

## **THE SACRAMENTO BEE**

### Sacramento Congo connection forms lasting roots

By Ed Fletcher - Updated July 27, 2014

As Jamie, 6, and Jordan, 5, made their way down a church camp chow line recently, the choices were abundant – hot dogs, hamburgers, chips, taco salad, potato salad, garden salad, watermelon and cookies for days.

Three years ago, such a scene would have been unimaginable. Before the girls – born in the impoverished African nation of the Democratic Republic of the Congo – were taken in as orphans, they were grossly underweight and well on their way to starving to death.

In 2011, Jamie and Jordan became the first children adopted through an orphanage created by Compassion for Congo, a Sacramento area mission supported by area churches. Their adoptive father, Stuart Loucks, spent a month in the country making the arrangements. Other area Christian families looking to adopt followed suit.

Forged by a strong connection with area churches, the Sacramento region has been the landing spot for the vast majority of children adopted through the orphanage, on the outskirts of Lubumbashi, Congo's second largest city. Eleven of the 15 children adopted from the orphanage found Northern California homes before the country suspended all foreign adoptions last September.

At that time, Congo officials said the freeze could last a year. Half a dozen California families, in various stages of the adoption process, are in limbo while the Congo orphanage is over capacity with 18 kids.

The number of U.S. adoptions from Congo has increased from nine in 2008 to 311 in 2013.

Jamie and Jordan Loucks were among seven of the adoptive children at a multi-church campout at Scotts Flat Lake Campground near Nevada City, where roughly 150 people from three churches participated in an extended weekend of powerboat rides, singalongs and exploring the woods.

The story of how Jamie and Jordan came to call the Sacramento suburb of Fair Oaks home begins with Didier Mukotshi, who grew up on the streets in Congo after his mother died when he was 8. His father remarried, but few stepmothers in Africa care for their spouse's children, Mukotshi told an audience at a 2013 fundraiser in Fair Oaks, and he was left to fend for himself.

Mukotshi found stability, education and his life's direction after he met a Christian missionary in 1992 who taught him English and introduced him to the faith.

In 2008, Mukotshi met then-Placerville resident Jim Hagen, who had traveled to Congo to meet his daughter's fiancé and family. Hagen decided to help Mukotshi, then an interpreter, and soon asked others to pitch in, said Paul Anthes, pastor of Placerville's Community Bible Church. "Ever since I first met (Mukotshi) he said he wanted to start churches, an orphanage and a school," said Anthes, who later formed Compassion for Congo through his church.

Mukotshi made his first trip to the United States in 2010, visiting several Sacramento area churches to speak about his mission. That trip raised \$10,000, Anthes said.

In 2011, they formalized their efforts by creating Compassion for Congo. Since then, Mukotshi – aided by American visitors – has built the orphanage, three churches and a guest home. They also planted fruit trees, dug a well and this summer finished installing a pump and filtration system, giving the property running water for the first time.

The orphanage and ministry has suffered its share of setbacks, including the initial theft of some fruit trees, which required building a wall to protect the trees.

Other losses have been more tragic.

Within weeks of his scheduled flight to finalize the adoption of a young boy, Phil Layton of Shingle Springs was hit with devastating news that the boy was dead. Layton carried through with his trip and while there met another boy whom he and his wife, Jamie Layton, would later adopt. "Life is real fragile in ... Congo. It's not that unusual for little ones to die," said Phil Layton, pastor of Gold Country Baptist Church.

The country's infant mortality rate and life expectancy rank it among the worst globally. Nearly a third of all children are underweight at age 5, according to U.S. government World Factbook.

For a while, Mukotshi was afraid Jordan wouldn't make it either. She was in such bad shape, Mukotshi told attendees at the fundraiser, that he feared that bringing her home would only mean he'd have to bury her.

"I said to my wife, 'I don't know if we should keep this child here. This child will die here,'" he recalled. "My wife looked at me and said, 'If God sent this child here ... I will not let you turn her away. If she will die, she will die here.'"

He described the girl, then 2, as having "just skin on the bones."

"If that child stayed in Congo I'm very sure she would not be alive," he said.

After burying the son he never met, Phil Layton met 1-year-old Matteus. Because the couple already had an approved adoption, the government expedited the process. Within weeks, Layton brought Matteus to El Dorado County.

“If you love children at all ... how could you not want to help them have a sustainable life?” said his wife, Jamie. “There are children that need a family.”

Gabriel and Josie Wilmarth of Orangevale made their second trip to the orphanage this summer after adopting twins Brandon and Kira in 2011. This time the couple took along their two eldest children, ages 16 and 14. Gabriel helped complete an orphanage water project, while Josie helped with the children and painted a mural.

The experience was eye-opening for the teens. The trip back was eye-opening for the little ones.

“I took Brandon to the bathroom on the airplane,” Gabriel Wilmarth said. “We hit the flush button, and he about jumped on my shoulders.”

The Wilmarth kids’ transition was easier because Josie speaks French, generally the second language spoken in Congo and the language used at the orphanage.

Jason and Kiana Gregg of Paradise, were the last of the Northern California couples to have adoptions approved before the government shut down foreign adoptions. The couple met Mukotshi while still attending Gold Country Church in Auburn.

“We didn’t set out to adopt kids from ... Congo. God orchestrated it all,” Kiana Gregg said. Their children, Jedediah and Keliyah, both 4, left Congo in January 2013.

An alert, issued in September by the U.S. State Department, suggests Congo’s freeze on adoptions will last a year, but no updates have been offered. The country is concerned that the children, “may be either abused by adoptive families or adopted by a second set of parents once in their receiving countries,” the alert reads.

Judge Emery Phuna, a family court judge who flew from Congo to Sacramento to check on the children, now proudly displays photos in his office of himself, the kids and their new families.

Anthes said the orphanage gained an enthusiastic advocate in Phuna. “We got a ton of kudos from him for doing just what we said we were doing,” Anthes said.

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