



The Gweimen Centre Newsletter

A Self Sufficiency Center for Widows and Orphans of HIV/AIDS

Winter 2010

The Gifts of Wise Men (and Women)

Early in the Christmas story Herod, the cruel King in Judea, goes on a rampage trying to kill the newborn "King of the Jews." Mary and Joseph have to flee their homeland and find political asylum in Egypt. And so it is that the two-year-old Jesus begins life as a refugee!

We can feel for Joseph as he wonders how to provide for the new mother and child so far from home. We trust that the Jewish community in Alexandria, true to its sacred tradition of hospitality, would arrange lodging for the strangers. But would there be work for another carpenter in their community? Food for three hungry refugees? Provisions for the needs of a household? What will shield these vulnerable aliens from disease and outright poverty?

At this point those who love this story may be remembering those generous visitors from the East. They brought precious gifts to the baby in Bethlehem. Little did these wise men know that the treasures of gold, frankincense and myrrh could prove a godsend for mother and child, supplying their necessities during months or years in Egypt.

We on the U.S. board of the Gweimen Centre represent some mothers and children who are also vulnerable to disease and outright poverty. They live in Kwoi and other villages in Nigeria. They are widows and orphans of HIV/AIDS. And if you have gifts of money to offer at this holiday season, they will surely be "God sent." And we pledge to be responsible like Joseph to turn your treasures into food, shelter, clothing, medication, education, protection and plenty of love and hugs for these vulnerable ones.

THE STORY OF RAHILA

Rahila is a staff person with Gweimen Centre and works as a cook at our Ankung Centre. She is 45 years old, a widow, and she is HIV positive.

Rahila was married in 1986. The marriage was blessed with four children. Her late husband was a graduate and worked as a school teacher, while Rahila has been a full time house wife.

Her husband became ill and died in 1996. Shortly after his death, her in-laws came and took everything that belonged to them, claiming they all belong to their late brother. Rahila was left

with four children and nothing else. She tried to lay her complaints in different quarters but no one would listen to her. It is a cultural pattern in her village for it to happen this way.

When Rahila's mourning period was over, she took up petty trading, selling sugarcane, oranges, peppers and the like to sustain herself and the children. Together with her children, she farmed most of their food and the Lord continued to be gracious to them. One day, a good Samaritan called her and gave her their small mattress, and that night they felt like royalty sleeping on a mattress again!

It was in this destitute condition that Gweimen Centre came to her rescue and she was employed as a cook and her children could receive a free lunch daily.

Out of desperation her first daughter, Grace, got married and has three children of her own. Recently, the principal of the school where her son Stephen attends promised full sponsorship for him.

Rahila does not know whether her husband's death benefits have been paid or not. She is thanking God for the daughter who is married and for Stephen being sponsored by his principal. She is left with her daughters, Esther and Patience, to look after. They work hard on the farms to produce most of the food they need for the family.

-As told by Mrs. Ankuma, Sec'y, Gweimen, Nigeria



Note on “Customary Law”

The experience of Rahila and her children is typical of many “widows of AIDS” all across Sub-Saharan Africa. Without more details we cannot know how events actually transpired, but it would not be uncommon if her late husband’s brother had come to Rahila a few days or weeks after the funeral to inform her that she and her children needed to find another place to live. She might also be told: “Be sure to leave the furniture.”

Rahila learned the awful truth that in many areas of Nigeria, as well as other countries in Africa, local inheritance laws state that when a man dies without a will his property “follows the blood-line.” A widow, not being of the blood, has no claim to any share!

Such is the power of “customary law,” a traditional code that operates alongside the national courts and continues to dominate local practice. Through it many AIDS widows are denied an inheritance and left homeless and destitute. With more and more women becoming infected with the AIDS virus, the number of widows and orphans impoverished by customary law can only multiply.

Our Gweimen family feels acutely the challenge and burden of expanding our services for widows if we are going to help write hopeful endings to other stories such as that of Rahila. -Editor

Gweimen Orphans Thrive

Can you imagine anything worse for a child than losing a parent? Even if that child is able to go on living in her own home and attending her own school, we would worry about how she will survive this calamity. Is she eating well? How is she doing in school? Are there changes in her behavior?

This tragedy for an orphan in Nigeria who has lost her parents to HIV/AIDS, and may herself be infected with the AIDS virus, can be compounded in many ways. Without medication the virus itself can take a toll on her health. A drop in family income can cut into her diet, maybe leaving her malnourished, and undermining her attendance and academic performance in school.

Furthermore, in Nigeria only a child whose family can pay the school fees (i.e. tuition) is admitted as a student, and if enrolled, she will need a school uniform and will be expected to bring pencils and paper from home.

These are the hazards that threaten the health and education of orphans in Nigeria. Without medication, nourishment and money for school fees and supplies, they face not only losing their chance at an education, but their health and their very lives can be at risk.

Now let me tell you about the 50 orphans who come to Gweimen Centre in Kwoi every morning before school. A loving staff provides a good breakfast, ARV (anti-retroviral) medications, school supplies, plenty of hugs, a prayer, a clean school uniform (if needed) and money for school fees for those who need it. At 8 AM they’re off to school. Then back to Gweimen for lunch, play time, naps, Bible study, homework, and a good supper. In early evening these orphans return to the local homes of their grandmas and aunties where they get some more love, enjoy what family they have, and sleep.

In the local school in Kwoi our Gweimen orphans stand out as a group. Though the majority are HIV positive, they are among the healthiest. Though they lack family support for the costs of schooling, they are regular in school attendance, academically ahead and they stay in school longer. We can’t give them back their parents, but with your help we can defend these orphans in our care against some of the worst threats to their health, their education, their future, and their very lives.

Vern Geurkink, Gweimen U.S.A.

Joy, Joy, Joy

Some of us are worriers. It’s not a good thing. I don’t know about you, but my best time to worry is in the middle of the night. Things seem scarier when it’s dark. When I can’t sleep, I tell myself that God is giving me time to pray, a quiet time to talk to him. And since not sleeping usually comes when I am particularly stressed, it makes sense that God knows that I need to slow down and take time to talk to him. According to one translation of Philippians 4 we need to “Shape our worries into prayers.”

If you read the rest of that chapter, it’s clear that the opposite of worrying is rejoicing. The opposite of being anxious is being joyful. But transforming worry into joy takes a miracle. It’s a God thing. Only he can do it. That’s why the peace that comes when it happens is beyond our understanding.

It doesn’t mean the scary thing has gone away. It just means we can rest in God’s care for us. When our son Jonathan was little (he’s big and in college now), he would sometimes have nightmares. He would wake up and cry for me to come. I would go in his room and he would say, “Just sing ‘Praise God from whom all blessings flow’ and then everything will be all right.” It seemed like a funny choice. But praising God made his fears go away.

Some of the children associated with the Gweimen Centre are really sick. Many have AIDS or are HIV positive. Many are orphans. They come to the Centre every day for help. We feed them and give them lots of love. We pay their tuition so they can go to school.

The name Gweimen means, “Comfort, welcome, hospitality.” It is a lot like the word “shalom.” We help the children face the scary things in their lives.

The children love to sing. One of their favorite songs goes like this:

“Joy, Joy, Joy. In my heart is ringing. See what the Lord has done for me, died just to set me free. In my heart a melody, it’s joy, joy, joy.”

They sing about joy even when their lives are hard. They have joy in spite of their situation. That’s the real kind. Some even have joyful names like Blessing, or Gift, or Marvelous, or Precious, or Miracle.

Joy that comes when you get a snow day, or receive a present, or come home to your favorite meal, or get an A on a test or a job promotion, that’s joy. But it is a joy that depends on outward things. It’s good and real. But it’s not the same as the joy that Jesus gives us.

At the Gweimen Centre, I have seen real joy in people who were very poor or sick or desperate. I visited a small prison in the village where prisoners live in a terrible place with no electricity. Abigail, the director of the Gweimen Centre, goes inside this dark place once a week and does a Bible study with the prisoners there. She invited me to go along a couple of times. That jail is really dark, especially at night. A very scary place!

Once while I was there, Abigail told about Jesus being the light of the world. She taught the men that Jesus is their light, even if their outward circumstances were really dark. Abigail talked with those prisoners in that scary place about being a light to the people around them.

It is only when it is dark that we know the importance of light. And it is only because of Jesus that we know real joy. The Gweimen Centre may not seem like a huge deal in the face of the terrifying AIDS pandemic in the world. But it is a real beacon of light in a dark, scary place. It is bringing the light of Jesus to people who understand that joy is not about our circumstances.

--Mary Sytsma, Gweimen U.S.A.

Thanks & Giving

In a few weeks, most of us will sit down with our families and friends to a traditional Christmas dinner. We will *give thanks* to our amazing, graceful God for his blessings upon us all, for *giving* all that is His, to each and every one of us. “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. (Matthew 7:7)

Thanks & Giving.....the two seem to go hand in hand, in fact just about every scripture that speaks of thanks, also speaks of giving. Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1Corinthians 15:57) The generous donations *given* to the Gweimen Centre this year 2010 have far exceeded our projected goals.

The Gweimen Centre would like to share with you a brief history of the past few years of *giving* (does not include gifts in kind):

Year 2008.....	\$ 9,692.00
Year 2009.....	\$18,413.00
Year 2010 (to date).....	\$39,424.00

As you can see, we have experienced over a 100% increase each year, and 2010 is not over yet! *Thanks* to your continued generosity, the Gweimen Centre now employs a staff of Nigerians that include five widows to cook, a nurse, an administrative assistant, a supervisor of the Centre and a storekeeper of the supplies.

In the scheme of charitable organizations and fundraising efforts, you might be inclined to think of the above numbers as “small peanuts”, and relatively speaking you are correct. In closing, I would like to leave you with a Hawaiian parable (taken from the book “Half the Sky”).....

-Linda Palmer, Treasurer Gweimen Centre, USA

A man goes out on the beach and sees that it is covered with starfish that have washed up in the tide.

A little boy is walking along, picking them up and throwing them back in to the water.

“What are you doing, son?” the man asks.

“You see how many starfish there are? You’ll never make a difference.”

The boy paused thoughtfully, and picked up another starfish and threw it into the ocean.

“It sure made a difference to that one, “ he said.



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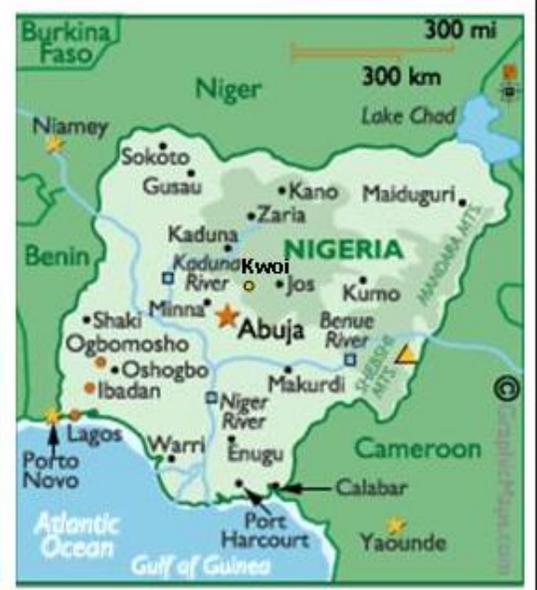
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