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Northwest leader spreads hope in Uganda

By Sheila Allen

VANCOUVER, Wash. - An average parent's response to post-college plans hatched by young adults with newly minted degrees in hand might be met with a degree of skepticism. But Tom and Becky Hixson gave support to their son Brad's plan to move to Africa for a year to serve with three friends from Whitworth College in Spokane, Wash.

Brad Hixson moved forward with his plan, secured funding and ultimately made arrangements to minister in Uganda, making his dream a reality. Tom and Becky Hixson have returned in recent days from Uganda on a mission trip of their own to serve alongside their son for three weeks. Tom Hixson, president of the Northwest Baptist Foundation, found a culture far removed from the achievement-oriented society Americans know so well.

"We saw for ourselves how underprivileged most people are in Uganda," Hixson said. "In most cases they don't have the education of necessary means to provide for their families."

Brad Hixson and his friends formed a ministry called 4Guys4Africa.

"The 4Guys4Africa did not want to just give money out of their pocket," Hixson said. "They wanted to teach people how to provide for themselves, instead of depending on funds from the Western world. This helps break the cycle of economic dependency based on financial aid that is not a long term solution."

The 4 guys joined forces with Come, Let's Dance, a non-profit, grassroots organization dedicated to empowering and inspiring the youth of Africa to initiate change in their own communities, one child at a time. They are based in Kampala, Uganda, and work in a multi-pronged effort including involving themselves with street children, getting them to hospitals, assisting the Come, Let's Dance Organization in obtaining non-governmental status, praying for them and providing means as they are able.

The Hixsons encountered a culture that was comparatively chaotic and unsettling when they first arrived. Sanitation is lacking in many ways, trash thrown onto the ground, with smoky fires burning heaps of debris along roadsides. Taxi vans, a main source of transportation, routinely had 16 to 20 people jammed into a single vehicle, and traffic jams happen on a regular basis. There is much to overcome in the perpetual cycle of poverty that pervades the area.

"There were heavy security bars on the windows in the home we stayed in," Hixson said, "and the house was surrounded by a solid wall topped with embedded glass and barbed wire. We also had a security guard on hand around the clock. It gave you the sense there was a big need for all this security."

"Brad is overseeing the sewing project called Thread of Life. This project helps women of Kampala earn a living and help provide for their families. We took gifts of aprons and a pattern that Brad's aunt made to offer as another option for the women to have a source of income. The women quickly picked up the skills needed to construct the aprons out of African-inspired fabric," Hixson said.

“They can now sell them to tourists looking for souvenirs to take home. Brad is also training a local man to run Thread of Life after the returns to the States.”

Another aspect of Come, Let’s Dance partnership with Light the World Church is the Mercy Ministries orphanage. There are approximately 80 children under the supervision of the orphanage, though many are gone during the week to boarding school. The Hixsons also took books, Bibles, flash cards and soccer balls to the children at the orphanage.

“The children loved the Bibles,” Hixson noted. “They wanted Becky to read the entire book without stopping. All of the children who live there are orphaned by the AIDS epidemic or have parents who have no means to provide for the children.”

Becky Hixson presented a booklet made by a weeknight missions class she teaches at Northside Baptist Church in Vancouver, Wash., to the children. It included photos of all the children in the Northside class.

“I told the children that these students in America had been praying for them,” Becky said. “They could not understand why someone across the world would do that. The caregivers for these children are young adults who grew up in similar circumstances, so it is basically kids taking care of kids.”

“The most exciting aspect of our trip was meeting the leaders, and those in training, with CLD, TOL, Mercy Ministries, and Light the World Church,” Hixson said. “Their enthusiasm for sharing the gospel and offering hope to those around them was such an encouragement to us. Every person we met was under the age of 30, yet they all had a desire to serve God and share his love.

“Though their resources were limited, their enthusiasm was abundant. The four pastors were so very appreciative of the Bibles and other study materials they received, and honestly couldn’t seem to express their appreciation enough.”

In addition to the Thread of Life sewing project, Come, Let’s Dance has also started a taxi business and is opening a guest cottage to house college students who come to volunteer with CLD.

Young African women are being trained to act as hosts and care for the needs of foreigners who come. They are given instructions in basics of cleaning the floors and toilets, and even the simple concept of supplying a trash can.

“We noticed tremendous growth in our son,” Hixson said. “It has been a life-changing experience for him, and it is great to see the new focus he has in life. It was a great opportunity to spend significant time working with him.”