

THE STORY OF THE MIRACLE KIDS

In May of 2017 the Siouxland Tanzania Educational Medical Ministry (STEMM) traveled as a mission team to Tanzania. As a celebration of 20 years of ongoing Ministry, the group of 13 included the mission founder, the executive director, several board members and a medical team. On May 6 after the first week of intense Ministry, the medical team and board were anxiously anticipating a day of safari at the Ngorogoro Crater. An unplanned delay in departure by an hour set forth a chain of events that would change their lives and Tanzania forever.

Near Karatu, as their Land Rover rounded a bend, they came upon a scene of unimaginable horror. The STEMM team pulled up mere seconds after an overloaded school bus which held two teachers and 35 seventh graders catapulted off a slippery road into a deep ravine. A nosedive impact hurled all 38 occupants into the windshield toward a near-certain grizzly death.



Screeching to a halt, our three medical personnel Kevin Nygard, Amanda Volkers and Jennifer Milby all sprang into action. Sorting frantically through lifeless and dismembered school kids, they were able to find three with a faint pulse of life. Amid the chaos and with no medical supplies they were able to stabilize and enable transport to a local medical facility. They had little hope for the survivors. One of the young ladies was demonstrating fixed and dilated pupils, a sign of brain death, at the scene.

After Sunday morning church service, still emotionally reeling from the mind-numbing horrors of the day before, the STEMM team happened upon a newspaper stand in Downtown Arusha. There they saw themselves in a photo headlining an article about the tragic event. Inquiring of the Newsboy the fate of the children, they were told they had been transported to Mount Meru Hospital in Arusha just a few blocks away. With no hesitation, they drove to the hospital to find complete lockdown security surrounding the children.

They milled around the parking lot and just as their hope of ever seeing the kids again was rapidly diminishing, a well-dressed Tanzanian approached them. Recognizing them from the photo, he introduced himself as the permanent Secretary of Health Ministry and warmly escorted them in to see the children. The emotional connection they felt and the relief of seeing all three children broken, battered but still alive, can't be articulated.

That evening, the three medical personnel made an impassioned plea to the STEMM board to do anything we could to prevent these children from languishing in a third-world medical facility. In spite of the seemingly insurmountable obstacles, they were answered with a unanimous conviction to do just that. So began a quest to bring restoration to these children that can only be described as miraculous.

The first and obviously highest hurdle was to convince an increasingly independent and proud Tanzanian government to admit their inadequacies and support the children's transfer. Dr. Steve Meyer, the Co-Founder and President of STEMM, enlisted the full support of fellow Co-Founder and Member of Parliament Lazaro Nyalandu. By 7 o'clock the following morning, a meeting had been arranged for the two of them to meet the Vice President of Tanzania.

To Dr. Meyer's amazement, the Vice President remembered him from a chance meeting 18 years prior. Pleading with her to think first about the children's welfare and place people above politics, they walked away without any inclination on her part whatsoever. On their way to the national memorial service, they went with the Vice President to see the children. She was obviously moved by their plight. During her visitation, a conversation was witnessed between her and President John Magufuli. Still, nothing was said.



Anticipating the worst but praying for the best, Dr. Meyer had already contacted Dr. Steven Joyce, Co-Medical Director of Mercy Hospital along with Dr. Larry Volz. Dr. Meyer was assured that as long as felt that all the surgical and medical care needed could be provided locally, Mercy Hospital in Sioux City would provide all of the medical services free of charge.

All that was needed was securing of passports, visas, and some way to get the critically injured children from Tanzania all the way to Sioux City, Iowa. That inspired a 60-hour ordeal of phone calls, prayerful pleading, governmental lobbying and faith beyond reason. Dr. Meyer's first call to trusted friend, Congressman Steve King ultimately proved to be the difference-maker.

Despite being on a tour of the Balkan countries, Steve King pledged his complete support. Impassioned phone calls were made to Senators, Congressmen, friends of legislators, State and Defense departments, the embassy and anyone who had any potential connection. By Tuesday night Dr. Meyer was told to expect a phone call from Steve Bannon who was to bring the case to Vice President Pence, but that call never came.

The rest of that Wednesday was spent frantically attempting to find a private air ambulance service. The first quote was \$380,000, and the second was equally impossible at \$300,000. Time was rapidly running out because the team was departing from Tanzania on Wednesday evening.



The team was able to check their email in Amsterdam, and they found out that Samaritan's Purse was in. They would do whatever was necessary to transport the miracle kids to America. Congressman King had refused to let this dream of American can-do spirit die, and he managed to convince his close friend Franklin Graham to give his essential services.

Incredibly, within 24 hours, passports were granted by the Tanzanian government for all three

children, as well as their mothers, a nurse, and an orthopedic surgeon to accompany them. The United States Embassy in Tanzania worked tirelessly engaging multiple staff members to secure the proper visas. After a week of miracle after miracle, the children were ready for the arduous journey to the U.S.

Departing Saturday afternoon in Tanzania the children were to arrive in Charlotte, North Carolina and then board a Gulfstream aircraft to fly into Sioux City Sunday evening. Unfortunately, a blown engine prevented that transfer from occurring so the children needed to be housed overnight at Charlotte Medical Center where they were stabilized for the final leg of their epic trip.

On May 15th, Doreen, age 13 and the most seriously injured, was the first to arrive in Sioux City. Febrile and with multiple extremity fractures, a severely shattered jaw and multiple thoracic spine fractures with near complete neurologic loss, her survival was in question. Within two hours of arrival to Mercy Emergency Department, multiple images performed and stabilization underway she was taken to the operating room. Dr. Dan Kensinger and Dr. Meyer of CNOS reduced and stabilized her hip and shoulder fractures. Following that, Dr. Jeffrey Dean spent four hours meticulously reconstructing her shattered jaw. A restoration was now underway.





Arriving later that day Sadia and Wilson, both 12 years old, had multiple extremity fractures. Between the three children, over 20 broken bones were discovered and ultimately treated. The following two days the second two children underwent a combined 15 hours of surgery. Finally, on Thursday, Doreen was taken back to the operating room for a four-hour surgery putting screws and rods in her back to address her tremendously unstable thoracic spine fractures by Drs. Quinton Durwood and Meyer.

Throughout the entire course of their pre and post-surgical care, the entire staff at Mercy Hospital went above and beyond the call of duty to provide exemplary compassionate care. In particular, the medical executive officers Dr. Steven Joyce and Larry Volz of Mercy Hospital volunteered countless hours providing medical and surgical care for the children.

By June 1, 2018 all three children were doing incredibly well. Wilson and Sadia were convalescing and rehabilitating at the Ronald McDonald House. While precious Doreen spent June and July making impressive neurological strides and physical strides in her recovery, eventually learning to walk again. The community avidly checked in on the children's progress, and cheered when the children threw the first pitch at an Explorer's game in July.

By mid-August, after 3 months in the United States, the children were ready to return to Tanzania. Their return was highly anticipated and over 1,000 people waited to celebrate with them as they descended from the Samaritan's Purse DC-8 which had transported them out of the country.



We were blessed to welcome Doreen, Wilson, and Sadhia back to Siouxland in 2018 for a few weeks. They saw the Bandits and the Musketeers, as well as getting a chance to reconnect with and thank the doctors



and nurses that aided their recovery. We were also so grateful to have them join us for our Night of Hope Fundraiser. Seeing them again we could hardly believe how far they had come. They have now returned to their studies in Tanzania, though they inspire our mission still.

As impressive as the rescue and recovery of these Miracle children is, perhaps more impressive has been the response of the country of

Tanzania and the community of Siouxland. The mindset of an entire country has been changed from deep despair over an inexplicable tragedy, to expectant hope, not only in the recovery of these survivors but the nature of human compassion. Tanzania was transformed by this act of love. Embracing the children as their own the entire Siouxland community has adopted these three children and their mothers as family. Seeing more similarities than differences the empathy toward the fallen children and outpouring of love to the survivors has been overwhelming.



Inarguably this heartwarming story of Christian love and compassion is a shining example of true heroism, American exceptionalism, and the true goodness of humankind. When Sadia's Muslim father, again and again, asked "WHY" he was told that the God we serve does not discriminate. He was told that Christ poured his love out to all. Why was so much effort made to not only rescue but restore three African children? If we truly DO believe that all lives matter it was simply the right thing to do.

Crossing the chasm of country, color, creed, and culture, the reclamation of these miracle children serves as a great example that when the world says no, God often provides the yes. It is our prayer that these children serve as a legacy of light and a living memorial to their fallen classmates. To that end, STEMM has made a commitment to do anything necessary to provide for the ultimate academic potential of these children. By sharing this story, praying for the children, and supporting us, you are now a part of this timeless tale of love.