

No Little People

A Family, a Church and a Heart for Orphans

By Susan Olasky

Harford County, Maryland is a fast growing exurban area attractive to families with young children. Located north of Baltimore and just west of the Susquehanna River, it's a land of forested rolling hills, farmland, and small towns with names like Churchville playing a losing game of tug of war with strip centers, malls, fast food eateries, and housing developments. Older leafy neighborhoods of modest ranch houses are over-shadowed by new ones, where too-big houses are squeezed onto small lots, dotted by saplings that won't reach the rooftops for another generation.

In the heart of that sprawl a story about orphans began with a family, spread to a church, and reached clear to the other side of the world.

Thirty-seven years ago Terri and Jim Cooney bought a \$20,000 house in Harford County. Built as a three bedroom split-level at the end of a cul de sac, the house has grown over the years: a sunny living room addition gobbled up a chunk of front yard, a den and bedroom ate up the garage, another bedroom took a chunk from the back porch as the house grew from three bedrooms to seven, barely enough to keep up with the Cooney's family.

For the first thirteen years in the house, the Cooneys were an ordinary family, with a mom and dad and two children, one boy, one girl. The only thing that set them apart demographically was the adoption of their daughter. Then came the 1980s, the "Me! Me! Me! Decade" of Tom Wolfe's "splurge generation." But instead of splurging on fancy cars or appliances, the Cooneys began splurging on children, answering God's call and adopting eight over the next twenty

years, all African-American and most with some kind of mental or physical handicap.

A Typical Friday

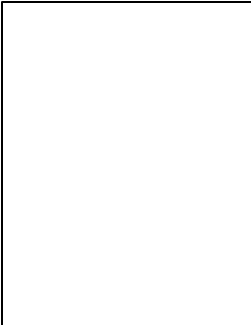
It's a sunny Friday in January and the Cooneys' day is off to a lazy start. Friday is the only day of the week when the six youngest kids, ranging in age from 9 to 17, take a break from structured home schooling and work on individual projects. Fifteen-year-old Sarah, a dancer, is at class. One of their older children, Leanne, 19 is next door, where she works as a nanny, and 22-year-old Nathan, a musician and recent graduate of Morgan State University, is off at work.

At about ten o'clock, Joshua wanders into the kitchen, talking softly to himself and staring off to the side. At seventeen, he is tall and broad-shouldered, dwarfing his petite mom by more than a foot. When urged to greet a visitor, he dutifully holds out his hand, still staring at some unknown point on the floor until his mom gently reminds him to make eye contact. His eyes slide quickly to the visitor before returning to their comfort spot on the floor. After pouring himself a bowl of cereal and milk, he stops at the threshold between kitchen and dining room to slurp the excess milk out of the bowl.

Although Joshua suffers from multiple handicaps—autism, mild mental retardation, and severe bi-polar disorder—he functions well in a typical world and hates being in a school with other handicapped kids. So he's at home for a while as the Cooneys search for a better situation for him. His bedroom is one of the "nook and cranny" rooms that sprouted off the house as the family grew. A color television and a small DVD player sit side by side. The DVD plays *Pete's Dragon* continuously, while the TV is turned to a different program. Joshua faces his bed, where the board game "Magic Kingdom," is laid out. He monitors both screens and plays the board game at the same time.

Rachel wanders in next. She's 14, and is the most recent addition to the family. Born in Ghana, West Africa, she became a Cooney only five years ago. When she was six or seven she was deliberately burned by a witch who had been having demonic dreams that something bad would happen to Rachel's mom—and then made the prophecy come true by burning the daughter. Pictures taken before the accident

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show a beautiful round-faced little girl with a broad smile. Those taken afterwards show a girl whose face was completely burned away, except for a spot on her cheek and a strip of skin near her hairline. Miraculously, her eyes were spared.

Methodist missionaries Rebecca and Gary Mink found Rachel in an African government hospital. They brought the little girl to Boston Shriners' Hospital for emergency skin

Their willingness was confirmed when their four-year-old saw Rachel for the first time. He said, "Oh, your face!" before adding, almost in the same breath, "Do you want to sleep in my bed?"

grafts, but then had to return her to Ghana, where she was further tormented because of her deformity and her reputation as someone cursed by a witch. Rachel's birthmom realized she couldn't care for her daughter and signed away her rights. The Minks brought her to America, along with several other African orphans.

When the Cooneys ran into the Minks at church and heard about Rachel with the terrible deformity, they thought seriously about whether they could add another child, especially one with such daunting medical needs, to their family. At that time their youngest was four.

Their decision-making process is admittedly atypical. It prioritizes God's calling and deemphasizes practical considerations. Jim Cooney, a retired schoolteacher, was 60 and Terri, a stay-at-home mom, 55, when they were faced with the decision about Rachel. Their family was often chaotic and sometimes even violent. "We had rough years," Terri says, "Years with violence, aggression and holes in the walls. But God was so clear every single time."

Even the missionaries wanted to know how they were going to provide medically for Rachel,

but the Cooneys trusted that through Jim's insurance they could deal with it. Their willingness was confirmed when their four-year-old saw Rachel for the first time. He said, "Oh, your face!" before adding, almost in the same breath, "Do you want to sleep in my bed?" Nine-year-old Rachel and ten-year-old Sarah bonded immediately, sealing the deal. As Terri puts it: "It jelled. She chose to stay, and it has been wonderful, miraculously wonderful." Rachel became a U.S. citizen last June on Jim and Terri's 37th wedding anniversary. (Since she has been a Cooney, Rachel has had 9 surgeries.

Doctors are in the process of forming a nose to replace the prosthetic one she now has.)

The Cooneys, with three daughters that are age 14 and 15, face emotional landmines. To heighten the volatility index, the girls deal with bi-polar disease, partial fetal alcohol syndrome with resulting memory and learning difficulties, dyslexia, and Rachel's surgeries. Sometimes it can be hard for

Janée, whose mom drank when she was pregnant, to see her sisters doing Algebra I and II, while she's still struggling with division.

On this particular Friday, Janée doesn't bother to eat breakfast. She tumbles out of bed and shuffles into the kitchen, her long hair mussed from sleep. She's intent on finding information about the tse-tse fly, part of her Africa project, which is part of the Cooney's "Around the World in 180 Days" homeschooling curriculum. "Where's the book about bugs?" she asks her mom."

Once they figure out what books she's talking about, Janée is dismayed to hear that she needs to look in the

encyclopedia. "I don't like to use big books," she complains, until her mom explains that she doesn't have to use the whole encyclopedia, just one volume. Minutes later she's hunkered down at the large, plastic draped dining room table, reading the entry on tse-tse flies, while her brother Stephen, 12, argues that he's seen tse-tse flies in Maryland, which leads him into the subject of his neighbor's Madagascar roaches, which he's sure are poisonous. Janée wearily



(Some of) the Cooney Clan

rolls her eyes and shrugs as though she's heard that kind of silly talk way too often.

Stephen only weighed 2 pounds when he was born. The Cooneys were told that he had cerebral palsy and that his "windswept" feet (both turned the same way) would mean that he'd never walk, so when he saunters into the kitchen for breakfast, it's a big deal. He's not content with the cereal choices, or with having a Pop Tart like his younger brother Isaac. He holds open the refrigerator door and sees some leftover sauce that would be great on noodles. "Can I make some noodles?" he asks. When his mother agrees, he gets out a small saucepan, fills it with water, and turns on the burner, playing with the steam as he waits for the water to boil. He has a bag of ziti at hand, which he planned to spill into the water until his mom shows him that he only needs a cup of the dry noodles.

While they cook, he finds a jar of white sauce in the refrigerator to add to the other. He puts some in a bowl and heats it in the microwave. As he puts the jar away he asks, "Can I use this sauce?" as if a bowl of it wasn't already heating.

In addition to telling the Cooneys that Stephen wouldn't walk, the experts also said that he wouldn't ever read, but Terry has learned not to believe everything experts say. "It is coming," she says. "He's come so far."

When the Cooneys adopted Isaac, the sixth child of a drug-addicted prostitute, they were 50 and 55-years-old. At age nine he's bright and energetic. "He's very ADHD," his mom says. "His focus is miserable. But he's a wonderful kid."

His "nook and cranny" bedroom, which he shares with Stephen, is stuffed with toys. "It's kind of messy," he admits sheepishly. A little later he's hamming it up with Toby, the dog, and later still he's proudly showing off a large pyramid he's constructed from small magnetic blocks and stringing a snaky length of fabric across the width of the den, where he anchors it on a doorknob. His dad and Rachel, working at side-by-side computers, seem oblivious to the commotion.

Terri recounts a story that illustrates the her unwavering confidence (and sense of humor) in the face of public scrutiny: Shortly after adopting Rachel, Terri and the kids were walking down the street. People began staring at Rachel's disfigured face. "I saw they were staring and she was moving closer to me. I said, 'Rachel, They aren't staring at you. They're staring at me. They're asking, 'Why is that old white woman with all those cute black kids?'"

The Church

The people at Mt. Zion Methodist Church have figured it out. The Cooneys had long prayed that their church would have a heart for adoption. In the late 1980s and early 1990s they organized Rainbow Family gatherings to bring together those who had adopted across race lines. As their family grew, and as they became the go-to family for hard-to-place children at Bethany Christian Services in nearby Crofton,

Maryland, eventually adopting five hard-to-place children through that agency, they hoped their vision for adoption would spread to other families. They would say, "You don't need one family to adopt 100 children; you need 100 families, each to adopt one child."

Terri says about thirty families in the 650-family church have adopted, most adding to families already blessed with biological children. In the past year, families in the church adopted nine children, and the example set by the Cooneys has helped the church become adoption-friendly.

"One of the things God has done is use us to knock down the reasons people might use to disobey the call: too old, house too small, not prepared to meet the needs of special needs kids. People saw that God could meet needs." They also learned that adoption is not always easy: "Just because God is telling you to do this, it doesn't mean it will be easy or quick," Terri says.

Supportive pastors, helpful programs, and accepting and loving people willing to respond to needs contributed to Mt. Zion's reputation as hospitable to adoption. Families with adopted children felt drawn to attend because they knew their kids would feel at home. The Cooneys may have helped the church develop a vision for adoption, but the church has responded: "We talk about, pray for, and rejoice over every single adoption... What I see happening is that our church has developed the amazing heart for these kids."

The World

Katima Mulilo is a village in the Caprivi region of Namibia, a country located in southwest Africa, just north of South Africa. Namibia looks a bit like a butterfly net, with one side of its drooping net forming the Atlantic coastline and its short handle facing inland, stretching over Botswana to Zimbabwe. Katima Mulilo, on the banks of the Zambezi River, forms the far tip of the handle.

At first glance, it doesn't appear that Harford County

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and Katima Mulilo in the African country of Namibia have much in common. But look a little closer and you'll find the Children of Zion Village orphan home, located on 17 acres of prime Zambezi River waterfront, founded and funded by people from Mount Zion Methodist Church to provide care for AIDS orphans in Namibia and beyond.

Usually the process of gaining approvals from all these authorities would stretch a year or longer, but within three weeks Mt. Zion had all its permits—without paying any bribes.

Currently 52 children, ranging from infants to teens, live in the orphan home, which grew out of the shared vision of a Maryland businessman, a Christian missionary couple, and the congregation of Mt. Zion.

The businessman, Benedict Schwartz, is the CEO of a software company in Maryland. He and his wife, Kathleen, are friends of the Cooneys and also attend Mt. Zion Methodist Church, where Kathleen is the director of music and Benedict serves on the board of trustees. Already the parents of four children by birth, they were inspired by the Cooney's example to adopt a daughter eleven years ago. Seeing the Cooneys raise so many kids on a teacher's salary "stripped away every excuse," Mr. Schwartz said. "We saw the need, the greatness of the need" and realized "we didn't have a reason not to." They have also relied on the Cooney's counsel in difficult times.

Mr. Schwartz was reading about street children in a Christian magazine and "trying to imagine what those children were experiencing in terms of terror and survival," when he had a brainstorm. For years Americans have been sponsoring needy children through groups like World Vision and Compas-

sion International, so why couldn't churches sponsor children's homes to care for these parentless children? His vision had two parts. He wanted Mt. Zion to start an orphan home and he wanted to help other churches do the same.

Because of the church's interest in missions and orphans the vision seemed a natural one. Mr. Schwartz met with friends from his church and began to pray—and the conviction that he was to start a children's home grew. Problem was, he didn't know where this children's home would be or who would run it, but a shortage of detail didn't stop him from going to the church's missions committee and asking for \$50,000 in seed money.

Mount Zion is a generous church. It gives at least 30% of its annual budget to missions (last year the percentage reached 45%). But even so he knew the request was crazy. Although he and his wife were part of the church's core group he anticipated a negative reaction to his request: "They're going to choke. They're going to drop their dentures," he thought. The mission's committee told him the year's money had already been allocated and reminded him that he had no details—no plan.

Since he was convinced that the vision of an orphan home came from God, Mr. Schwartz persevered. He says that for a long time the church's pastor had promised the congregation air conditioning—but only after building a church in Africa. Remembering that promise, Mr. Schwartz went to the trustees and made his pitch. How about they fund a children's home in Africa, thus paving the way for the church to get the air conditioning the people wanted?

The trustees agreed to take \$20,000 out of the building fund and apply it to the orphan's home. After hearing this news, the missions committee found \$20,000 in unallocated

funds and pledged it to Mr. Schwartz, on the condition that he give back the building fund money, which he did. During the first year, the missions committee came up with another \$30,000, making a total commitment of \$50,000 to jumpstart the project.

Just before Thanksgiving in 2001, Mr. Schwartz



Children at the Namibian Home

met with veteran missionaries Gary and Rebecca Mink, who had long been supported by Mount Zion. They were the missionaries who had brought young Rachel from Ghana for her first skin grafts and introduced her to the Cooneys. When Mr. Schwartz shared his vision of an orphan home, he found that Rebecca Mink, a registered nurse, had been nurturing the same vision for twenty years. Suddenly the question of who would run such a home was answered, leaving the where and the how still to be figured out.

When the Minks came to dinner they brought another guest, fifteen-year-old Christina, who had come to America for surgery on polio-crippled legs. As the Minks planned to return to Africa to pursue the idea of the children's home, they needed a place for Christina to stay, since her disability would have made her an outcast in Africa.

The Schwartzes welcomed her and adopted her, and now joke that she came to dinner and never left. Though she had no schooling until she was 15, she is graduating this year from a technical high school.

The Minks returned to Africa, overcame work permit difficulties, and received permission to stay in Namibia. In January 2002, a four-member team from Mt. Zion traveled to Africa to help the Minks find property for the home. A village family offered to donate 17 acres on the Zambezi River. Since people don't own land in Namibia—it is held in trust for all people—the village family was offering a “permit to occupy” which is good for 99 years. Their generosity required a daunting set of approvals, both from traditional, tribal authorities and the state. Usually the process of gaining approvals from all these authorities—the eight senior members of the family, the chief of the township, the tribal council for the region, and the paramount chief of the tribe, as well as the director of lands and the government committee with final authority, which met only once a month—would stretch a year or longer, but within three weeks Mt. Zion had all its permits—without paying any bribes.

The who and the where had come into focus, and before the team left Africa, part of the how was answered as well. A South African architect, part of the Mink's prayer team, met with them, and drew up computer-assisted design plans for the orphan home. The team left Namibia after three weeks bearing all the needed approvals and plans.

The next 12 months were busy ones. Gary and Rebecca cleared the land and oversaw the construction of the home, which cost about \$200,000. Rebecca obtained certifications to operate the orphanage and school, and formed a local board of directors. She also developed relationships with the local social welfare agency and courts, which would refer children to the home. On January 17, 2003, local villagers and dignitaries attended the home's official dedication ceremony.

Relying on a combination of African and American paid

and volunteer staff the home provides shelter, medical care, clothing, and schooling for 50 children, including the nine or ten who have HIV/AIDS. Since the home opened at least three children have died of the disease, including Lazarus, who was nine months old when he came to Children of Zion Village. He died on Thanksgiving Day, 2004.

Running the home is expensive. It costs about \$11,000 per month to operate; a special fund pays for expensive retrovirus medications for the children with HIV/AIDS. The home

It is not uncommon to hear of grandparents, who were parents of four or five children, all now dead, who are caring for 12 to 16 grandchildren.

grows its own vegetables with the help of an irrigation system that Gary Mink installed. The children tend the home's thirty goats, which provide milk for the home and for women who care for their grandchildren. The children also care for chickens and ducks, and perform other farm chores. They learn to ride and care for a herd of twenty donated horses.

The Maryland church members sponsor individual children and commit to provide monthly support and prayer. A bulletin board in the church features photos of each of the home's children and lists the church families that sponsor each one. Church members also volunteer as short-term missionaries: they volunteer to teach, cook, and do construction, maintenance, and farm work, paying their own airfare and \$150 a month for living expenses while in Namibia. At least 40 members have volunteered so far for terms ranging from weeks to months.

Terry Cooney says, “The heart for adoption has led a whole church to adopt a whole family of kids in Namibia.”

Growing the Vision

If the AIDS crisis were a small one, perhaps the Children of Zion Village home in Namibia would be a big enough response. But Benedict Schwartz knows that the crisis is growing. According to the UN more than twelve million children in sub-Saharan Africa are AIDS orphans and the problem is ready to spiral out of control as grandparents and extended families, the traditional social safety net for children, die or are overwhelmed by the need. It is not uncommon to hear of grandparents, who were parents of four or five children, all now dead, who are caring for 12 to 16 grandchildren. When grandparents die or are unable to provide for their grandchildren, many end up living on the streets or out in the bush. Relatives and strangers often exploit them,

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stealing their meager inheritances or selling them into slavery.

During the past two years, Children of Zion, Inc., now a separate 501(c)3 corporation, has learned how to run an orphan home. The Minks have earned the respect of the various tribal councils and are overcoming the suspicions many Africans have of white people. “Don’t disappoint our people,” the regional governor told them at first. The reality of the home is breaking down that suspicion and winning support.

Mr. Schwartz wants to take the Children of Zion Village’s success and use it to persuade other churches to build similar homes. He points to Muslims, who in many countries have

actively set up madrassas to indoctrinate orphans into Islam, often of the most radical variety. Christians, he says, have been slow to respond.

Children of Zion hopes that the home in Namibia can be a model for others to follow—and a place to train new workers who will go and do likewise. Mr. Schwartz is now devoting his time to getting this informal network off the ground. He hopes to recruit other evangelical churches to start and support hundreds of similar homes and veteran missionaries with experience working within tribal cultures to run them. Children of Zion also hopes to attract the support of U.S. business partners who do business in participating countries to help build the homes.

As the Children of Zion mission statement says: This is a time to have great vision, unbounded drive and energy, and constant prayer to accomplish what, with God, is possible.

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