

(Right) Kenyan children watch Wendi Dwyer draw. Dwyer's gratitude to Kenyans prompted her to help the Wandu family.

A Lion in Africa

New member launches shrewd literacy effort to uplift troubled new nation

by Wendi Dwyer

I stepped off the small U.N. plane in South Sudan. Our bags were tossed onto the red dirt ground. The plane took off, and I knew there was no turning back. A bolt of fear shot through me.

It was over 110 degrees. The heat felt like I was surrounded by blow dryers turned to the hottest setting. There was no terminal—just a few scattered straw huts and a pack of starving dogs plodding toward us. In the distance a cloud of dust rose above the brush: our ride was slowly approaching. Thankfully, the jeep arrived before the dogs reached us. We drove to “town” and I soon realized that South Sudan may as well be the moon—it was that different than the world I live in. When the sun sets pure blackness descends. If I got sick or hurt there was no 911 to call for help.

I live in Geneva, Illinois, a small, attractive Chicago suburb. I am a married mother of four and an active member of the Geneva Lions Club. About a year ago I became a Lion for two reasons. I am losing my sight. Because of my own predicament I feel fortunate to be a part of Lions Clubs International. I also witnessed how sight impairment shortens the lives of my friends in South Sudan and saw the crippling impact illiteracy has on a nation. I know Lions can make a huge difference in this newly independent country.

Few South Sudanese have access to electricity, safe water, roads, clinics or schools. People cook over open fires and walk miles to pull 30-pound buckets of water out of 40-foot-deep, four-foot-wide open bore holes. These activities are dangerous for anyone, but even more so for blind people. The saddest thing about seeing the many sight-impaired people struggling to survive in South Sudan is that much of their blindness is curable and preventable. Lions could save lives here.

Last year I learned there were no Lions clubs in South Sudan. So I contacted LCI headquarters in Oak Brook near

my home and learned they were already working on this. Headquarters connected me with Past International Director Manoj Shah in Nairobi, Kenya. We are now working together with the South Sudanese government to secure the necessary approvals and documentation.

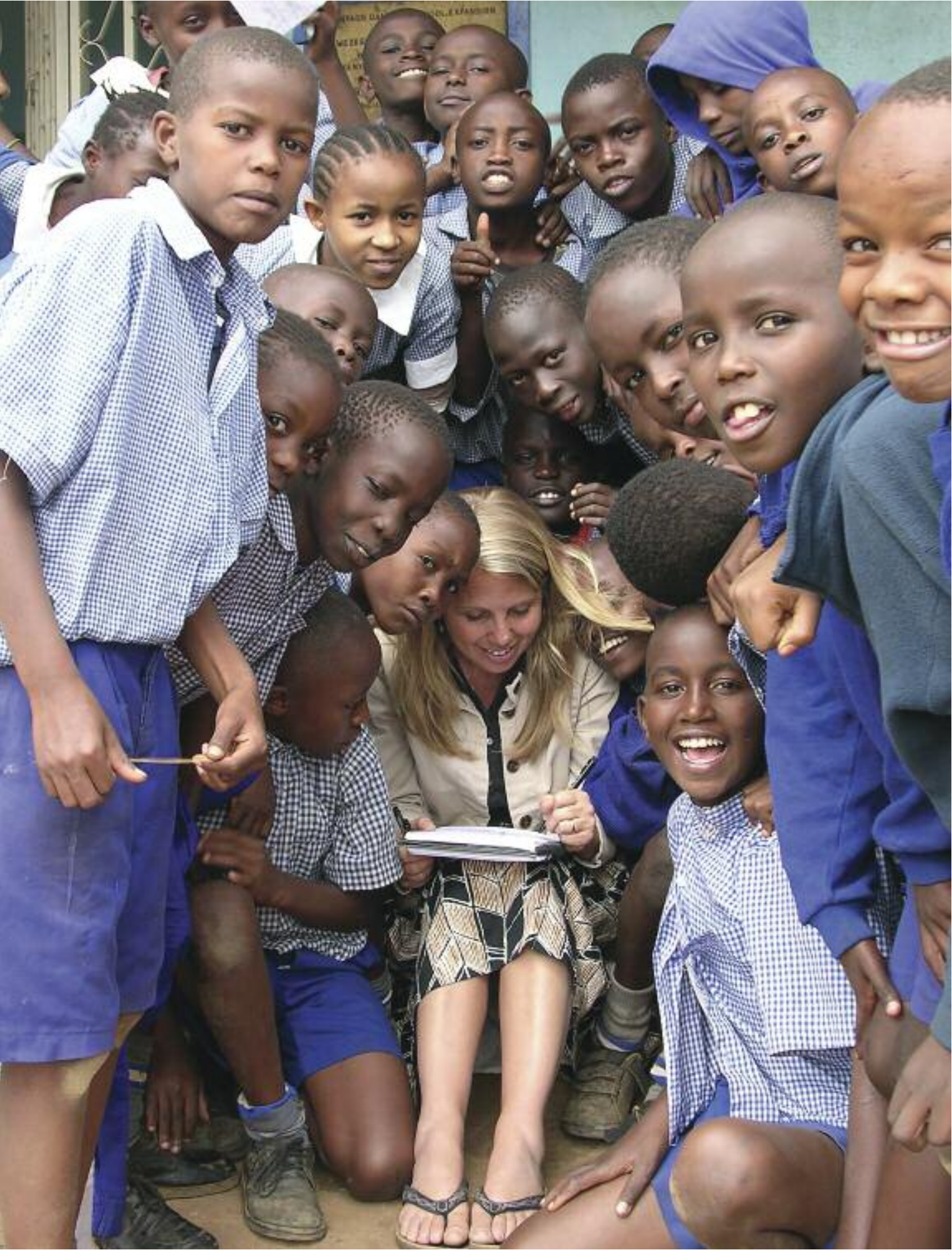
I am determined to help charter a Lions club in South Sudan. The eyeglasses, antibiotics and teams of surgeons LCI can provide will save lives. Also, International President Wayne Madden is a strong advocate for literacy.

Without literacy a nation cannot become a democracy. Tyranny occurs when a few literate people make decisions for the illiterate majority. This leads to oppression and corruption. Without literacy conflicts are difficult to resolve and often become violent. This leads to war. Without literacy parents are unable to access new information and simply do what the generation before them did, even if those practices are unhealthy. This leads to many children dying before their first birthday and mothers dying in childbirth.

South Sudan became independent on July 9, 2011, but the people are not free. With one of the lowest literacy rates in the world they are left in bondage. They desperately need the tool of literacy to work together to create a peaceful, healthy society.

Imagine digging a well and the whole village gathers to help but only one person has a shovel. This is South Sudan. With so few people able to read, development is slow and difficult. Information is hard to circulate and people are unable to solve their own problems because they are left out of the decision-making process.

I could not have planned the strange course of events that led me to dedicate the few remaining years of sight that I may have left to raising the literacy rate in South Sudan. My journey began in 2005 when we welcomed the Wandu family into our home. They were refugees from



South Sudan. A friend who works for World Relief told us that the Wandis had not been exposed to electricity, showers, toilets or traffic. They needed help adjusting to life in America. My help was reciprocal. I had recently returned from teaching art to more than 550 school children in a slum of Nairobi in partnership with the Kenya Children's Fund. I knew that without the help of my Kenyan friends I could not have safely navigated the strange ways of the Dandora slum.

The Wandis arrived at O'Hare airport with nothing more than the clothes on their backs. Their two sons, Bill Clinton Wandi, 6, and Nelson Mandela Wandi, 4, balanced huge men's shoes on the tops of their feet as they disembarked. They had been shoeless, and a kind soul placed these donated shoes on their feet so they could board the plane in Africa.

At dinner one night my oldest son asked Bulus Wandi, the father, why they had come to America. Bulus drew a big breath, paused and then told us about the day the armed men came on horseback to his village. He was a young boy of 8 then. The men told them they would need to follow the ways of their religion or trouble would come to the village.

His brother, who was 14, spoke up, "We don't fear you! Our God will save us!" The men roughly bundled up his

brother, hung him from a tree and lit him on fire. Bulus triumphantly concluded his story: "And God saved him!" My son asked, "He lived?" "No, God saved him," Bulus replied.

Bulus' faith in God's love and in the promise of heaven was unshaken. Even though his brother was brutally murdered before his eyes, he did not doubt God's presence. His faith made us question the depth of our faith. Was ours a faith in a God who loves us and provides for us even in the most horrible earthly circumstances?

Over the years I heard stories of faith like this from many South Sudanese friends. Unlike me, they saw God clearly in difficult circumstances. I didn't realize they were helping to fortify my faith until I was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa, which is an incurable, progressive eye disease. I am an artist. My sight is essential. If you had told me five years ago that I may be blind I would have panicked and been furious at God. It has been hard as my sight continues to worsen, but, surprisingly, I have peace. I believe this is because of the perspective I have gained from my South Sudanese friends, some of whom were among the Lost Boys of Sudan. Their travails help me realize we may not be able to choose the struggles in our lives but we can make a conscious decision to tackle them with integrity and faith.

The Dwyers taught the Wandis how to use modern conveniences while they learned how to handle difficulties with serenity from the Sudanese family.



In the 1980s thousands of young Sudanese boys were displaced or orphaned during civil war. The Lost Boys, as they became known, walked more than a thousand miles to refugee camps in Ethiopia. Many didn't make it. They were attacked by animals; others died of starvation and dehydration or were killed by the militia. The Lost Boys worked together to stay alive. The United States later re-settled many of them.

In 2006 I began helping a group of Lost Boys tell their amazing stories of survival and fortitude to inspire students in the Midwest while also raising funds for education in South Sudan. We have spoken at more than 60 high schools and universities. I am now the executive director of the Lost Boys Rebuilding Southern Sudan (LBRSS), a non-profit. We raised funds and built the Malulkon Community Learning Center and seven wells in Northern Bahr El Ghazal State. Our mission is to educate people of South Sudan so they can help develop a peaceful, healthy nation.

Our remarkable agent of change is called Literacy at the Well, which doesn't rely on supplies that are difficult to replenish. In South Sudan, women and girls spend hours each day drawing water or waiting their turn at wells. Literacy Leaders, paid \$100 a month, are assigned to a well. We use games and songs familiar to them to teach them reading

and writing. The average well site serves as many as 1,000 families. For a small investment we make an enormous impact on a whole community.

A key component is our "train the trainers" method. An established school serves as a training hub for our Literacy Leaders. Working alongside the teachers who are improving literacy, the volunteers acquire the skills needed to become Literacy Leaders themselves.

Our literacy program was launched at the Maluakon Community Learning Center, where we have strong relationships within the community. Maluakon is also an excellent choice because of the presence of other NGOs, potential partners. UNICEF already provides notebooks and pencils for our students. We will soon expand our literacy efforts to other states in South Sudan.

The cost to train and pay a Literacy Leader is \$1,500 annually. When literacy rates go up, child mortality rates go down, conflicts are resolved more peacefully and an entire nation can prosper. Water wells sustain life; reading well can build a society.

More information on Literacy at the Well is available at RebuildingSouthernSudan.org.

Women and girls in South Sudan spend hours at wells getting water, leaving time for teaching them how to read and write.

