

Dispatch

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PERSON OF INTEREST
by
Doug Moe



Wendi Dwyer and her guide dog in the Madison office of the Literacy Network, where she serves as development director.

RUTHIE HAUGE

A LIFELONG CALLING

FOR WENDI DWYER, IT ALL STARTED TWO DECADES AGO IN MADISON, in an 11th grade journalism class at West High School. Two sisters, Laotian refugees, were sitting together at the back of the room, looking lost. Dwyer pulled her chair beside them and pointed to where the class was in a book. Mostly, she smiled. ¶ In the ensuing weeks, with a teacher's urging, Dwyer helped the sisters, Cam and Ping, learn to read and write English. The experience stirred something in her. ¶ Years later, Dwyer invited African refugees into her suburban Chicago home. That experience inspired her to start two programs dedicated to bringing literacy to strife-ravaged South Sudan, where she was the keynote speaker at the United Nations

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DISPATCH PERSON OF INTEREST

International Women's Day held in the city of Aweil in 2012.

The advocacy that took her around the world started in her native Madison, so when it was time for Dwyer, 54, to advocate for herself, and others like her, she came home.

Dwyer has a genetic retinal disorder called retinitis pigmentosa. She is gradually going blind, and stopped driving seven years ago. Her condition worsened considerably in October 2017. She got a sight cane and now has a guide dog.

In January, Dwyer moved back to Madison. Her parents live nearby, as do many of her lifelong friends. She has her own place

downtown, walking distance from almost anything she needs, and is undaunted, determined to live a full life.

Top of mind now is advocating for the blind and visually impaired, who, she says, "are the least employed of all people with disabilities." Dwyer is taking classes at the Wisconsin Council for the Blind and Visually Impaired and is hoping to launch a radio show dealing with "the journey of life as a blind person."

Dwyer was not always so focused. After graduating from West, she took a year to travel around Europe. Eventually she met and married a man from Scotland, where

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LEADING THE BLIND: As Wendi Dwyer gradually loses her sight, she finds herself doing more advocacy for people with disabilities like hers.

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they lived for a time and had a son. (Dwyer is now single, with "four great kids," ages 18 to 33.)

On returning from Scotland, they settled in the Chicago area. One day when Dwyer was visiting Madison, she and her mother had lunch at an Asian restaurant.

Their server smiled and said, "Hi, Wendi!" It was Ping, from the high school journalism class. She proceeded to tell Dwyer's mom how her daughter's welcoming attention had meant the world to Ping and her sister.

"It helped us keep coming to school," she recalled Ping saying.

For Dwyer, the lunch was a reminder of what giving to Ping and Cam had in turn given her.

"I made a commitment to have more refugee friends in my life," she says.

Having returned to school, Dwyer taught for a time in the Chicago suburbs, and in 2005 a community art project she spearheaded got the attention of the Kenya Children's Fund, which took her to that African country for a student mural project.

A week after she returned, Dwyer got a call from a friend who had gone to Chicago O'Hare International Airport to pick up a refugee family from troubled South Sudan. Two families got off the plane. One of them ended up with Dwyer's family.

"We became a sort of hub," Dwyer says.

One African refugee, Gloire Lokombe, was 12 when his family emigrated to the Chicago area in 2010. His parents worked weekends at a warehouse, so he and his two brothers spent those days and nights with Dwyer's family.

"They opened their arms," Lokombe says. He's now a junior studying mechanical engineering at Bradley University in Peoria. "I can say a lot of what I learned about America came from Wendi and her family."

Another dinner guest was one of the "Lost Boys of Sudan," a group of more than 40,000 youths displaced by the Sudanese Civil War. His story led Dwyer to co-found a nonprofit called Lost Boys Rebuilding South Sudan, which necessitated several trips to that country and the building of a school.

When the school was about to open, Dwyer visited and found numerous wom-



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en and girls in the school taking shelter from the sun while they waited to get water from a nearby well. They didn't attend the school—they were needed to ferry water from the well to their homes.

Dwyer asked, "What if while you were waiting at the well for water, there was a teacher there?"

"They had said they wanted to read and learn," Dwyer says.

A second nonprofit, Literacy at the Well, was born.

Dwyer, who stepped down as executive director in fall 2017, says the program "is continuing to grow throughout South Sudan."

Now, as she reacquaints herself with Madison—"I'm so happy to be back"—Dwyer is determined to make and affect perceptions and possibilities regarding her own disability.

"My goal going forward in life," she says, "is to live and work in such a way that on the day I die, a child who is born blind has an opportunity that I can't imagine."

Doug Moe is a Madison writer and a former editor of Madison Magazine. Read his weekly blog, "Doug Moe's Madison," on madisonmagazine.com.

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