

South Sudan/Uganda update

October 1, 2011

From Joe Biggers, at the Dreamland orphanage ---

After we all had woken up and been fed, we started the day with our morning devotional, as we have every morning since we've been in Yei, South Sudan. This morning we read from Matthew Chapter 6, and I tell you it couldn't have been a more fitting scripture for how God was going to work through us today and bless his people he has called us here to help. Verses 25-34 describe how God's people are not to worry. That we are not to worry about what we are going to eat or eat or drink, or even about our own life. God provides for his many other creations, and how much more valuable to him are we than they? God knows that we need food, water, and clothes and that worrying about these things is a waste of time and energy. By first seeking his kingdom and righteousness, God has promised to provide us with everything we need.

After piling into the truck and traveling down the disheveled road that takes us to the New Generation Dreamland Children's Orphanage, we climbed out and were greeted by the most excited, beaming faces you have ever seen on children. Every day we are greeted like this, their eyes wide, mouths bearing toothy grins as they scampered up to greet us so that they might receive the love and attention that they deserve so much. Next, we began to set up shop in one of the classrooms, continuing the art project started the previous day. As this takes place, Clint takes off with two Dreamland personnel to go to the market and to hopefully meet up with Steve, as he is scheduled to arrive today. We only have three classes left that haven't had a chance to paint and express themselves artistically (something they rarely ever get to do). But even with the six of us there, it manages to take us 5+ hours to finish the project. These last few classes had older children, and they took much more time with their paintings. Their time and prolonged concentration was evidenced by the impressive, beautifully painted canvases that lay drying at the end of the session. And even though the project was over, the eager children still wanted to draw and color, and the team happily obliged them with paper and utensils so they could continue to create.

In their makeshift soccer field, a small group of boys gathered to play a soccer game with a ball that could've passed for a lump of dried mud it was so dirty and worn. But to them, this and their lack of shoes didn't matter. This worn out ball that could never be sold at any garage sale back home, or even donated to a local Goodwill for that matter (trust me – I've worked there), two sets of tree trunks pressed into the earth for goals, and bare, black feet was their escape from their day to day routine and chores they must perform to function as an orphanage and survive as a community.

During the middle of one of their pickup games, Clint, Steve, and the two personnel they left with earlier showed up unannounced to give what I know would be an unforgettable Saturday to the children of the Dreamland Orphanage. As the truck stops, Clint steps out and throws a brand new soccer ball into the middle of the field. The children's jaws drop, and they rush towards the ball like we would an open suitcase full of money. Still in amazement at what had just happened, the children only have a few moments to test out their new soccer ball before they are summoned to the school house where the art project took place earlier. When everyone was gathered in the building, the team and Dreamland workers undid a large tarp to reveal brand new soccer shoes for everyone on the team along with four more brand new soccer balls. You could literally feel the excitement from the ecstatic children as squeals and sporadic jumps took place throughout the room. But it didn't stop there. Clint, Steve, and crew managed to get matching red and blue jerseys along with shorts and socks. When the boys came out of their dormitory, fully clothed in their new attire, you could see the proud, satisfied looks on the

young boys' faces – they looked like a real soccer team, something they probably never thought they would experience.

The rest of the day was spent celebrating and cheering the squad of boys as they played each other in their new soccer gear. It felt like attending a family event as we all sat side by side not caring who scored or who played better. The fact that we were all here together serving as God's promised provisions to his faithful servants made today truly unforgettable.

God bless,  
Joe

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From Steve Schwartz, in route to South Sudan, on Friday and Saturday---

Friday morning was an early morning. I was on the shuttle to the airport by 6:20am for the flight from Entebbe, Uganda to Arua, Uganda. The flight was scheduled to leave at 8am, but it was around 8:45am by the time the small plane with me and the other two (yes just two) passengers lifted off. It was an uneventful one hour flight, and we touched down on the dirt runway just before 10am. Patrick, the director of CAFECC (Christian Action for Empowering Church and Community), the microfinance organization I was there to visit with, was at the airstrip to meet me with one of his board members. Arua is a small town in the northern part of Uganda, about 18 miles from the Congo border and 50 miles from South Sudan. Interestingly enough, Patrick informed me in the car that the town has been without power for about a month due to "the machine being broken". Still not sure what that meant, other than it was pretty dark there after the sun went down.

Patrick took me to the guesthouse to drop off my luggage, then we went the CAFECC headquarters. We started with devotions, singing, and a time of prayer. We then had morning tea together while we discussed their organization. CAFECC currently has about 340 clients, and gives out microfinance loans averaging around \$50 to help the underprivileged start and run small businesses. After tea, Patrick and Jimmy, one of their loan officers, took me to visit some of their clients. I met with people who have started and run everything from small convenience stores, to clothing shops, to chicken and pig farms. It was an interesting and informative few hours. Despite having good organization and a hardworking staff of four, CAFECC is still struggling financially and is fighting to become self-sustaining. It was a good visit and reminder for me of the struggles of the microfinance industry.

After the visits, we went back to their headquarters for lunch, then spent the afternoon discussing more about CAFECC, microfinance, and just getting to know each other. Just before supper at night, we had another time of singing. Patrick brought out some songbooks that had a lot of classic old hymns, and the four of us sat around singing some hymns with Patrick playing the guitar for about a half an hour. Does it get any better than three Ugandans and one American sitting in a small dark African town singing hymns? I'm going to say it probably doesn't.

After returning to the guesthouse for a short night of sleep, I was up early Saturday morning for the drive from Arua to Yei, South Sudan. Pastor Stanley had arranged for a friend of his named Nuru, who drives a taxi back and forth from Arua to Yei, to pick me up in Arua. He was at my guesthouse by 7am in his painted up Toyota, African music blaring, and we were on the road by 7:15am. After leaving the town, the road we were on quickly turned to dirt. Yep, I was in for a 4 hour ride on a dirt road. Being

used to paved roads, it took me a while to get used to traveling on a dirt road for that amount of distance. It was a little rough. After an hour or so of traveling, Nuru turned to me and said that since we were getting closer to the border, the road was "going to get rough". Umm, excuse me? What had it been up to this point!? (Haha!) Anyway, he was right, the road quickly turned rougher with large potholes, rocks, and some ravines. Of course, this was on top of the goats, chickens, cows, and people that we encountered on a regular basis.

In short time, we reached the border in a town called Kaya, where the borders of Congo, Uganda, and South Sudan meet. I was a little nervous about the border crossing, but with Nuru's help, it went off without a hitch. In about 15 minutes time, I was through the Ugandan and South Sudan immigration offices, and we were back on our way. After passing through a military check point, we ended up on a border road through some relatively thick jungle with the Congo on the left side of the road and South Sudan on the right. It was like driving through an issue of National Geographic. Incredible scenery. After coming over one hill, though, there was a reminder that all is not as beautiful as it looks in Africa. We came upon several large military trucks and a couple of hundred armed soldiers spread out over the road. After it was apparent that these were Ugandan forces in South Sudan, Nuru explained that they were part of the force chasing the Lord's Resistance Army, a vicious African rebel group. The Uganda soldiers smiled broadly and waved as we drove by. Very nice people, trying to accomplish a very difficult task.

After another hour or so of driving, we arrived in Yei. Nuru dropped me off at Pastor Stanley's house, and then left to pick up another fare and drive back to Arua. It was an incredible trip, and I'm thankful to God for giving me safety on the road. I think I understand more about that "pray without ceasing" verse now. :)

After about 30 minutes, Clint returned to the house from the orphanage, and informed me we were going shopping. Before we could head out, however, Pastor Stanley came over with Pastor John Fabiano from Darfur. John had travelled to Yei and wanted to meet with Clint. The Vineyard has had a relationship with John for about five years, but contact with him has been non-existent lately with the troubles in the Darfur region. We sat and talked with him for about an hour. He's an impressive man, doing excellent work in an extremely difficult situation. One of the outreaches he likes to do is a food outreach to the hungry in the Darfur region. Thanks to the generosity of The Vineyard Church, we were able to give him \$1,500 to help with food outreach in Darfur. Thanks again, Vineyard family, for your willingness to give.

After John left, Clint and I headed to the market with some of the workers from the Dreamland orphanage to buy some gifts for the children. The market is a little bit of a crazy place. Tight quarters, a lot of people. We bought some soccer shoes, shorts, socks, and shirts for the boys at the orphanage. Finding enough of anything that matched was impossible, so we finally just gave up and bought what they had. We also bought metal washing bins, some clothes for the boys, and five soccer balls. Also, because the orphanage has been without rice for a couple of months while they are waiting on another shipment, we bought 5-50kg (about 110lb) bags of rice, and 4-50kg bags of sugar. Sugar is becoming more and more expensive here in South Sudan, and being able to buy that much is rare.

At this point the truck was full, so Clint and I headed off with two workers from the orphanage to deliver what we had bought so far. The others from the orphanage stayed at the market to continue shopping. When we arrived at the orphanage, the rest of the team was there working with the children. When we pulled up with the truckload of items we'd bought, we were quickly surrounded. We unloaded the truck,

and gathered with the children in the dining hall to hand out what we had bought. The soccer equipment was a huge hit. The boys quickly went to their dormitory and changed into their new clothes and shoes. I gotta say, they were looking pretty sharp when they came back out. Of course, a soccer game quickly broke out, and everyone gathered around to watch. We brought out benches from the dining hall and sat and cheered the boys on while they played. Keep in mind, these boys had never had soccer shoes before, or shoes at all, for that matter. They were very proud of their new clothes and shoes. Again, Vineyard people, this was entirely due to the radical giving you showed last week. The boys from the orphanage thank you!

While the soccer game was going on, the truck returned to the market to pick up the other worker from the orphanage and the rest of what they had bought. They came back with four dozen tubes of skin cream for the children, two serving buckets for food, two charcoal irons, four tea kettles, three flashlights, and a 50kg bag of flour. The truck was unloaded, and then we all got in and headed back to the compound here. We had an excellent dinner that included rice, chicken, bread, and goat.

It's about 10pm on Saturday here now, and I'm tired. But it's a good tired. As I've looked back over the last two days, I realize it's been a whirlwind. From Kampala, to Arua, then the overland trip to Yei. Wow. A crazy couple of days. I'm looking forward to seeing what tomorrow brings here in Africa!

God Bless,  
Steve