

Forever Changed in Africa

By Rebecca Johnson

Megan Johnson didn't believe her parents four years ago that they were going to begin saving for an international mission trip. It was too far in the future and sounded just a little too surreal. She still didn't believe them this past May when they said the next month they were going to travel to Africa for four weeks to serve. Only when she boarded the plane to the Congo and finally landed in Malawi did Megan realize this trip was for real. Not knowing what to expect, Leon, Wendy, their son Brock and daughter Megan, followed their calling to serve in Malawi, Africa for four weeks for their first mission trip ever, and let God take it from there.

Right away the Johnsons knew they were in a whole different world. The Republic of Malawi is a south-eastern, landlocked African country with a population of just under 14 million. Of those natives, about 80 percent are Christian. Although Malawi has a few large more modern cities, most of the country is underdeveloped and overall a third-world nation. The village the Johnsons stayed in had unpaved roads and little electricity and did their cooking over campfires. Their culture is also incredibly different from our own and upon arrival the Johnsons experienced this immediately.

When the Johnsons arrived at a village, the children swarmed around their van. So much so, that they couldn't even exit the vehicle. Their translator had to ask everyone to step back and allow his passengers to get out. Once the family got out, the crowd swarmed them again. The Malawian culture is very touchy-feely, the family explained. Standing around their van, the crowd of children reached to touch their arms and shake their hands, eager to greet and gawk at their international visitors.

The Johnsons ventured to Malawi after Pastor Gordon Everett introduced them to Jerry and Nancy Senner, who then introduced them to the organization, Children of the Nation's (COTN). COTN's mission, as stated on their website www.cotni.org, is "*to raise children who transform nations*". COTN

does this in many ways and the form in which the Johnsons were called was to start building a new high school.

Leon owns a concrete construction business and his expertise in concrete construction and finishing was vital in the beginning stages of building the high school. Along with beginning the foundation and layout of several school buildings and a dormitory, a perimeter fence was also on his agenda to build. Leon and his son, Brock, spent their four weeks working at the job site building and educating the 60 Malawian men that were hired to work with them.

While the men labored at the job site, Wendy and her daughter, Megan, participated in a wide variety of other activities. The duo did everything from serving in preschools and secondary schools, helping with feeding programs serving meals, and walking through villages playing with children. One of the bigger events was a trip they helped sponsor to take a group of 28 widows to Lake Malawi for the day.

Wendy is greatly fond of her memories of the trip to the lake. She got to take the widows and treat them to a very nice luncheon. Such a nice luncheon that the women couldn't believe they had all the silverware they did, each getting a fork, spoon and a knife. After the meal they played and lounged at the lake, rolling in the sand and running through the waves. The widows loved posing for pictures and a smile never left their faces. Wendy talked about how relaxing and rare it was for the women to have a day to focus on nobody but themselves, to not have any cares and to just soak in this day of freedom.

Another experience the family had involved meeting a twelve-year-old boy, Mandaliza, they had been sponsoring from home, and during their time adding two more children to their international family. One day, Megan was in the village when she met a twelve-year-old girl named Nachisoni. She was living with her grandparents and had 9 younger brothers and sisters. The two girls became attached and Megan made the decision to raise the 32 dollars a month necessary to sponsor Nachisoni. Megan

explained, "I want to sponsor her so I can help give her have the same opportunities I have. I want her to be able to go to the school my dad and brother helped build." Wendy also met and decided to sponsor a child, a 5-year-old girl named Madalo.

One of the biggest moments from the trip is when Megan accepted Christ as her Lord and Savior. The high school student from Lake Stevens had grown up in the church but had never formed a personal relationship with Christ. During a weekly devotional for a middle school group, Megan was asked by one of the leaders to lead the devotional the following week. Shocked and pretty darn nervous about the request, Megan studied for a few days and created a 30 minute devotional about how common a "need-based" relationship with God is and how one's relationship with God actually should be. While praying and reading the Bible before she gave her devotional, Megan read the scriptures and they spoke new life into her, they had new meaning she hadn't experienced before and she gave her life to Christ!

For Leon, God really worked in him on the job site. "I learned a lot about patience in those four weeks", he remembers. While working at the construction sites he had 60 Malawian men working under him, all of which pretty much knew no English. Plus they had limited visitation from interpreters. So he trained them by demonstration and lots of patience. Mess ups and mistakes were common as the men were eager to impress and show they were learning.

Wendy shared how different it was to actually be in a third world nation compared to watching it on TV. She said it broadened her thinking and made her adjust her parameters. She said she wasn't sure what she had to offer when she arrived but soon realized that she did and that really, everyone has something to offer.

Brock's favorite memory from the trip, and a way he saw God working, was the joy the people had though they were "dirt poor", in Brock's words. He was also impressed with how friendly everyone

was, that they were never shy to strike up a conversation. However, what Malawians do in a conversation is something he had to adjust to. "In Malawi you hold hands when you talk to people, including guys. To be honest it made me feel pretty uncomfortable at first, but by the end of the trip I realized it was just people being friendly."

The Johnson family has been forever changed from their mission to Malawi. They experienced a culture and a people that had so little yet were so joyous with their lives; they cherished so much and their compassion was powerful. The family agreed at how humbling their trip was, to see such poverty yet to see so much joy and faith in the Lord. Before leaving, the family of four gave all their clothes away that they came with except what they wore home. "When you're leaving and kids are chasing after you in the van, you know it's a big deal. That you impacted their lives" said Wendy.