

## Helping children thousands of miles away in Africa

Written by Chris Lee

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Traveling thousands of miles overseas to help complete strangers doesn't fall too high on many Americans' to-do lists. But for Mark Whittaker, that very thing was and still is high on his list.

Whittaker spent the summer of 2008 in Zambia, Africa. For nearly four months, he spent time with an orphanage full of kids in Lusaka who were in need of help. The trip was sparked after his brother traveled to the same orphanage, Energy of Hope, the December before.

"It got me thinking so I just decided to go over there and volunteer and help them out," Whittaker said.

Energy of Hope was started in 2007 after Amanda Dye, 23, a college student in Kansas City, Mo. participated in a non-profit trip to Zambia. Upon return, she wanted to do something to help the children of Zambia and began the orphanage. She has plans to expand the orphanage with other buildings and eventually a plot of land to grow food.

Whittaker stayed with Duane and Lori Permenter, missionaries from the United States. Three days a week he traveled the nearly two hours by van to the orphanage where he helped children with schoolwork and entertained them. He said they also went on hikes. One hike in particular he liked was one along the Kafue River, the second largest river in Zambia.

While there, Whittaker also visited Victoria Falls. The fall is nearly a mile wide and he said he went during the prime runoff.

Experiencing a different culture was eye-opening for Whittaker. He said the kids in the orphanage are the lucky ones because they get regular meals and have shelter. Whittaker said there were a lot of kids on the street and some would stand outside or sit in trees outside the orphanage and just stare at it. Most of the 17 kids in the orphanage lost their parents to AIDS.

He also said the children are happy. They don't know or haven't experienced anything better so they are very happy.

"It just goes to show you that you don't need money to be happy," he said. "Those people are

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truly happy and satisfied. In a lot of ways you are jealous of them because time doesn't matter. It made me realize, no matter what, people are people," Whittaker said.

He mentioned the natives were very friendly. "It is one of the poorest countries in Africa but the people are just great," he added. "You always hear how poor people are but when you get over there you can't even imagine it."

Whittaker said groups of children in the street flocked to him every time he was out and about. "You're just like royalty when you're there," he said.

He said a funny thing was the way they like to rub the hair on his arms. Whittaker said they didn't have a lot of hair and it was funny when this happened. "Once they find out you are from America, you are pretty special," he said.

English is the official language so there wasn't a language barrier of any kind for Whittaker. He did have trouble with the accents but overall it wasn't a problem.

As for security, Whittaker said he never felt threatened. He said he would walk alone in the dark sometimes and later found out he probably shouldn't have, but overall he felt safe.

He said he keeps in touch regularly with the orphanage through e-mail. The kids are beginning to use computers and technology.

"I plan on hopefully going back there again," Whittaker said. He doesn't have any plans as of yet and said if he didn't have any family back here he would've stayed there.

Whittaker says if someone is given the opportunity to participate in something like this to take it.

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Whittaker is a 1979 graduate of Holyoke High School and lived in Ft. Collins for nine years prior to traveling to Zambia. He works as a carpenter and owned a carpentry business in Holyoke for about 20 years.