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## Building a Memorial to a Son, One Child at a Time

By SHARON LaFRANIERE

Seven years ago, Pam Cope owned a hair salon in Neosho, a tiny southwest Missouri town, and her husband, Randy, had just been appointed vice president of a company that ran a string of newspapers there and in neighboring states.

Their lives revolved around their son's baseball games, their daughter's dance lessons and trips to places like [Walt Disney World](#).

"My world was very small," Mrs. Cope said in a telephone interview in late January from Neosho, where she still lives. "I was pretty shallow."

Few would say that today.

Early last month, Mrs. Cope returned from [Ghana](#), where she had financed the rescue of seven children who were working as indentured servants on fishing boats for as little as \$20 a year. The youngest of them, Mark Kwadwo, 6, had labored in dire conditions under a brutal fisherman who beat him when he did not get up at midnight to bail out canoes.

Working with a small Ghanaian charity, Mrs. Cope paid \$3,600 to free the children and found them a new home in an orphanage near Accra, the capital. After years of privation, the children were dumbstruck by the plentiful breakfast served at the orphanage, caregivers there said.

Mrs. Cope's trip to Ghana followed journeys to Vietnam and Cambodia, where she and her husband help finance shelters for needy children and their families, and where the Copes adopted two Vietnamese children.

The little hair salon, with its cozy peach and green decor, is a dim memory. Mrs. Cope is now a fund-raiser and executive of Touch a Life Ministries, an organization she and her husband started to help desperate children in faraway places. By their reckoning, the group has spent about \$150,000, mainly in Cambodia and Vietnam, on such tasks as financing shelters for children who are abused, handicapped, living on the street or orphaned by [AIDS](#).

Mrs. Cope says that work has brought new meaning to a life that was once far more circumscribed. But her motivation lies elsewhere: by helping children abroad, the Copes sought to create a legacy for their son, Jantsen, who died in June 1999, unexpectedly, of an undetected heart ailment.

Jantsen was an athletic, fun-loving 15-year-old, the first baseman on a local team, excited about the prospect of high school. With his death, "we were instantly transformed into different people," Mrs. Cope said. "We couldn't resume normal life. We already knew that."

It took the Copes about a year to find their new focus. Jantsen's funeral was the start. In lieu of flowers, they asked for donations to a memorial fund in his name.

The fund accumulated a surprising \$25,000, and the Copes searched for how best to spend it in Neosho, a town of about 11,000. They thought of buying new uniforms for the girls' soccer team, but discovered that it already had money for that. They considered buying new playground equipment for the parks, but that did not seem to be a crying need either.

"It got to the point it was almost comical," Mrs. Cope said. "All the doors were closed. That's when we decided that God had very specific plans for this money and that our money should be spent overseas."

They finally offered the money to Arkansas friends who were building orphanages in Vietnam and went there to see the work under way. That changed their lives: they adopted two orphaned babies. An additional 45 children are now cared for in shelters with their organization's support. In Cambodia, they help finance a shelter for families suffering from AIDS-related illness.

Mrs. Cope, 44, and her husband, who is still a publishing company executive, run the organization together. They make a monthly contribution from their income. He keeps track of the accounts. She makes the rounds of churches and service clubs and chooses the projects.

Initially, she found fund-raising stressful. "I would speak to 400 or 500 people, and nobody would give me any money," she said. Then, she said, she decided she could only try to be a voice for children in crisis, not control the reaction. Now she views the balance sheet with equanimity.

"Money comes from places I never expect, and places I expect to get money from I don't," she said. "Part of my message is, you don't have to have tons of money, but you have to have a willing heart."

Hers was touched Oct. 29 by the plight of Ghanaian children who were forced to labor up to 14 hours a day for fishermen on Lake Volta. The Copes read an article in The New York Times that day about how the child workers in fishing villages around Kete Krachi were deprived of necessities, schooling and freedom.

The International Organization for Migration, an intergovernmental group that fights child trafficking, was planning a long-term rescue project there. Late in January, working with officials from the Ministry of Women and Children in Ghana, it secured the freedom of 25 children, its first group from Kete Krachi.

But Mrs. Cope did not want to wait to see if the International Organization for Migration would come through. Working from her home in November, she teamed up with a Kete Krachi schoolteacher, George Achibra, and a Dutch volunteer, Paul van den Bosch. The men run Pacodep, a small nonprofit group in Ghana. It also aids International Organization for Migration programs.

Mr. Achibra and Mr. van den Bosch negotiated with the employers of seven children, offering to pay for new nets, boat repairs and other needs in exchange for the children's freedom. The two tracked down the parents of those children. All of the destitute parents agreed in writing that their children should be cared for at a Christian-run orphanage called The Village of Hope, Mr. van den Bosch said.

Four days before Christmas, the children arrived by bus at the orphanage. Caregivers said one girl was so fearful of

going hungry that she filled a bag with leftovers from other children's plates. Few of the children had had any schooling. All now attend school.

When Mrs. Cope visited in January, she found Mark Kwadwo a transformed child — reveling in piggyback rides, spaghetti and his new school uniform.

“To hear him giggle,” she wrote by e-mail, “was priceless.”

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