

# Team Memories at the Home for Orphaned Children in Liberia - February 2009



 Alongside International



## Journey & Welcome

Dave and I separately and together knew we had to return to the visit the kids before one year had passed. God brought together the perfect team to come with us, Jeff and Jenn Richards and George Shea. We were excited to share this unique home with them. After our long journey from Canada we spent our first night in a hotel in Monrovia. The next day Jeff, George and I went grocery shopping with Martha Klibo, and Dave, Jenn and Dr. Edwin, a Liberian doctor who would work with us, went shopping for meds with John. Finally stocked up, we got on the road. The dirt road into the jungle seemed never ending; each hill seemed the hill before the bridge, then home. Finally the mission came into view! What a welcome!!



## Team

We are grateful for the team God put together. Jenn is a paramedic, and she never ran out of energy and enthusiasm as she spent time in the clinic doing triage, wound care, running the pharmacy and assisting the doctor. She was wonderful with the kids, teaching Bible verses through song, new songs with actions, always ready to entertain. Jeff, who is a personal support worker patiently, administered the meds through long hours in the pharmacy. He shared his love around freely with humour and compassion. George is a farm worker who has a special way with kids. He spent long days assisting in the clinic with the crowds, and entertaining the dozens of kids who came. He was always surrounded by the home kids, and he willingly got involved in all the other projects.



## Food and Accommodation

This year we had the unique experience of sharing Pastor Benda and Mother Alice's home with them. Last year the took up all the rooms, and Bishop Klibo's sister came out to for us. I had little opportunity to get to know Mother Alice. This year she took on job of cooking for us. The home full of children all the time, in and out, always in the kitchen, chickens nesting on the living room couch, guinea hens, dogs passing through and pigeons flying in the open rafters. Alice kept track of everything from the back porch as she yelled, directed and scolded. We worked out the details of our meals together. I showed Alice how to make pancakes and scrambled eggs. She just shook her head as I cut up onions on a cutting board; they cut everything in the palm of their hands. She asked frequently if her cooking was OK for us and was very pleased when I wanted to watch and see how she made her delicious sauces.



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Every day she made a variety from potato leaves, squash, cabbage and beans for our one lone very skinny chicken. The country side was scoured a few times a week for chickens. Our other meal I invented from our supply of cans and packages. Alice teaches household and cooking skills to the girls. They take their turns sweeping and washing the floors, cleaning the bathrooms and helping prepare and cook the food, cleaning the pots and minding the babies.



### **Uniforms and Clothing**

In January of this year the president of Liberia, President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf dedicated a small government building in Gbarpolu County. This building is just down the road from the Love Family Home. The school children in surrounding villages were invited to this special event, but the community leaders did not invite the children at of the Love Family Home. Why? Because they don't have school uniforms, Pastor Benda told me that no other school in the area has a choir; they have both a junior and senior choir. When they are invited out to perform he declines invitations because the children won't be dressed properly. Their clothing is in such poor condition and they only have plastic flip flops for their feet, no proper shoes.

### **Memories**

Last year I noticed that the older girls pass their time redoing each other's hair in a wide variety of braided do's. I thought their nimble fingers and creativity could be put to good use making friendship bracelets from embroidery floss. When I showed Eve and the girls the bracelets they were eager to begin. Eve is one of the teachers, now 22 years old, has grown up in the home, was sent to high school, and has returned to teach. Our first lessons in the living room of the pastor's home we called the unknotting class! The floss was frayed, tangled and damp with sweat, but they were keen to continue the next day. Patience was the first lesson. It was a special time to get to know these teenagers. They were eager to pass the bracelets on to their friends. Next time the younger girls.

One of the first things I noticed about the girls was that they were all wearing toques. It was very hot, but it is a fashion statement to them. A plan to teach them how to crochet toques in their school colours next visit began to take root.

On Sunday morning the iron with the rooster on top, filled with hot coals, passes back and forth between the dorms and the house as everyone prepares to look their best for church.

Jeff had the idea to make a telephone with two cans and a string. A great hit with the kids. Simple things that we wouldn't think of doing here today brought a lot of joy to them.

A special treat usually reserved for Christmas is a small bag of popcorn with a wrapped candy on top for each child. We were able to provide this luxury a couple of evenings. A number of the older girls had the job for the afternoon of popping corn on a hititachi, and then filling bags. Lots of snacking, giggling and visits from everyone as the delicious smell drifted from the back porch.

I brought a variety of pictures to colour and lots of new crayons. I included "connect the dots" by following the number sequence. They had never seen it before. No matter the age they take their time and great pride in the finished picture. Dave had mistakenly photo copied some of the pictures on Partners letterhead. A good promo for Partners? One afternoon as I sat on the porch writing some notes some of the small kids came to finish their



pictures. They took great pleasure in having a large box to themselves, as they choose their colours and organized the crayons. No crayons missing!

On a hot, lazy Sunday afternoon we all gathered under the shade of the huge mango trees, pastor, teachers, doctor, nurse everyone. My church children's leader had donated a craft, foam crosses, with a variety of stickers to put on them. The adults thought it was wonderful, and made many crosses to give their friends. The kids didn't waste anything, as the pictures show, and covered their faces and arms with the leftovers.

Early in the first week George and I gathered some of the younger kids to do a simple necklace. I had brought some plastic cord, large buttons of figures of people and beads. As they sat in front of us I could feel the tension rise. Pushing, shoving, and yelling began as they pressed closer. It took some time to assure them that we had enough for everyone, and that this activity was to be fun, to relax and enjoy. I was surprised that everyone wanted this simple necklace, and I had enough and more. After this the anxiety faded and we were able to do other activities together in peace and harmony.

I developed many pictures of our visit from last year and pasted them on some core board panels. They always ask to have their picture taken, but never see the results other than on the digital camera screen. Smiles and laughter as they poured over the photos, remembering the Canadians who had visited them for the first time last year, and all the many things we did together.

In the evening we had movie night with everyone jammed into the living room of the pastor's house. With the generator roaring in the background, Dave set up our laptop and small projector, and showed the photos we had taken that day of them, sometimes small videos. The highlight was the video of the story of Jesus as seen through the eyes of a child. We watched that four times. We brought the Planet Earth series. The middle class kids are studying mammals so they got a lot out of that series. Some evening we had a special treat of candy or suckers.

As I sat quietly on a bench the afternoon after we had arrived I was suddenly swarmed by a group of young boys bowing, cheering, full of loud "thank you, thank you, thank you. They had just received one of the new soccer balls!

### **A Special Prayer**

One day John drove us into Monrovia to shop for crafts and more supplies, pump, etc. He mistakenly took a phone with him that Pastor Benda didn't have the number for. The day wore on the shopping and traffic dragged us further and further behind. Upon arriving home after 8:30 we found everyone in the living room having a loud meeting. We tip toed pass into our rooms so we wouldn't disturb them, only to find that this prayer meeting was for us. With no contact all day they were sure we were in trouble, one small girl told me she worried we had plunged off the bridge.

### **Water System**

We were able to complete the water system the team had installed last year. Last year we replaced the old concrete water tank on the existing tower with a new plastic one. The piping was installed under ground from the well, and all the way up to the top of the tower, with taps ready to deliver the water into the buckets. Unfortunately after purchasing 3 pumps, a new, larger generator, our time ran out and we had to leave without the water flowing into the tank.

This year we went to a different hardware and pump store. Our suspicions that last years pumps were rebuilt and rebuilt incorrectly was confirmed, when we tested them there. We are wiser now, and tested the new pump before

leaving the store. What a celebration when we turned on the taps under the water tower and filled a bucket within seconds. The time the girls spent hauling water can now be used reading their new books.

### **Gardens**

One morning I spent time with Eve and the older girls and we went to the girl's farm in the jungle. Under Eve's direction they cleared weeds and planted corn among the very hot peppers they love to add to their sauces. With a small stream nearby they are able to maintain this farm. They boys have a separate farm. On the way to the farm we walked down a narrow path through the jungle. Two small boys full of mischief had covered themselves in leaves, and were delighted when they saw their plan to jump out and scare me had worked!

Eve and one of Pastor Benda's older sons Amos have made a very large garden in another area. I can't imagine the labour, as the jungle is so thick and tangled, but once they cut down the large trees, they burn the rest and the soil is very rich. They had neat beds laid out for pepper, corn, potato leaves, rubber trees, with room for more vegetables in the coming weeks. I told Eve I thought she had a "green thumb". After explaining to her what this meant she said "she just liked to eat", but she was proud of their work.

Last year Dave, one of the team members and the kids had cleared and burned the hill side down to the river. This year the kids couldn't wait to show us Dave's garden planted with cassava. This inspired Dave to continue on the top of the hill. George wondered how Dave's "lets clean up around here a little" had mushroomed. The younger kids were up to the challenge. With machetes and African hoes and fire the thick weeds, tangled brambles and two old cars from the former mission station were soon moved aside. Moving the cars was an event. The big boys were eager to be involved in this. First the termite mounds growing under the cars had to be dug up. Cars were built to last then and flipping them over and over, accompanied by a rousing chant, did little damage. Eunice was quick to cut up the cassava stocks ready for planting, the kids so eager to help plant. A good day's work! Food for the future.

### **Container of Books and New Library**

Great excitement the day the books arrived. Pastor Benda jumped for joy! We had partnered with Christian Salvage Mission, and the container of Christian books, Bible, teaching materials for school, etc. began to come to the mission. After we visited last year Dave shared with CSM the story of their badly damaged school with an empty library. CSM had been praying for a trustworthy connection with Liberia, so a container to Liberia was quickly given priority. As we began to unpack the banana boxes, (that is how they ship the books) to the pastor's great delight there were enough Bibles for everyone, a set of encyclopedias, some math, science teaching books, among the many books.

The boxes weren't hand picked for the mission, but just the right ones had arrived. Extra shelves were quickly built with salvaged materials. With a table and chairs in the middle of the room – a library. What a miracle, as there is not a library in that county or even any amount of books. The next Sunday the older kids sat proudly in church each holding, for the first time a Bible. Lessons on correct handling of books, washing hands, no writing in them, no folding pages was firmly given. Treasures!

### **Witnessing to Villagers**

By 4:00 am every day the villagers had gathered under the trees, on the benches at the back of the house, in line for the clinic. Every day Pastor Benda shared devotions with them. But this morning was special as Bishop Klibo had spent the night. He preached to the crowd, and had an altar call. He appealed to the villagers to help care for the children at the home. He said "these children are orphans, without mothers or fathers, they are your children, children of this county". The junior choir came to perform. A young boy about 12 years old leads the choir and

introduces the songs with a solo. A memory that will be with me forever - as his young voice rose and the kids joined in, singing in harmony praises to the Lord as only African voices can. My heart ached and my eyes filled as I listened to them, and watched the stone faced villagers. The kids are dressed in rags, some barefoot and I know hungry, as they begin their day of school and chores.

### **Medical Clinics**

By 4:00 am everyday we began to hear the voices, and see the flashlights as the villagers coming from all directions arrived early to be first in line for the clinic. Some had walked all night, and some took days to get there. We had a Liberian doctor, Dr. Edwin, and nurse working with us. The nurse, Eunice, is one of the Benda's adopted children. She grew up in the home, has finished her nursing degree and has come back to give much needed medical help in the home and community. Before the rest of us had our breakfast, she had already circumcised a number of babies, an interesting skill Canadian nurses don't learn or practice!

Jennifer, our paramedic and Jeff, a health care worker ran the pharmacy and wound care. They had their hands full as the clinic saw over 100 patients a day. George handled traffic control and did an amazing job of keeping smalls kids happy. Bishop Klibo told us word had reached Monrovia about the free clinic and medication available out in the jungle. Pastor Benda spent the day visiting with everyone.

A total of 823 people were treated and all of the mission children were examined and treated for a variety of ailments including stomach worms, malaria, and ring worms.

### **Wind-up and Celebration**

Our last night together was a special celebration time. A huge bonfire was build to mark the occasion. I purchased a large quantity of elbow macaroni, many cans of tomatoes, pasta sauce, fresh tomatoes, onions and oil. Under Mother Alice's direction everything was cooked to perfection. We sat in a large circle by the water tank and everyone had a very large amount of pasta for the first time. Nothing was wasted, and I noticed leftovers going to the dorms. A bag of popcorn finished the feast. Pee Wee, a young man who grew up in the home and is now studying masonry construction at college returned for a week to see us. He is very a very gifted musician and the junior and senior choirs practiced every night for this special evening.

As the senior choir began to sing a rousing song of praise, Mother Alice couldn't keep to her seat, and as she began to dance the kids joined in, soon we all were dancing with joy to the Lord under a sky so full of stars it takes your breath away. After a favourite game of picking a paper out of a hat with something to do, Pastor Benda and Mother Alice's duet always a high light for the kids, speeches by Pastor Benda and Dave, glow in the dark bracelets from Jeff and Jenn, we finished the evening with a last movie night of a recap of movies and pictures of our time together.

For HIM,

Linda Miclash  
Team Director