

Vessels of Compassion

Don and Sondra Tipton, co-founders of Friend Ships, gave up a lucrative career to transport food and relief around the world.

Don and Sondra Tipton aren't intimidated by the impossible.

In the 1980s the successful California couple converted to Christianity, felt guilty about their lavish lifestyle and decided to do something about it. Don says he felt inspired to find a ship to take surplus food to poor people in other countries, even though he knew nothing about sailing.

The Tiptons quickly exhausted their own funds in their quest to serve God and love their neighbors. When a company finally donated a ship, the gift turned out to be a rust bucket the couple spent 4 1/2 years renovating. They have existed virtually hand to mouth ever since—living by faith, trusting in God, focusing on others. “We feel like God chose us because we were too ignorant to know it was impossible,” Sondra Tipton, 52, says with a smile.

For 16 years their Christian navy, Friend Ships, has been quietly plying the seas, delivering food, supplies and the gospel to the world's poorest people. Though the Louisiana-based organization is not widely known, it includes a fleet of five vessels and has delivered \$150 million worth of goods—including 53 million pounds of food—to 18 countries. It also responds to disasters and sent two ships to the New Orleans area after Hurricane Katrina. “It's fun because it's the Lord, you know,” Sondra says.

Back in the early 1980s, the Tiptons seemed unlikely

candidates for foreign missions. Don, 60, grew up in Southern California in the Assemblies of God, and though he accepted Christ as a youngster, he virtually abandoned the Christian lifestyle as an adult. He got involved in horses and wound up owning a polo club in the Beverly Hills area.

He also worked for the Gaming Alliance in Las Vegas and spent half his time there producing concerts and other events to lure gambling customers. "We dreamed up events that would cause people to come to Las Vegas and gamble on those lean days," he says.

Sondra grew up in Detroit in the Eastern Orthodox Church but says she never had a relationship with Christ. She explored Eastern religions and traveled overseas on spiritual quests. "She was looking all over the world for God," says Don, who married Sondra after they met at the polo club. "I've never seen anybody hunt Him like she was."

Even though Don was no longer a practicing Christian, he believed Christianity was the way to God and told Sondra so. Somewhat to his surprise, he convinced her. "A few weeks went by," Don says, "and I saw such a massive change in her attitude that I realized she had found what she was looking for like I'd never seen anybody find it."

As Sondra studied the Bible and prayed, another surprising thing happened: "She led me back to the Lord," Don says. They accepted Christ in 1984, married in March 1985 and were baptized in the Holy Spirit the following October.

With their demanding work schedule they didn't have time for church, but they studied the Bible devotedly. "We started

reading the Bible and seeing hundreds of Scriptures about helping the poor,” Sondra says, reciting Proverbs 19:17 and 28:27: “‘He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord.’ ‘He who gives to the poor will lack nothing.’ ... We got to looking around at the opulent lifestyle and we knew that wasn’t where Jesus was at.”

“There was no one there to explain away the Scriptures,” adds Don, who with his wife considers Friend Ships their church. “We just read it and believed. We began to act on it as if it was real, and it became real.”

Doing the ‘Impossible’

Then news of the 1985 Ethiopian famine hit the TV screens. “We saw the children of Ethiopia on television starving ... and we had bumper crops on [U.S.] farms,” Don says. “Actually, our granaries were full. Just the crumbs off the table of this rich country would feed most of those children who were starving.”

That’s when he had the idea to get a ship and take surplus food to Ethiopia’s hungry people. This was a man who owned a yacht he never used, who had no seagoing background. But he went to work in his spare time trying to find a vessel.

After several months, Don approached Bill Walker, president of Coast Engine and Equipment Co. in Tacoma, Washington. He explained what he needed, what he wanted to do with it-and the company agreed to donate a vessel. But when he saw the ship, Don wasn’t sure whether the gift was a blessing or curse. Though capable of hauling 5,000 tons of cargo, the 338-foot steel cargo ship was a rust bucket that hadn’t sailed in 30

years.

The Tiptons sold the polo club and moved aboard the vessel, unable to afford even to keep the power on while they worked. During the winter, "I remember wearing six layers of clothes during the day," Sondra says.

Many of their Christian friends thought they were crazy. Some believed they had started a cult. The Tiptons had to recruit street people to help clean, scrape and paint. "We'd get discouraged, then we'd go to prayer and we always felt the Lord was saying, 'Don't look to the left or right, don't look at circumstances, just look at Me,'" Sondra says.

Professional divers examined the ship and reported dents in the hull and rot in the stabilizer fins. The Tiptons prayed over the ship, and when it was hauled out for bottom work, "there wasn't a single dent. The stabilizer fins were fine," Sondra says. "The integrity of the hull was one of the finest they'd ever seen in the shipyard."

They christened the ship Spirit, and in 1990 it made its first voyage.

After Hurricane Katrina, Friend Ships sent its two disaster relief vessels, Hope and Mersea, to Gretna, Louisiana. Workers set up tents to distribute food, clothes, toiletries, tarpaulins and hot meals, while teams ministered, prayed and provided music. In September, Hurricane Rita damaged some of Friend Ships' warehouses and broke Spirit of Grace loose on its moorings in the Calcasieu River. But the ship did not suffer any damage. Friend Ships was able to provide relief for Rita victims, as well as for those affected by Hurricane Wilma

in October.

The story of how Friend Ships grew from one rusty tub to a fleet of five seaworthy vessels is a story of miracles, one after another, day in and day out. The Tiptons tell of the organization's early years in their book *Jesus & Company (Part I): An Incredible but True Adventure in Faith*, published in 1996 by Via Verde Publishing. They plan to write a sequel in a year or so.

Meanwhile their ships have taken food, clothing, medicines and other supplies to Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Haiti, Jamaica, St. Kitts-Nevis, Antigua, St. Lucia, Albania, Croatia, Angola, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, Gambia, the Soviet Union, Israel and the United States. They traveled to many of those places more than once, some as many as eight times. They've loaded ships in California, Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi, as well as Denmark and Holland.

Friend Ships has sent air shipments to Russia, to Japan after the Kobe earthquake and to Nicaragua for tsunami relief in 1992. It has sent containers by commercial vessel to Tonga, the Philippines, Israel, Haiti, Guatemala, Honduras and many other places. It also runs food programs for the needy in the U.S. and a job-training center for single mothers in Honduras.

Friend Ships' crews-all volunteers-have braved hurricanes and war zones, heat and ice. Two members of the crew died of cerebral malaria contracted in Africa. A third, Stuart Ver Wys, nearly succumbed to the same thing in 2005 after a visit to Haiti.

In the Soviet Union, they "helped tear the statue of Lenin down," Sondra says.

They arrived in Nicaragua shortly after the Sandinistas were ousted, in Haiti just after Jean-Bertrand Aristide took power, in Latvia just after Mikhail Gorbachev was kidnapped and in Albania four months after the dictator was killed. Who says the era of nautical adventure is over?

No Time for Fundraising

On a typical visit to a foreign port, a Friend Ships vessel brings millions of pounds of supplies to distribute to churches, orphanages and charities. Crew members set up camp, and when local residents arrive they find free face-painting and puppet shows, eyeglasses, haircuts, dental work, medical treatment, massages, clothes, food, cool drinking water, and movies such as Jesus and God's Story.

"They're treated like VIPs," Don says, noting that on a Honduras trip doctors saw 12,000 patients. A jet helicopter ferries physicians from ship to a clinic site. Friend Ships even has a portable surgical unit.

Yet the staff and crew of nearly 100 all are volunteers. No one receives a salary, not even the Tiptons. According to the Web site , Friend Ships spends 98.8 percent of its income on programs, 1.2 percent on administration and nothing on fundraising. "We don't fundraise, so nobody knows who we are," Don says, adding that he doesn't have the time, money or staff to devote to fundraising.

But Friend Ships' needs are met. Corporations, organizations and individuals donate surplus food, supplies and money. And many people have volunteered to serve, whether short- or long-term.

Debbie Stout, 26, of Sacramento, California, has been with Friend Ships for two years. "I really liked what the ministry was all about, and God just led me here," she says. "I love it, just absolutely love it. I'll probably be here for many years to come."

As for supporting herself: "We step out on faith and do what seems impossible," says Stout, who has been on voyages to Honduras, Haiti and Pensacola, Florida.

"God provides money in miraculous ways," says Jennifer Pratt, 26, of Seattle, who recently married fellow crew member Craig Pratt. She signed up because she felt God's leading, she says, even though she had no maritime skills. "I didn't have any knowledge or training," she says. "I knew I could do whatever they needed me to do."

Director of public relations Kaylene Whitley came from Australia intending to spend two years. She has been with Friend Ships eight years so far and has had to trust God to supply her financial needs. "I just entered a whole new realm of faith," she says.

The Tiptons say many more volunteers are needed, and not just sailors. The organization can use welders, construction workers, housekeepers, cooks, groundskeepers, bookkeepers and more. People are needed to sort clothes, count pills, cut fabric and wash dishes. Volunteers can work an hour, a day or stay for years. "We can use everybody that comes with a willing heart," Sondra says.

Unlike some charities, Friend Ships does not charge volunteers, and life is inexpensive because most of the crew lives on-board ship and eats donated food. Friend Ships also needs prayers and funds. A ship burns hundreds of thousands of

gallons of fuel on a typical voyage. And there are ongoing expenses, such as the mortgage on their new headquarters in Lake Charles, Louisiana.

Friend Ships moved from its Los Angeles headquarters two years ago after it became apparent that the Gulf of Mexico was the best launching pad for most of its destinations, whether Africa, the Middle East, Eastern Europe or Latin America. The Tiptons found waterfront property along the alligator-infested Calcasieu River on the north side of town, an eight- to 10-hour sail to the Gulf and a far cry from Southern California.

The headquarters carries a whiff of the exotic, like a scene from a Joseph Conrad novel. A yellow building with green trim sits in front of a yard full of equipment and supplies, the cargo ships Spirit and Spirit of Grace, and the 180-foot disaster relief vessels Mersea, Hope and Shalom.

Most of the crew lives aboard the Spirit. Meals are served in a large room with windows all around, offering views over the flat, wooded Louisiana countryside. The menu consists of surplus food donated by local restaurants, typically Mexican or Chinese.

Some of the crew, including the Tiptons, live in recreational vehicles parked in a grove of shade trees just north of the shipyards.

In fiscal year 2004-05 Friend Ships delivered more than \$5 million in commodities to Haiti, Honduras, Guatemala and the U.S. In late 2005, they were planning a trip to Haiti and a voyage to Israel to carry furniture and supplies to new immigrants.

Friend Ships recently completed a five-minute soundless video that gives a picture of what they do. The film opens with these written words:

"Today and every day 850 million people are hungry.

"300 million are children.

"25,000 will die today.

"Enough food is produced in the United States to keep the world from starving."

What follows are scenes of Christian volunteers delivering surplus goods to hungry people around the world -something the Tiptons were just too ignorant to know was impossible.

Ernest Herndon is religion editor for the McComb, Mississippi, Enterprise-Journal and author of 17 books, including Nature Trails and Gospel Tales (InterVarsity Press) and Paddling the Pascagoula with Scott Williams (University Press of Mississippi).

For more information about Friend Ships Unlimited, write to Port Mercy, 1019 N. First Ave., Lake Charles, LA 70601; call (337) 433-5022; or visit .