

She's on a Rescue Mission

Pam Cope didn't close her heart when she learned about vulnerable African orphans. Today she is reaching children around the world.

☒ Some people can read an article about an alarming human rights issue without giving it a second thought. Not Pam Cope.

On October 29, 2006, *The New York Times* reported that a 6-year-old named Mark Kwadwo and other young children were working as slaves on fishing boats in Ghana. Cope and her husband, Randy, read the article during a trip to New York, and Cope was so moved that, upon returning to their home in Neosho, Missouri, she tracked down the reporter and put the wheels in motion to rescue Mark and six other children who had been sold into slavery.

Nine weeks later, the mission was accomplished. The children were safe in a Christian-run orphanage in Accra, Ghana, where they would receive an education.

Oprah Winfrey noticed the same newspaper article and sent correspondent Lisa Ling to investigate. Much to Ling's surprise, Mark and some of his friends had been rescued by the time she arrived. She reported her findings on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in February 2007. Oprah invited Cope to appear on the program and honored her for her heroism.

"The next time you see a story and the story grabs your heart and it haunts you, you'll think about Pam and what one woman can do to make a difference," Oprah told the audience.

Cope, now 47, made her seventh visit to Ghana this fall. She and her team rescued 13 more children and placed them in three homes, where they will be cared for, educated and provided life skills. Village of Life, a new center built by donations

Cope helped raise through her Touch a Life Foundation, celebrated its grand opening in March. It is located in Kete-Krachi, a fishing town near the Lake Volta region, and can accommodate 24 children and house-parents.

Led by the Spirit, Cope is following the biblical mandate to serve orphans and those who have no means to return a favor. To date, she has helped free 69 children by working closely with George Achibra, a former teacher in Kete-Krachi who now holds an administrative position in the region's educational system.

Careful negotiations with the fishing village's "master" have enabled him to rescue the children; no money changes hands for their release. Achibra explains to the masters that their activities are against the Human Trafficking Act, a law passed by the Ghanaian government in December 2005.

Russell Simmons, who was recently appointed United Nations Goodwill Ambassador for the Permanent Memorial to Honor the Victims of Slavery and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, says some 27 million people worldwide are being exploited through human trafficking. This broad category covers child labor, migrant smuggling, sex worker trafficking, debt bondage and "old-fashioned slavery."

In Ghana, part of the challenge in rescuing children is finding good homes for them. If returned to their parents, they will likely be resold. "Unfortunately, we don't have the money to care for all of them long term," Cope says. "We budget for approximately 10 years of support per child [\$100 per child a month]."

Investing for Eternity

If she had not experienced deep sorrow herself, Cope might not be rescuing kids on the other side of the world. But her son, Jantsen, died unexpectedly on June 16, 1999, from an undiagnosed heart ailment when he was only 15 years old. The

tragedy rocked the Copes' small Missouri town, where Pam owned a hair salon and Randy worked as a publishing executive.

After Jantsen's death, Cope spent time re-examining her life, as she details in her book, *Jantsen's Gift* (Grand Central Publishing/Hachette). "When tragedy comes, you are forced to sit and reflect and evaluate what has been driving your life, what your focus and true core values have been—and it can be pathetic," she told *Charisma*.

"As I was going through that process, I asked myself, 'What am I investing my life in that truly doesn't have any eternal impact?' I discovered that, when I was really honest, most of it *didn't* have any eternal impact. I was ready to turn things around."

Her journey initially took her to Vietnam. She and Randy had decided to give a portion of Jantsen's memorial fund to some family friends involved in adoption and missions work.

While in Vietnam, they became enamored with a baby abandoned by his mother and living in an orphanage. Their own 11-year-old adopted daughter, Crista, begged them to adopt him. They finally relented, and Van Cope became part of their family in August 2000.

Shortly after that trip, Cope and her husband decided to donate the remainder of Jantsen's memorial fund to a woman named Mai Lang, whose focus was getting children off the streets in Vietnam and providing them with an education and a safe place to live.

Cope's big turning point occurred in late 2000. She had been trying to raise more funds to benefit Lang's efforts in Vietnam (without much success) and came to grips with the fact that she had personally not made any huge financial sacrifice. She felt it was time to give up something she valued: her diamond solitaire wedding ring.

“My decision to give up that ring was the moment that things really started to happen,” Cope says. “At that point, I began to take my work—and myself—seriously.”

In 2001 Cope learned about a 2-year-old girl in Vietnam who lived in the same orphanage Van had come from. The child had developed mild cerebral palsy as a result of physical abuse the mother experienced while pregnant. After seeing pictures of the little girl, Cope couldn’t stop thinking about her. In October she and Randy adopted her and named her Tatum.

Since the inception of Touch a Life in 2000, Cope has gone the extra mile to alleviate suffering, one child at a time. Early on, she established what she calls “The Fixer Fund” to help meet the serious medical needs of children who might otherwise die or spend their lives crippled. For example, she lined up a sponsoring physician in the United States and obtained a medical visa for a Vietnamese girl named Phoo Twee Do, whose legs had been blown off by a homemade bomb and who was battling a serious infection.

Phoo received prosthetic legs—and was adopted by a loving couple from Tulsa, Oklahoma. Without Cope’s intervention, Phoo might have become another sad statistic.

An Expanded Worldview

Cope didn’t grow up in a churchgoing family. Her faith journey stems from a prediction in 1980 that the world was coming to an end. At that time, Cope was a senior in high school. She remembers going to a revival every night with her friends—hungry and searching for answers.

“I can remember one night when the pastor asked who wanted to become a Christian, and I felt this magnetic pull. I went forward and said, ‘I’m ready to do this.’ ” Unfortunately, Cope did not have an intimate relationship with Jesus, and for years she struggled with her faith.

“Up until the point of losing Jantsen,” she says, “there was this constant struggle of wavering back and forth between not being worthy, not being knowledgeable enough of the Word, and really trying to get my arms around forgiveness. I wasn’t sure that forgiveness was something that was truly for me.

“When Jantsen died, I was forced to reflect on everything I had read in the Bible and my relationship with God up to that point. I was desperate for an authentic relationship.”

Cope says after Jantsen’s death, she would beg God to fill her with His presence. “I would feel His peace wash over me and know it was His presence,” she says. “Even though it was such a painful time of grief, it was so powerful with God.”

Cope admits she was a performance-oriented perfectionist before Jantsen died. “Everything was focused on my immediate family, my needs. My world was pretty small,” she says, noting that Jantsen and Crista had most things money can buy.

Since then, traveling to Third World countries has opened Cope’s eyes. It is hard to justify spending \$150 on something as frivolous as matching pajamas and slippers after seeing three generations of the same family living in a one-room apartment in Vietnam, she says.

In recent years, the Copes have made some significant financial adjustments to help support more children in need. For example, they got rid of their credit cards and committed to an all-cash budget. They also downsized by moving into a smaller house.

Cope sometimes struggles to find a balance between work and family life. But she hopes her children will learn through her example that we have a responsibility to take care of people in need.

Being Jesus’ hands and feet starts with a simple prayer, says Cope: “Jesus, break my heart for what breaks Yours.”

A few weeks after Jantsen died, Cope says her brother-in-law told her, "Your life will definitely be sad, but it's also possible that it will be richer and fuller than ever before." Neither of them had any idea how prophetic his words would turn out to be.

Cope, whose family now lives in a Dallas suburb, never dreamed she would be involved in global outreach. Last year in Ghana, some 7,000 miles away from home, she felt God's presence in a special way, she says. Standing under a tree on a 110-degree day eating banana Laffy Taffy, she knew she was right where she needed to be, doing what God called her to do—rescuing children who otherwise had no hope of a normal life.

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