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Letters from Chad: From Arizona to Africa

A plea for help puts idea into motion.

by Matt Brennan

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A trip to Arizona for a Promise Keepers Conference blossomed into a life changing experience for Gary Augustine.

As pastor of the Evangelical Fellowship Church in Elburn, Augustine tinkered with an idea about going to Africa with some friends to provide spiritual help, and to see if he could provide aid in a poverty-stricken country. But until he went to the Promise Keepers Conference, the idea of going to Africa was just that, an idea.

"It pushed me to actually know that I should do it," Augustine said. "I had no decision making."

Following the conference, Augustine committed to a journey over the Atlantic. Augustine spent from Nov. 5 to Nov. 19, 2003 in Chad. While there, he witnessed life and Christianity in a third world country, provided spiritual advisement and recorded some observations in a journal that has been made available to the *Elburn Herald*.

The push to go to Africa at the conference came from an active American member of the South African Christian community.

Bruce Wilkenson has lived and worked in South Africa, and authored "The Prayer of Jabez," for which the profits went straight back into the African community. He spoke at the conference, and called the people in the audience to go to Africa to spread their ministry. Everyone in the audience who wanted to go to Africa went up to the stage and prayed. The idea was received well among the crowd, including Augustine.

"There were 10,000 pastors at the conference," Augustine said. "There were about 3,000 who responded to the call to go to Africa. I don't have an exact number, but I would say about a third of the crowd went forward."

Augustine was one of them. The trip he had in mind involved going to Chad to help a leader of the religious community in that country with an orphanage program. When the time came, the Promise Keepers Conference helped Augustine to know exactly what to do.

But it was not until after the conference that the trip became official.

"I didn't know it was something that we were actually going to do," he said. "We talked about the possibility of going to Chad. I had a friend who said 'There's this guy who might go there.' I said 'Well, if it happens, I think I might like to go with.'"

How the trip materializes

Steve and Nancy Hoffman attend the Evangelical Fellowship Church, where Augustine is pastor. The Hoffmans are friends with John and Vivi Wickberg, who lived in Wheaton at the time, and attended College Church, at Wheaton College.

The Wickbergs met Ngarndeye Bako, a native of Chad, while he was attending Wheaton College on the Billy Graham scholarship, a scholarship set up for Christian leaders in foreign countries to study in the United States. Bako was elected to the highest position of the Evangelical Church in Chad.

While attending Wheaton College, Bako worked on a project involving the issue of orphans in Chad. Bako wanted to solicit the help of major organizations in the United States, but many of these organizations were reluctant or had policies against helping nationals.

So he asked the Wickbergs, Hoffmans, and Augustine, for help. He asked them to help find ways to support an organization providing aid to orphans in Chad.

Augustine said he was drawn to Bako because of his motives for helping orphans. Bako himself was an orphan as a child, and rose to one of the highest positions of power in his native country.

"He was a kid of incredible intensity, but no real prospects," Augustine said. "And he ended up becoming a national leader because someone took interest in him."

Orphans are a major problem in Chad. Bako's intention is to provide the same services that he received to as many of the children as possible, so they can have a good home to grow up in, Augustine said.

"His plan is not to build an actual orphanage, but to support a network of foster families, which he and a board are doing right now at a smaller level," Augustine said. "The goal of the program is to provide any means to help foster families raise a child."

"They would like to do 100 (children) right now, but they just can't," Augustine said. "Their plans are to make this extensive through fundraising. There are about 100 they could do right now, that they've had contact with. There's about 40 right now, and about 60 they'd put in the program right now if they could."

When the Wickbergs met Bako, he had only been speaking English for one year, and they were impressed with his skill, so they invited him over for dinner.

That is when the Wickberg's learned of his plan to help the orphans in his country, which was then in its infancy stages. The Wickberg's were more than willing to help on a grassroots level.

At the time, they were selling their house in order to move into a town home. They decided that if their house sold for a higher amount of money, they would be able to donate a certain amount to Bako's plan in Chad.

"My husband and I both said, 'Do we have a reason not to?'" Vivi said. "And we both agreed no. We both said, 'We need to help these people.'"

The Wickberg's also had their friends the Hoffman's over for dinner on a few occasions to meet Bako. The Hoffman's were interested in helping Bako in a way that Steve was familiar with--shooting video.

Steve always considered film a hobby, he said, and looked at the situation as an opportune time to go to Africa and make a video. He wanted to make a video detailing the situation in Chad, so that it could be used as an aid to try and solicit help for Bako's cause.

Originally Steve said he was only really interested in the video, but he soon gained more interest in the subject as well.

"Everybody in the group went there for humanitarian reasons," he said. "I went to shoot a video. I didn't have a heart for it at first, but that soon changed."

Augustine, who was introduced to the group through the Hoffman's, then became part of the trip.

"Really I wasn't back from the conference for three weeks when Steve comes up to me and said 'The trip is on, are you coming?' The conference pushed me to know that I should do this. He said 'Are you coming?' I said 'You bet.'"

Augustine went on the trip to see what could be done to help the people in

Chad. He wanted to witness the problems first hand, so he could be part of the call for help. The Wickberg's, the Hoffman's and Augustine each worked with Bako to see what they could do to help his orphanage project.

Augustine knew the group would not be able to provide a lot of direct help. They would not have an immediate hand in the organization of Bako's project. But the goal of the group was to organize more support for the project in the United States, to help improve the social situation in Chad.

"That's what is unique to this organization, is that we are not here to go in and do it with them," Augustine said. "We are here to help them do what they need to do."

Visiting the country helped make up the group's minds about helping out with the problem, Augustine said.

"Essentially 90 percent of the world lives in ways that Americans can't conceive of," Augustine said. "They don't know that people don't have clothes to wear, and certain freedoms. Americans don't know these things."