



FAMILY LOVE ORPHAN HOME

LIBERIA 2008

 **Alongside International**

Our Journey to the Family Love Orphanage, Liberia, Africa

Hollywood's most creative minds could not put together this amazing survival story, the location, the cast of characters, the history of the mission station, the first hand witness to the devastation of the war, the vision to make a home for kids orphaned by the war and the love that only God inspires. This is a true survivor story, where everyone is voted into God's family.

The Love Family Orphanage

We left urban Monrovia behind and for two hours drove into the rural countryside. We turned off the main highway at a small but busy country town of Tubmanburg and then for another hour we wound deeper into the jungle on a narrow dirt road, wash board, pot holes and cave ins! We passed by wonderful vivid green scenery, villages of mud brick homes, rivers filled with kids swimming and women scrubbing their laundry on the rocks. When we descended a hill and crossed over a small river we spotted the former Zuo Mission.

The kids in the river began running up the path through the trees, and we glimpsed a large open area, many buildings and people streaming from all directions to meet us at the main house. Turning off the road, into the grounds we were greeted by the words "God is Love" written with freshly painted white rocks. Before we knew it we were surrounded by an excited crowd of kids pressing close to give us a warm African welcome.



Picture the Love Family Orphanage Home which is located in the former Zuo Mission Station. This past glory of this abandoned mission station can be seen by the scattered remnants of equipment and buildings that once served the surrounding communities. One can only imagine the sacrifices and challenges from the 1940's until the 1990's conquered by the women who traveled to this remote place.

We see a large cleared area, bound by rubber trees and jungle on three sides, the road on the fourth, and the land gently slopes up from the river to a soccer field at the far end of approximately 6 open acres. Large trees scattered throughout the property bring shade to the bamboo benches beneath them.

Buildings of different eras are spread over the property including the mission house, Bethuelwa, the former school house that is now a part of the outdoor kitchen, the girl's dorm, the boy's dorm, the old wooden house and the school. Remnants of foundations are all that is left of two buildings that were the original boy's dorm, girl's dorm and library. These buildings were destroyed in the war and the auditorium of the school severely damaged by grenades.

One of the largest battles of the war was fought on the school grounds between the rebels and the government forces. At one time during the war, 200 rebels lived on the mission grounds. They used the pages from the Bibles to roll cigarettes when they smoked dope. With the damage the rebels inflicted, along with the weather, the termites and the jungle completely taking over the buildings, it is amazing that there is anything left of the Zuo Mission Station. All of the school desks, library, bathroom fixtures, the contents of the home, the kid's beds, everything was taken or destroyed by the rebels.

Pastor Benda proudly showed us that they had spruced up everything for our arrival with a fresh coat of paint, new screens, curtains and a general clean up.



I am thankful to have the opportunity to see that the once successful mission station that served God is still set apart to honour Him through the rebuilding of children's lives.

This is a brief history of the Zuo Mission as shared by John and Pastor Benda.

In 1932 three African American women Mother Teasly, Mother Coleman and Mother Poole arrived at the village of Zuo. They had to walk from the main highway via trails in the jungle. The village of Zuo was founded by Pastor Benda's grandfather. The villagers were concerned that the women would try to change their culture and traditions, so Pastor Benda's grandfather and father gave them 450 acres of land about one hour's distance from the village. The work to build the Zuo Mission began.

In 1940 three more African American missionaries came, Father Richardson, Mother Hardgrave and Mother Mountain. Mother Teasly and Mother Poole moved on to begin other mission stations in Liberia.

Over the years many people came from the US for different periods of time to help build the mission. Mother Mountain returned to the US for furlough in the 50's. While there she married and she and her husband Mr. McCoy both returned to the mission later that decade.

Father Richardson and Mr. McCoy built the wooden house that is now almost destroyed by termites. Father Richardson died here after a short time.



The McCoy's built the home named "Bethuelwa", in the late 60's. They also adopted a Liberian girl.

Mother Blanche Lewis came in the 1960's. She was instrumental in helping Pastor Benda throughout the years.

When the other ladies returned to the US Mother Lewis, continued to work with the McCoys. She had older children living at the station in the dorms that were eventually destroyed in the war. These kids were not orphans. While living at the mission they attended school and helped out to earn their school fees.

Mother Lewis returned to the US and the McCoy's continued. They no longer had children living at the mission. The kids from the village came and worked on the property in the afternoons and on Saturdays, for their school fees. The building that is now used by the outdoor kitchen was the school.

In 1977 the boy's dorm was constructed.

In 1979 Mr. McCoy died after a fall from the roof of the garage that was located behind the house, and was buried on the property.

In the early 1980's Mrs. McCoy returned to the US. By this time she was blind. Her Liberian daughter and granddaughter stayed in Liberia.

Mother Lewis returned from the US to work at the mission.

In the 1980's groups of African Americans and some people from Bermuda came and built the present school. The kids in the village continued to come to school, but they no longer lived at the mission.

Mother Lewis left when the war began in 1990 and the Zuo Mission was left in Pastor Benda's care.

While dispensing eye glasses we met many men who lived in nearby villages who had attended the Zuo Mission School as children.

Pastor David and Alice Benda

Pastor Benda and his wife Alice are not just the founders of the home; they are the heart of this home. With eight children of their own they continue to respond to God's burden for orphans. We not only witnessed the love that only God can inspire but we experienced it in so many ways. They began Love Family Ministries to share the gospel with the less fortunate: children, the disabled and elderly. Caring for orphaned children quickly became their priority once the war began.



They did so much to make us comfortable, even moved out of their home and gave up their beds. Pastor Benda is 54 years of age and Alice is 44. Their children range from 2 to 24 years. They own nothing. All they receive, they share with the kids. Pastor Benda shared his life's story, the many hardships in his young life when he struggled to go to school, the narrow escapes during the war and the challenges to feed and care for the kids. It was difficult to record all the details, so I will leave those exciting stories for him to recount accurately.

Pastor Benda was born in 1954 in the village of Zuo.

In 1966 he went to kindergarten at the Zuo Mission School.

His father died and his mother was financially unable to keep him in school

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From 1968 to 1970 he began an apprenticeship with a tailor, which he did not like.

In 1970 when he was 16 years old he was able to start school in grade one. With no money he attended school in bare feet. Mother Lewis, one of the missionaries at the Zuo Mission provided him with some clothing.

He came back to the Zuo Mission School to complete grade 6 to grade 9 which he finished in 1976.

A friend loaned him \$20.00 to pay for the school fees at a government high school where he began grade 10.

While attending high school he slept in the open porch of a tailor's home. In exchange for food, he helped in the house, washed all the clothes for the four different families that lived there. The tailor felt sorry that he was sleeping in the porch so he rented a room in another house and Pastor Benda and the tailor's apprentice roomed there. He spent many days at the tailor's home and became close to the family. The tailor eventually put him in charge of the house.

In grade 12 Pastor Benda became very sick with malaria but he was able to complete his year.

He graduated in 1979 and at Mother Lewis request he came to the Zuo Mission to teach junior high.

Pastor Benda married and unfortunately his wife died in 1981. Immediately after her death both sets of parents decided that he should marry his wife's younger sister, Alice. It was after their marriage that Alice learned to read and write.

In 1985 to 1987 Mother Lewis provided support for him to attend Cottontown College for teacher's training. When finished he returned to the mission to teach at the school again.

In 1988 to 1989 she once again provided for him to attend college for additional training in math.

In 1990 he came back to the mission. By then the war had reached the area. Mother Lewis fled the country. Since the Zuo Mission was left in his care, he began to take in the first orphans of the war.

In 1992 when the rebels approached, there was a mass exodus from the area. Pastor Benda and Alice and 11 kids walked on foot through the jungle to the city of Monrovia. Because of the war, for the next 5 years no one was able to go back to the area. During these years Pastor Benda went to Bible School in Monrovia.

When they finally returned in 1997 the jungle had reclaimed the land. The buildings were barely visible and the war, weather and termites, had taken their toll on the buildings. They opened the school and began to take in more orphans.

In 2002 the rebels advanced from the north into the area and the family was forced to flee back to Monrovia again. At that time about 30 people including children and relatives traveled there to safety. They were able to obtain an apartment in the city, but unfortunately there wasn't enough room for everyone and some had to live in a displacement camp.

In 2003 Alice took one of their oldest sons and some of the girls back to check and see if the mission was livable. Pastor Benda decided to return with most of the kids, while a few stayed in Monrovia to finish school.

Pastor Benda talked to the rebel commander and pleaded for help and the freedom to live again at the mission. He was able to get the commander to promise that his men would not abuse the girls or try to conscript the boys.

In 2004 when disarmament was called there were 25 orphans at the home. In 2005 they had increased the number of orphans to 71. They were able to obtain a little more help from NGO's.

This brings us to the present with about 80 kids living at the home.

The Kids

When I look at our hundreds and hundreds of photos, I wish I could remember each child's name. I count it a privilege and responsibility that God would allow me a glimpse into their world. I have seen the things that break the heart of God. The suffering and losses experienced in their short lives are beyond my comprehension. I can only cope with this by thanking God for where they are today. They are safe, especially the girls, from every evil abuse, safe from child labour, safe from starvation and loneliness, to name a few.



Their days are hemmed in by focusing on God. They start with morning devotions and end with evening devotions. They have become brothers and sisters in this large family. Some kids stand out more than others and it was hard not to be drawn to just those few.



A few precious memories; their beautiful smiles, their enthusiasm when they sang, their voices joined together in prayer, their laughter, their friendships and their care for each other. When the boys

realized we were shocked by them eating bugs, they enjoyed watching our reaction as they ate more original snacks, larva to name one.

The boys shared the fascinating secrets of the jungle. Young girls cooked competently on the fire in the open kitchen. The girl's natural graceful



posture as they walked up the path carrying on their heads colourful buckets of water from the river.

Girls' always creating new hair do's. Their enjoyment as they climbed trees to gather nuts, and how generous they were in sharing them. The teenage boys were eager to practice their

reading skills.

Everyone was so willing to help with the construction of the dorm and digging for the water lines. They wouldn't let us carry anything and if we stood to watch something a chair was immediately placed there for you. One exciting event was the soccer match between the big boy's mission team and the Zuo village team. The whole mission family was there to cheer them on. The smaller boys watched in awe and imitated their heroes.



The original kids that the Benda's first took in are now young adults. They are truly devoted to the Benda family. Some are now teachers at the school, and one young man is their choir director. They are all inspirations and role models to the younger kids.

The Christian guidance and love the Benda's are providing with God at the center, is building the future ...hope ... and leaders of Liberia.



Typical Day for the Kids

In the
the
clanging
bell
pitched



their never ending crowing. It is 5:00 am. Devotions are held outside the girl's dorm on benches forming a circle with a lantern as their only light.

Pastor Benda shares one half hour of Bible teaching, half hour of counseling, followed by the sweet sound of the kid's voices singing praises to our Lord along with the soft beat of the African drum and the rhythm of the sasa's beads.



Devotions end with their young voices offering their individual prayers up to heaven as a new day begins.

Light is beginning to filter through the trees, as the big girls start the fires in the outdoor kitchen, haul water from the river, and the big boys check the traps they have set the night before. A quick wash in the river before getting dressed, and then up to the school for 7:30. Only a handful of kids have uniforms, the rest wear their good clothes and shoes. Each young child has an older child who is responsible for helping and guiding them.

At 10:30 they have a break and this is when they eat their first meal of the day. The outdoor kitchen is a busy place with 3 or 4 large pots on the open fires. A large bamboo prep table sits under the shade of a huge breadfruit tree loaded with fruit just beginning to ripen.



Mother Alice (Pastor Benda's wife) is in charge and with the help of two women from the nearby village of Zuo and some of the older girls, she prepares a meal that may consist of wheat, rice, beans, yams,



corn, sauces made of leaves and whatever bush meat or fish the big boys have trapped. Monkey, porcupine, and crocodile, large frogs found in the well were a few of the things I saw added to the pot. A barrel of drinking water with a community cup hangs nearby to quench their thirst. The kids return to school until 1:15.



The afternoon is spent studying, doing chores, playing soccer and games and the girls spend time redoing each others hair. The big girls help with preparation for the evening meal, carry water from the river and do laundry and the dishes in the river. The big boys collect fire wood, set new traps in the forest to catch bush meat and traps in the streams to catch fish. There is also work in the garden at the edge of the jungle. Peppers and corn are just beginning to grow.



There is a large circle of bamboo benches under the shade of two very large mango trees where the kids always played a tag game with much enthusiasm and yelling. Rules were very hard to discern, but the game was a favourite pastime. There was no shortage of snacks, free for the taking. The walnuts, almonds and cashews were in season, and the kids pursued

what hadn't fallen to the ground by climbing the trees or hitting the nuts with a long bamboo pole. The walnuts and almonds took some work, pounding them between two rocks, but it was clearly worth the effort. The kids ate only the fruit of the cashew trees, and large nuts were strewn everywhere.

Occasionally some of the kids tried to roast the cashew nuts, but the fruit was what they really enjoyed. The kids licked their lips in anticipation of next month's treat - mangos. This was the season for a very large bug, about 1" long that come out at night for their short life span.

The next day the kids collected them, pulled off the wings, and ate the bodies. They described them as sweet.



At 5:30 p.m. they ate their last meal of the day, the same ingredients as the first. Unfortunately they only have recourses to feed the kids twice a day.

Twilight begins to fall by 6:30 p.m. and by 7:30 p.m. it is dark. Around the light of a lantern Pastor Benda leads the evening devotions. The kids recite Bible verses they have memorized, sing with enthusiasm, a devotional is shared, more singing and end with their soft voices offering up their prayers. Wednesday and Thursday evening is choir practice lead by a young man nicknamed Pee Wee. He is one of the original 11 kids the Benda's

took in when the war began. He has a passion for music and the kids clearly love him.

The kids begin to head off to bed as night descends, and another busy day ends.

Bishop Jerome and Martha Klibo



Bishop Klibo shared with us a glimpse into his life; his struggles to finish school, to find a place in life while working deep in the jungle, physical injuries and his desire to serve God. He is a soft spoken humble man who God has chosen to lead AICA, Association of Independent Churches of Africa. He met Pastor David Benda when attending a pastor's conferences in

Liberia's capital, Monrovia.

One day he specifically asked him about his work in the jungle. Bishop Klibo shared that his first visit to the Family Love Orphanage moved him to tears. He was convicted to help. Martha, Bishop Klibo's wife seems quiet and shy but her actions tell a story of a woman who lives with purpose. She is step mother to his four children, supports her husband in his ministry, preaches, has taken a tailoring course and now teaches other women to sew so that they can find a way to support themselves and their families. She learned how to dispense eyeglasses from us and is successfully carrying that on. I feel certain that this is just a glimpse into her ministry to others.

Reverend George Davies



Reverend Davies is a senior who is the Chairman of the Board of AICA. He was our guide and protector while we were out in the middle of the jungle. He shared our morning devotions, our meals, prayed with us, laughed with us, and encouraged us with wise words of council and words of praise. Some lines from him will go down in Alongside International memories, like his morning prayer when he thanked the Lord for “the safe night’s journey”. I now have a different appreciation of God’s special care for me, even during my sleep. The chicken and sauce made with okra was the one lunch he didn’t eat. “I don’t eat slippery food” he said! We have used his lines many times. And “Don’t preach now”!

He told us he missed his wife and family while he kept watch over us. In the evening he made the trek through the narrow jungle path up to the hill top where the cell phone could connect. One night I asked where he was going as it was getting dark, he said “I’m off to talk to my sweetheart”. Every day his wife rises early to go to the market to sell vegetables. This usually means first going to the main outlet to purchase the vegetables. I noticed one day that he spent a lot of time writing on a yellow legal pad. He was writing his thoughts about “The Power of Prayer”.

When I expressed interest he carefully and slowly read it aloud to me. I asked if it was possible to receive a copy before we left Liberia. On our last day at the airport, he entrusted me with his one and only original copy. He asked me to type it out and send it by email to Bishop Kliblo. I was very touched and promised to return the original.



Connie

Connie is Bishop Klibo’s older sister, a widow with four grown children, and numerous grandchildren. How grateful we were for her creative cooking skills, practical advice, her servant’s heart and sunny nature. Without

electricity or running water, in a shell of a kitchen, Connie cooked on two small charcoal hibachis and spoiled us with a delicious variety of African dishes and some western meals we invented. Connie and I put together our years of experience and went shopping for our supplies.

The supermarket was our first stop. To my surprise there were many American canned and packaged goods, even canned wieners. Only in America! After a week, served on a piece of bread with mustard, they were a treat. We then went to a house wares shop jammed with everything but the kitchen sink. Here we purchased pots, pans, dished cutlery, towels, etc.

The next stop was the outdoor street market where we bargained for fresh fruit and vegetables and live chickens. Last stop was a large empty store that only sold cooking oil. We purchased a very large container about 6 liters and actually ran out in two weeks. Maybe that's why we didn't loose weight! In spite of the flour going bad, the bread turning moldy, the eggs running out and our supplies diminishing, Connie managed to keep us full and content.

John Deguah

John is the assistant director of the home. He is Uncle John to the kids and he clearly loves and enjoys spending time with them. He works for Gospel Recordings in Monrovia and helps provide support through his contacts. Although sporadic, his vehicle is a valuable asset as he periodically brings much needed supplies to the home.



He and his wife have five daughters. One of their daughters lives in the U.S. with her grandparents. Presently Eunice, one of

the original kids at the orphanage stays at his home in the city while she is in school completing her nursing degree.




Our journey to this special home has only begun. On the day we parted the kids sang these words to us “Don’t worry we will see you again”. We look forward with great excitement to that day!

Inspired by the love demonstrated by AICA, the family leaders and of course the children.

Linda Miclash
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 Alongside International

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with God all Things
are possible