks, he passes on a message of peace and touches the faces and hearts of men, women and children.

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*Garcia walked from Tijuana to San Diego. Then Mayor Susan Golding, proclaimed January 25, 1998 "Danny Garcia Day."*

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It seems that modern day America has found its messenger in Danny Garcia, 56, a San Diegan and former United States Marine who has walked more than 29,000 kilometers over the past five years promoting peace and raising awareness of children's rights.

"When I first started walking, I think I was walking for my own healing and salvation. The only person I knew who could give me this love was Jesus," says Mr. Garcia, who describes himself as "a dead person who needed life" after going through a painful divorce in 1996. "I started walking, and the love that I experienced from [Jesus] through other people was a gift. Not only did it heal me, but it continued through me, and I was able to

touch others."

Mr. Garcia's first walk was conducted in three segments and totaled over 3,500 miles. He walked from San Francisco, California to Tijuana, Mexico, from Alexandria Virginia to Oklahoma City and from Miami, Florida to New York City.

"I was at the lowest point of my life. One day I got up, and I knew it was time to go," says Mr. Garcia, who dedicated his first walk from San Francisco to Tijuana to the U.S. Marine's Toys for Tots program. "The first day, I got hit by a lot of rain, and after walking for 11 hours, I realized that I only had \$41 in my pocket."

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He laughs softly and his warm eyes sparkle as he recalls approaching the manager of the Half Moon Inn. "I told him what I was doing and asked him to call a friend of mine who would charge the room to his credit card. The man looked at me and told me that he couldn't charge a person who was doing what I was doing," says Mr. Garcia, stating that the man provided him with the best room in the hotel. "This has happened everyday for the past five years of my life."

Mr. Garcia is a Cuban-American who grew up in New York City's Spanish Harlem. His father was José Garcia, a musician famous for his congo and bongo drum playing. Since his parents often traveled, Mr. Garcia and his sister were raised by other relatives. By 1962, Mr. Garcia had dropped out of high school to join the Marine Corps. In 1974, Sergeant Garcia was transferred to North Island, here in San Diego.

A July 1974 article printed in *The North Islander* details a party that the then 29-year-old Sgt. Garcia threw for "Advocates for Youth," an organization that dealt with underprivileged children. It states that it was the only party many of the children present had ever attended and mentions that, within four months of his arrival, Sgt. Garcia had already connected with every community organization in San Diego.

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*Rosary Sisters School, Agaba, Jordan.*

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During this time Sgt. Garcia instructed a one-week human relations course given by the Marine Corps. The article goes on to state that, "Garcia doesn't teach human relations in a manner that you would normally expect... Garcia transforms a Marine who may or may not really care about human relations" into a Marine who "wish[es] classes could be extended."

According to the article, Sgt. Garcia accomplished this not by teaching from any text, but by dispersing his students into the community to interact with others. He ordered men into hospitals to see "life beginning or ending," instructed them to work with disabled children and even "arranged to put men in the Tijuana jail for two to three days."

Today, Mr. Garcia speaks proudly of his time as an instructor and explains that his job was to "eliminate the myths and deal with reality." Although he ended his career with the Marine Corps in 1975 and followed this up with a number of law enforcement positions, Mr. Garcia broke away in 1978 because he did not feel "comfortable" with the way many inmates were treated.

Instead of continuing along this career path, he chose to take a very different road. From 1978 to the present, Mr. Garcia has traveled throughout the world and presented over 400 world leaders with symbols of peace on behalf of children. Among those he has met are the Pope John Paul II, England's Princess Anne, Prime Minister Shamir of Israel, the President of the Olympic Committee in Seoul, Korea, Mother Teresa, Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter.





"The Child" by Mario Torero

When asked what initially inspired him to walk for children, Mr. Garcia folds his hands as if in prayer. "First, they are the future of the world. Second, I really thought that they needed help," says Mr. Garcia, himself the father of six children. "Nobody was listening, and nobody was standing there with them."

Lorella Losa, 70, is a health counselor who has lived in San Diego County for the past 30 years. She has known Mr. Garcia since the early 1980s and confirms that his love for children and for others has always run deep. "There is a great deal of power that goes around this man. People may not always understand where he is coming from, but they know somehow that he is different and they respect him. He saw the raw side of life from the time that he was little," says Ms. Losa, who describes Mr. Garcia as a "very unique, special and spiritual person." "He realized that it was a dangerous thing for a child to be born into this world, and he just decided he would speak out for their safety."

WHY CHILDREN

In 1998, Mr. Garcia continued his trek, this time pounding the roads of Europe, Asia, South America, Africa and Australia. He attended a peace summit in New York, and walked from Harlem to the United Nations accompanied by children from 185 countries. Then Mayor of San Diego, Susan Golding, proclaimed January 25, 1998 to be "Danny Garcia Day".

As for the country that most affected him, Mr. Garcia states that every trip is similar in one important way. "Every trip was different, yet every trip was the same because God was with me. There have been instances like my walk in Iraq where I had thousands of people coming towards me. I didn't know whether they were going to kill me or love me. They ended up singing to me and walked with me to Bagdad," says Mr. Garcia, describing an event that occurred during his latest trip to the Middle East. He then recalls an Aborigine in Australia who walked with him. "This man said, 'All my life I have been filled with anger because of the way white people treated me. You showed me how to forgive,' and he cried when I left."

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Mario Torero, 54, is a local Chicano activist and muralist. He met Mr. Garcia, whom he calls "Tito," in the late 1970s. In honor of the Year of the Child in 1979, Mr. Torero painted a four-foot-by-four-foot portrait of a child cradled in a large, outstretched hand. Struck by the painting's message, Mr. Garcia strove to get the work, titled "The Child," into the United Nations Building in New York City. Mr. Garcia spent the next 20 years presenting copies of the painting to leaders around the world. The original now hangs in the Vatican in Rome.

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Mr. Torero recalls the intensity with which Mr. Garcia promoted "The Child" free of charge. "When I go to another country I ask for the 'crazy artist' because, when people come to this country and ask for that, they get me. I look for that energy in others. That's what I consider Tito. He's not crazy, but he's that committed. People



see us going all the way with something when most people give up," says Mr. Torero. "We continue until people think that we are mad, and that's what I saw in Tito taking this image of the child around the world."

Mr. Garcia shakes his head at the mention of words like "messiah" and "savior." "People have used words like this to describe me, but I am just the messenger. I am one of the many people who work for Jesus Christ Western Union. I'm not just walking for little kids, because in God's eyes we are all children," says Mr. Garcia. "Whether you are big, small, black or white, regardless of what language you speak or which country you live in I walk for you."

*At 12 noon on Saturday, February 23, Mr. Garcia will walk from the United Nations Association Building in Balboa Park to Absolutely DanceSport Center at 2400 Kettner Blvd., Suite 101. A concert to raise money for his next trip from San Diego, California to Buenos Aires, Argentina will follow the walk. For more information call: 619-531-1700.*

*Feb 23, 2002.*



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