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Remarkable Woman Wendi Dwyer's fight for literacy in war-torn South Sudan

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REMARKABLE WOMAN

Wendi Dwyer, bringing literacy to South Sudan

She wants to give South Sudan a powerful tool for peace: literacy

March 02, 2014 | By William Hageman, Tribune Newspapers

Wendi Dwyer should have been packing for a trip to Africa. She had been scheduled to leave the next day. But a recent outbreak of violence in South Sudan — the nation is teetering on civil war — forced her to cancel. Instead, she sat in her Geneva home and explained her reason for often flying halfway around the world.

Dwyer is executive director of Lost Boys Rebuilding Southern Sudan, a 9-year-old organization founded by some of the former Lost Boys, the 20,000 children and young men displaced by civil war in Sudan from 1983 to 2005. Many settled in various parts of the U.S. The group, based in St. Charles, seeks to change the face of South Sudan, a massive undertaking.



Wendi Dwyer, executive director of Lost Boys Rebuilding Souther...

South Sudan, which became an independent nation in 2011, is one of the world's most undeveloped countries, with little infrastructure and few educational opportunities. It also has the world's lowest literacy rate — 27 percent, according to the CIA's World Fact Book. That's where Dwyer and the LBRSS (rebuildingsouthernssudan.org) come in.

Dwyer's association with Lost Boys Rebuilding Southern Sudan began when she was helping a family of South Sudanese refugees get acclimated to the U.S. They had a friend, also new to the U.S.

"His name is Arkangelo, and he quickly became a part of our family," she says. "He is a Lost Boy and one of the founding members of LBRSS, and he asked me to help them."

One of the group's newer initiatives is to teach the nation's women to read and write through the Literacy At The Well program. "These skills will help to resolve conflicts without violence," she says. "Our overriding theme has always been that this is more powerful than weapons. Education will prepare South Sudan for peace."

The strategy: Locals are hired as teachers. They set up at the wells where the women come daily for water — and also learn to read and write. Then they walk home and share what they learn with their husbands, sisters, children and neighbors.

Dwyer, who turns 50 in August, has been helping refugees for almost 35 years. A divorced mother of four, she recently sat down to discuss South Sudan, her work and goals, and dealing with the progression of retinitis pigmentosa, which is slowly costing her sight. This is an edited transcript:

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Q: How did you become involved with refugees?

A: I started working with refugees in high school, in Madison. There were two Laotian sisters, boat people, my age. Ping and Cam. They didn't speak English and could barely read. I loved them. And I'd find them huddled together in the morning, scared in this big high school. I'd say hi, smile, and tell them I'd see them at lunch. Years later I was in the Grand Pagoda Restaurant, a Chinese restaurant in Madison, and this beautiful woman came to our table to take our order. She asked, "Are you Wendi?" And it was Ping. She said that the only way she and her sister could come to school was because they knew I would smile at them. That changed my life.

Q: Where does literacy in South Sudan fit into your life?

A: Teaching people to read and write, these skills help to resolve conflicts without violence. Our overriding theme has always been that this is more powerful than weapons. Education will prepare South Sudan for peace.

Q: When did the program begin?

A: A year and a half ago I was in Maluakon in Northern Bahr el Ghazal state (in South Sudan) to begin preparations for opening a traditional primary school for children. When we got to our newly completed four-room school building, I was surprised to find it filled with women and girls escaping the sun while waiting for their turn to fill water jugs at the well.

Immediately I knew these were our students. I asked the women and girls if they would like to learn how to read and write. Almost every one said "yes," but they didn't have time to go to school. Their families relied on them to walk long distances to the wells, wait in long lines to fill their jugs and walk home with 40 pounds of water on top of their heads. I began recruiting the best team possible to create a program that would turn the waiting time at the well into an opportunity to learn.

Q: How big is it?

A: We currently have sites in six communities. Each site serves more than 200 women and girls. We have also built the Maluakon Community Learning Center. This serves as the headquarters for our literacy program. More than 400 learners attend classes there each day.

Q: South Sudan may be heading toward civil war. Has the unrest affected your programs?

A: (Northern) Bahr el Ghazal has a long history of stability. It's become a refuge for people fleeing conflict all over South Sudan. So today, the women are going about their day. Women are showing up at the wells. Teachers are carrying out teaching. Our people are all nationals, so no one has fled. It's their country.

Q: But you can't be there.

A: I would have loved to have gone right now. I'm bringing new teaching ideas, teacher assessment (of students) ideas. I would have loved to roll that out. If I could go from here to there, I'd go right now. But I can't get there.

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Q: What is the cost of Literacy At The Well?

A: The program is cost-efficient and sustainable. We use every dollar to support teacher training and salaries. It costs only \$4,000 to provide a community with a teacher. This covers the teacher's salary, their training and the supplies.

Q: How has this been received?

A: One of the most affirming things I've heard, a male community leader told me, "If you pick up and never come back, this would keep going. This is wildfire."

Q: You're educating these people, but are there lessons for you too?

A: (I have had) all these refugee friends who have overcome these terrible things: rape, having their children taken away, war. But I learned that we are built to overcome the trials in our lives. It really puts my problems in perspective.

Q: The retinitis pigmentosa?

A: Four years ago I drove myself to the doctor and was told I didn't have enough sight to drive home. I had to call someone. But within two weeks 13 Lost Boys came in from as far away as Nebraska and Michigan. They descended on our house to hold a prayer service for our family so we wouldn't be discouraged.

Q: It's difficult to fathom life there.

A: I get to sit up late at night with the people in these communities and hear what their lives have been. I can't see in low light, so I sit and listen. To hear the hearts of these women makes me want to do so much more.

Q: What are some of your immediate goals?

A: I'm trying to find the best documentary team to tell the story of a woman who has been equipping Sudan for peace for 70 years. Her name is Sister Amandit. She's 90 now. She has become blind, so we have that in common. I want to tell her story; she has a message that has to be heard. She was this little Dinka girl who spied on the missionaries, watching them read their books. She had no idea even what a book was. She learned English, she was the first South Sudan woman to learn to read, she became an advocate for education. She graduated from college in Uganda 70 years ago. The literacy rate (in South Sudan) is 16 percent (for women) now; imagine what it was like back then. She is my hero.

Q: How'd you meet her?

A: I met Sister Amandit while in South Sudan to train teachers. The date was March 8, 2013, on U.N. International Women's Day. I had the privilege of being one of only six speakers at a large event in Aweil, the capital of Northern Bahr El Ghazal. I had heard of her and had always hoped to meet her. She said that she had been told I was coming. And I said, "Oh, our people told you." And she said no, that God spoke to her. She said God had gotten her up in the middle of the night and told her a woman was coming from far away, and that she'd help her tell her story, and then she could die. For her to say, God told me you were coming ...

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Q: People who want to get involved with a program like this may hesitate because of political unrest or threats of violence. Your advice?

A: I don't think everybody should jump on a plane and go overseas. That's not where everybody is needed. I never imagined I'd be in South Sudan, where there are no guarantees, no health care, no protection. The reason I go came out of relationships I had developed with people and understanding what my role would be. It's not adventure but to help people I was connected with. People should do what really matters to them. My (decision) came from that relationship with Cam and Ping. I realized I could work with refugees.

Q: When they decide on a mission, how do they proceed?

A: Start slowly, for one thing. Really look at what you have to offer. It might not be your home or money. It might be something as simple as teaching someone to read or to drive. And never give more than the person you're helping is willing to invest. They need to be as invested as you. Anything you're willing to give your time or your money to, make sure it's something that helps people to better themselves, to become more independent.

Q: So it's a two-way street.

A: A lot of times you want to take care of someone or give them everything. That can create a sense of dependency that isn't good for the person you're trying to help.

Q: What do you do in your spare time?

A: My house is full of people all the time. I spend a lot of time with friends or my kids' friends. I think that's what makes us good at resettling refugees. It's always chaos here. I'm a Lion (Lions Clubs International), which supports our programs. I'm part of a circle of people committed to literacy. I do Bible study with a group of girlfriends. I'm in a book club. I walk everywhere. I travel: Paris, Hamburg, South Sudan. I speak on behalf of Lions, I have presented at UNESCO. My passion, and what fuels me and is interesting to me, is equipping South Sudan for peace. So I meet every week with people who have the knowledge and skills to make that happen. I love it. And I get to meet all these interesting and cool people who share my passion for promoting peace.

Q: You said you're in a book club. What are some of your favorite books?

A: Well, it's getting more difficult to read. So I listen. "The Lacuna" by Barbara Kingsolver is a really good book. Anne Lamott, I like her writing; "Beyond The Beautiful Forever" (Katherine Boo), about the slums of Mumbai. A book I love is "Mountains Beyond Mountains," the story of Dr. Paul Farmer. That book is so inspiring. My most favorite book is ... "What is the What" by Dave Eggers.

Q: What music do you like?

A: Lou Reed, I've loved him since I was 16. Miriam and Amandou, a band from Mali. I played them at dinner last night and the kids were like (shakes her head). Jimi Hendrix, Van Morrison, Alicia Keys.

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Q: Do you have any guilty pleasures?

A: I like taking really long baths by candlelight. This is what helps me daydream, pray, plan and unwind. I like wine. Every night, a glass with dinner.

Q: How are your New Year's resolutions panning out?

A: My New Year's resolutions were to settle on a house wine and eat more fudge. The wine I came up with is 90+ Lot 2, a sauvignon blanc. It's (about) \$10 a bottle. And fudge. I'd never had fudge, ever. Just didn't like it. This year my sister made some for me for the holidays, and I tried it and I loved it. I took a picture of a bottle of the wine and some fudge and sent it to her. Within 24 hours (of the start of 2014) I had it all done.

bhageman@tribune.com

Drawing inspiration

"My inspiration is anyone going through a struggle," Wendi Dwyer says. "Not shying away from people who are struggling inspires us. ... You see people come out the other side and you realize you'll be OK. That inspires me as I go through my difficulties, as I lose my sight."