

One Woman and a Great Big God

✖ Irene Gleeson moved from an affluent suburb in Australia to a war zone in Uganda to start a ministry. Today she operates schools, feeding centers and churches for 6,000 children.

When Irene Gleeson got the call from God to leave Australia and go to Africa, it could not have come at a more inconvenient time for her.

She was happily married, attended a dynamic Pentecostal church, and lived in a spectacular beachside suburb of Sydney. With her four grown children and 13 grandchildren nearby, her life was rich, full and busy.

Gleeson's journey to this season in her life had been a bumpy one, punctuated by moments of deep sadness and tragedy. But those days had passed. Now at 47 everything was on track.

So when God unexpectedly summoned her to pull up roots, leave her oceanside life, and move into a war zone two continents away, Gleeson, not surprisingly, questioned His timing.

"I remember arguing with God about this," she says. "I didn't want to leave my beautiful beach houses, my grandchildren and the country I loved."

But despite her ties to home, she couldn't escape what she knew God had told her: "Now that your children have grown up ... go."

In 1991, just when everything was set for Irene to enjoy the prime of her life in Sydney, she instead stepped reluctantly yet obediently from beach-front suburbia into a culture of violence in northern Uganda.

In a small remote community, under the shade of a mango tree, Irene and husband Jeff's* vision of rescuing and

rehabilitating orphaned children began.

Today that tree is still there, no longer surrounded by the sounds of gunfire and mourning but by joy and singing. Strapping young men and mature young women who call Irene, now 64, “Grandmum” can still recite the words and gestures to the songs she taught them in the last decade.

Back then, these Ugandans were destitute children who sat like zombies in the dust, trapped in a longstanding insurgent war that ignited in 1987 and brought widespread social devastation to the region.

Some were perpetrators then. Many were victims of The Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), a rebel group led by religious extremist Joseph Kony that terrorized the country for more than two decades. One of Kony’s tactics was the violent abduction and recruitment of children for use as soldiers, porters and sex slaves.

While the warfare raged, tens of thousands of Ugandans died or were mutilated by the LRA, and more than 2 million were forced into Internally Displaced People camps. At one time 200 or more of these squalid settlements, each housing up to 30,000 people, operated in the north of the country.

Conditions were appalling. All had overcrowding, open sewers, and no electricity or running water—only handouts from overseas aid agencies helped people survive. The conflict in northern Uganda was described by the United Nations as one of the world’s most-neglected humanitarian crises.

* The name of Gleeson’s husband has been changed to protect his identity.

Life From the Dust

Working alongside Irene since those days, these rescued young people have helped her establish Childcare Kitgum Servants (CKS), an umbrella ministry for educational and humanitarian

services that reach 8,000 children a day.

CKS operates three primary schools and clinics that serve 6,500 children, a vocational training center for 1,300 students, a 60-bed AIDS hospice, 15 wells, a community church, and a radio station that broadcasts the gospel message to more than 1 million people living in the area.

Yet the transformation would never have happened had Irene listened to counsel she got when she attempted to heed God's call. Before she left Sydney, she approached several aid organizations and missions groups and told them: "I want to go to a war zone where no one else is going and build schools."

They were not impressed.

"You're very naïve," the aid organizations told her. "Get a Bible-college degree," some missions groups advised.

All of them questioned her capabilities. What could a grandmother possibly know about the development issues of nations in crisis? Discouraged but not deterred, Irene and Jeff made a decision to go it alone. The only question was, where?

"We looked at all the Scriptures in relation to God's direction, especially Exodus 23:20, where God promises His protection and provision for the journey ahead," Irene explains. One passage that leapt from the page was Ephesians 2:10, which says we are God's "workmanship" created for "good works."

"I just envisaged footsteps leading me to a particular place for good works, so I prayed and asked God where that would be," Irene says.

Well-meaning friends suggested possible mission hotspots: Sri Lanka, Tanzania, other parts of Africa. But it wasn't until someone told her about northern Uganda, describing the civil

war and plight of the child soldiers, that her heart leaped.

"I knew straight away that this was the place God had prepared for me. Despite the dangers, it was perfect," she says.

Not so perfect was the reaction family and friends gave her when she told them she was selling everything to live in Uganda.

"My family thought I was crazy," she says, her eyes twinkling. "My children were distressed because I'd only recently become a stable Christian—and now I was leaving them."

Determined, and after holding two garage sales and auctioning their two beach houses, Irene and Jeff packed everything into a cheap caravan, shipped it to Uganda and booked their flights to Entebbe. Upon arriving, they boarded a bus and said to the driver, "We want to travel as far as this bus goes." The last stop was Kitgum: a war-torn district 40 kilometers south of the Sudan border.

"I can vividly remember that bus trip," Irene says. "As we crossed the Nile River the scenery drastically changed from lush banana plantations into thorny scrub. It was then I said to God: 'I could never live here. You'd better confirm this is the right destination.'" As they traveled along, the heat intensified, and they noticed villagers cheering them and waving them on.

"I asked the driver why people were cheering," Irene says. "He told me this was the first bus that had made it through rebel territory since 1986. I heaved a sigh of relief, knowing that the north of Uganda was God's plan."

Irene clearly remembers the day they got off the bus in Kitgum. "Our senses were completely assaulted. I was used to smelling the beautiful aroma of coconut oil wafting up from the beach, not the stench of dirt and sweat."

The people hemmed them in from every side. "They couldn't quite figure us out," she continues. "Then I noticed something moving across the ground—a woman. Her body was twisted with polio. She was crawling on all fours like a spider.

"I gasped. And then she reached out to shake Jeff's hand. Even though I was physically shocked, I can recall thinking, *I will help these people, no matter how hard it gets.*"

Irene's first job was to convince the local council to give her land for her mission. Eventually, after 12 months of negotiations, they were given 18 acres of dry, dusty scrub. It was here that Jeff began farming and Irene's ministry to 50 traumatized kids took shape under a large mango tree.

"I started by teaching them songs like, 'Jesus loves me, this I know,'" Irene says, demonstrating the gestures. "I think at first they all thought I was a little crazy—'What was this strange white woman doing?'

"The kids all looked like zombies. They had seen too much. It was then I realized that nothing, not even my own childhood, could compare with what these children had suffered and were still suffering. War had robbed them of any childhood joy."

Persevering through the suspicion of villagers, the blank looks of the children and the watchful eyes of local authorities, Irene eventually took her "tree ministry" to other parts of Kitgum. "I was singing and working with puppets in three places around town," she recalls. "I'd start in one location, then walk three kilometers to the next place and do the same thing."

Eventually she added English lessons to her repertoire, carving out the letters of the alphabet in the dust—a challenge, considering the language barriers. "As I was teaching them, I began noticing their bloated bellies and ringworm, so I bought medicines and employed a local lady," she recalls. "Next, I started feeding them tomatoes and beans

from my little caravan. Water was another issue, so I worked with the locals to sink two water bores."

Irene faced another challenge: finding a way to continue financing her work. She had been using the money from the sale of her two homes in Australia, but that resource was quickly diminishing. Her solution was to raise funds from her family, and from friends' churches and ministries.

Over time, through donations and sponsorship, she and Jeff were able to build a school, then another and another. "I couldn't have rehabilitated the destitute children without God or the support of those who love African children."

Rock-Bottom Redemption

It was Africa's children who first drew Irene's heart toward the continent. A year before she and Jeff moved to Uganda they made a trip to Kenya and Ethiopia to visit the children they sponsored through World Vision. What Irene saw there unnerved her.

Confronting the poverty unlocked feelings in Irene that she couldn't ignore. The children who greeted her with sad, knowing eyes—ones who had been rejected, abandoned and left to fend for themselves—connected with her and stirred up emotions from her own troubled past.

"I never felt wanted or loved as a child," admits Irene, whose military father left the family when she was born. "Even my mother considered adopting me out, but couldn't go through with it."

Irene's mother went on to have seven more children to different fathers. "I became the house-mother to my brothers and sisters," she says, describing her turbulent and unsettled childhood. She moved from home to home, enduring poverty, her mother's depression and sexual abuse from her stepfather.

When she was 14 her mother died of lung cancer. Irene was left to take care of her younger siblings. "I spent most of my childhood protecting and defending children," she says. "I think that's why I feel so strongly about the children of northern Uganda."

At age 16 she was captivated by the kindness and attention of her first boyfriend, who offered her security and an escape. They married and raised four children. After 20 years they had drifted apart and the marriage ended.

Irene decided to go back to school and get a teaching degree. Afterward, she left Australia to trek the Himalayas and explore Eastern religions, but her searching was fruitless. She returned to Australia uncertain about her future.

At 37, she hit rock bottom. She was divorced, the mother of a drug-dependent son, depressed, suicidal and living in a neighbor's back yard with her latest boyfriend. "My life was a complete mess," Irene says. "I can recall shrugging my shoulders and saying to God, 'OK, now You can have what's left of me.' "

It was just enough for God to work with. Shortly after that jaded surrender Irene committed her life to Christ and encountered God in a new, fresh way. "I remember crying out to God, saying, 'Father, please be Lord of my life.' As soon as I did this, I was flooded with joy and I heard Him say: 'Everything will be good from now on.' "

Over the next 10 years Irene worked in a secular college, attended a vibrant Pentecostal church, and met and married Jeff, who shared her passion for the poor. Several years into the marriage, they made the trip to Africa to visit their World Vision-sponsored children.

"[It] completely changed me," Irene says. "I never knew people lived in such terrible poverty. I was in a state of shock. I had a burning in my heart to redress the imbalance; but it was

just a matter of time.”

‘Cinderella’ Children

It has taken time, effort and perseverance from Irene and her rescued youth to carve out the CKS ministry in this remote, war-torn region. Doing it hasn’t been without challenges, Irene notes.

“Living in Uganda, facing the daily issues of civil war, was terrible,” she says. “Nights were filled with bombing and gun shots; the days were filled with mothers crying for their children.”

Many times the war came to Irene in the middle of the night. The first time it did, Irene and Jeff were awakened by torchlight through their caravan window. Getting up to have a look, Irene opened the door and was confronted by five men brandishing guns and machetes.

“One of them put a bayonet to my chest; another had a big AK-47—he was cranking it,” she recalls. One armed man smashed Irene’s arm with a stick. Then they slashed Jeff’s ear.

Says Irene: “I thought: *Oh, no; we’re dead*. That’s when I realized the next face I would see would be Jesus’, so I closed my eyes and started murmuring: ‘Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ.’

“I waited with my eyes closed, and nothing happened. When I opened my eyes, I saw them lunging at me, but it was like a glass wall was stopping them. It was then I knew how much power is in the name of Jesus.”

After about 20 minutes, Irene screamed at the men, “Go in the name of Jesus!” and they fled into the night.

The attacks and subsequent victories left Irene feeling all the more determined to save the people of northern Uganda. Jeff, on the other hand, felt traumatized and vulnerable. A

short time later, after traveling back to Kampala for a rest, he sent a letter to Irene asking for a divorce.

Devastated, yet pragmatic, Irene continued on with her ministry, alone. Her strength came from Christ, she says; her inspiration from the many children she helped rescue over the years. Ones like Vincent—as a 12-year-old he had watched in horror as armed rebels set fire to his hut, killing his entire family.

“This young man is now studying to be a doctor,” Irene says proudly. “He comes back and volunteers in our AIDS hospice.”

There’s also 10-year-old Francis—“a special child who was pulling along his shy friends to my tree ministry,” she recalls.

“He was the first child to sit in the dust, lifting his face and arms to the sky as he sang. One morning he sat silently, tears streaking down his cheeks. I was told through the translator that he was often beaten by his mother, a local witch doctor,” Irene says.

Irene took Francis under her wing, helping him complete CKS primary school and five years of mechanical college. Now, at 26, Francis is the founder of a 700-member community church in the area. “It is amazing and humbling for me to see God raising up His children to reach their full potential,” Irene says.

“Irene’s love and passion for the people she works with is truly inspiring,” says Grant Windle, producer of the award-winning documentary *Cinderella Children: Rescuing Children From the Ashes of War* and a pastor in Brisbane, Australia. Grant and a cameraman from his church traveled to Uganda to capture Irene’s remarkable story. “What God has done through the obedience of one lady who left the comforts and security of her home to follow Him is amazing. This was a story that needed to be told.”

A Sustainable Hope

Also inspired by her work is Bible teacher Kenneth Copeland, who prophesied over Irene in May at a convention in Sydney. He told her: "This thing is not done yet. You haven't done all you can do. It's going to keep getting larger and larger and doing more. But it will not be by more effort on your part, it will be by supernatural multiplication and divine release from heaven."

The enlarging Copeland spoke of is already taking shape. Irene has been given a parcel of land in the far north of Uganda that she believes is reserved for a special use. "God has just shown me 16,000 people who have been hiding from war in the mountains for 10 years. I must go and rescue them too," she insists.

Construction is also under way—at CKS a four-story creative arts center is being built that will provide a way for local Ugandans to make and sell their crafts.

Sometimes, Irene admits, the enormity of the work feels overwhelming, especially now that she is in her mid-60s. At those times God reminds her it's His work and He'll bring it to completion. He has also promised her good health, protection and comfort when she feels lonely, she says.

And her work has not gone unnoticed in the international community. The breadth of what Irene has accomplished in the last 18 years was recognized by her native Australia in June. She received a government award—Honour of Officer of the Order of Australia—for "service to international relations, particularly through sustained aid for children affected by war and HIV/AIDS in northern Uganda."

"I've often said to God, 'Lift your hands off this work and I'll go back to Australia.' But He doesn't.

"I just have to look at the faces of these children and

realize they all need Jesus. Yes, I miss my grandchildren and the life I had. But, truly, if I was back in Australia I would not be so fulfilled. Life is meaningful for me here.

“And despite the hot sun and my fair skin, the electricity going out, and the bland food, I’m in the right place.”

Nicole Partridge is a freelance journalist based in Australia who writes for magazines, newspapers and overseas aid groups. She lives in Sydney with her husband and two children. To make a donation or to sponsor one of Irene Gleeson’s children, visit [www.cinderellachildren.org](#). To order a copy of Cinderella Children, the inspiring documentary of Gleeson’s life, go to [www.cinderellachildren.org](#).

Facts About the Worlds’ Children

- 2.2 billion worldwide
- 143 million are orphans
- 2 million were HIV-positive at the end of 2007
- 25,000 die per day due to poverty
- 3 million have no shoes
- Every three minutes in a developing nation a child dies from malnutrition
- 9.2 million who were born in 2007 died before age 5
- One in seven have no access to health services
- 400 million have no access to safe water
- One in three do not have adequate shelter
- 121 million are not educated

Sources: U.N. AIDS; U.S. DOJ; UNICEF; ;

Want to Help?

Want to lend a hand? These 10 Christian organizations are a few of the many making a difference through compassionate ministry.

World Help / *Forest, Va.*; ; 800-541-6691. A nonprofit dedicated to helping children through community development, wellness programs, evangelism and relief.

Hopegivers International / *Columbus, Ga.*; ; 866-373-HOPE. A faith-based nonprofit and NGO that cares for orphans and provides a range of ministry-training options.

Partners Worldwide / *Grand Rapids, Mich.*; ; 800-919-7307. PW seeks to eliminate poverty through job-creation initiatives in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Feed the Children / *Oklahoma City*; ; 800-627-4556. FTC delivers food, medicine, clothing and more to victims of poverty, war or natural disasters.

Stop Child Trafficking Now / *New York*; ; 212-333-7286. SCTN targets the sex-trafficking underground, seeking criminal prosecution of the buyers and predators.

Hope for Haiti / *Orlando, Fla.*; ; 407-805-9532. HFH provides permanent housing, education and love for impoverished, abandoned and seriously ill children in Haiti.

ZA0 / *Fort Mill, S.C.*; ; 888-926-9283. ZA0 offers safe drinking water and more to areas of Tanzania, Kenya and Burkina Faso.

Convoy of Hope / *Springfield, Mo.*; ; 417-823-8998. This outreach to the poor fed some 6 million people in 2008.

World Relief / *Baltimore*; ; 800-535-5433. WR reaches children with efforts that include prenatal programs, food, shelter, medical care and more.

Floresta USA / *San Diego*; ; 800-633-5319. A nonprofit, Floresta uses reverse-deforestation projects to help the poor while teaching stewardship of the land.

–Valerie G. Lowe