

Holyoke couple devoted to helping children of Uganda

Written by Darci Tomky

□ One Holyoke couple's heart for missions has gone hand in hand perfectly with their heart for Africa. In the last several months, Jeff and Tricia Michael have become involved in a program focused on the children of Kayango, Uganda, including two trips to this African village.

□ "Africa's got my heart big time," said Tricia.

□ Even though Tricia has felt called to Africa since age 9, it wasn't until an opportunity with churches in Grant, Neb. came along did she get to see her dream become a reality.

□ Evangelical Free and Free Mennonite churches in Grant sponsor a care point for children in Uganda through an organization called Children's HopeChest based out of Colorado Springs.

□ The group follows a "community to community" model where the churches here partner with the community in Africa to bring about holistic, sustainable change.

□ Tricia said the village has around 5,000 people including 4,000 children. One hundred of those children in Kayango are sponsored by individuals from Grant.

□ Through the sponsorship, kids still live in a home setting with their parents or guardians, but they can walk to the care point where they receive food and some teaching from disciplers on English and the Bible.

□ One of Jeff and Tricia's goals is to set up sponsorships in Holyoke and Haxtun.

□ They explained the need in Kayango is huge—around 1,000 children are within walking distance of the care point including 200 children in critical condition.

Holyoke couple devoted to helping children of Uganda

Written by Darci Tomky

□ What makes Children's HopeChest different from other organizations is the "personal connection," said Tricia. Sponsors can write letters to their children, but even more important than that, they could even travel to Africa on one of the planned mission trips.

□ The Michaels noted how their trips to Africa provided links for the Kayango and Grant communities. "It's like a family," they said. Jeff and Tricia had a chance to see the two children they have sponsored, and other children were excited to ask about their sponsorship families in America.

Trips provide vision

□ Jeff, Tricia and eight other people from Grant traveled to Kayango in January. During this two-week trip, the group built a kitchen facility with a concrete floor, a water well and a four-stall outhouse. They also held a kids club and a pastors conference while there.

□ It was such a blessing to be able to go down there, said Tricia.

□ Most recently, Jeff and six others went back to Uganda July 16-Aug. 4 for a vision trip of sorts. Their main goal was to see how to better improve the schools in Kayango.

□ The Michaels explained there are around 1.5 million children in the school district. The student to teacher ratio is 800 to nine, and there are 18 kids for every one school book.

□ Jeff's group met with Uganda's head of education. The government is behind them and in support of their vision for education, the only problem is the government can't provide any

Holyoke couple devoted to helping children of Uganda

Written by Darci Tomky

funding.

□ Jeff was able to visit a number of private and public schools as well as orphanages to observe what works for them and what doesn't. It was a bit of an investigation trip to determine what the next step should be for Children's HopeChest and their care points in Uganda.

□ While there, the group also visited a rock quarry, a place the poorest of the poor work for about 50¢ a day. Jeff's team handed out Bibles, beans and cornmeal to 80 families there.

□ "It's hard to see poverty everywhere," said Jeff. "They are happy people, but they have to work so hard every day just to be able to eat."

□ The people of Uganda face much disease, including malaria and AIDS. Tricia said a family might have 10 children, but it's good if even two of them survive to adulthood.

□ "It's something you can't grasp until you are there," she said.

□ The Michaels said they might be planning another trip in January and possibly next summer. It looks like a group from Grant will be going every six months. Jeff and Tricia would love to see a group from Holyoke go as well.

□ They are hoping to organize a meeting in the next couple months to see who would be interested in sponsoring children or going to Africa on one of the mission trips. Holyoke's involvement will not be sponsored by a single church, but will be a community effort.

□ It would be great to get another 100 children in Kayango sponsored, they said.

□ Those interested in more information about Jeff and Tricia's Uganda mission can visit the

Holyoke couple devoted to helping children of Uganda

Written by Darci Tomky

Children's HopeChest website at www.hopechest.org or email Tricia at frogger0319@yahoo.com.