



Habitat Build an Unforgettable Experience

by Stacy Bosco,

Photos by Pastor Steve Herder, team

For 12 American travelers, a Habitat for Humanity build in Zambia was a chance to experience a very different part of the world while truly serving as God's hands.

The assignment: building a house for Mary Chongo, a 64-year-old disabled grandmother raising her three orphaned grandchildren. Mary, along with Charles, Bright and Jane, lived in a two-room hovel made of dirt – which was in fragile condition, with a leaky roof. As if that weren't enough, the owner of the land upon which the home sat had given the family notice to vacate within the next few months.



Mary Chongo, left, and two-room home. Mary's condition leaves her in constant leg pain.

The American volunteers set out to build the house for Mary in one week. It was an exceptional gift for Mary and her family, and, as it turned out, for the travelers as well.

Pastor Steve and Julie Herder; Steve and Susie Smuck; Scott, Sherith, Silje, Brock and Gunnar Squires; Carly Anne Johnson, Janelle Kim, and Tiffany Weiss of Thrivent Build International made up the team.

The distance between Los Angeles and Doha, Qatar, is a little over 8,300 miles. Doha – a dazzling city with a breathtaking skyline of futuristic skyscrapers -- was the first stop for the Ascension team, which flew over on two successive days.



There were side trips and visits before the build. The Herders were among those who went to Hwange Park, Zimbabwe, to see the wildlife there. That unforgettable experience included night temperatures in the 30s, recalls



Pastor Steve, and for heat, they were supplied with old fashioned rubber hot water bottles.

They visited the Ngamo School and the Ebenezer Child Care Trust (orphanage) in Livingstone, Zimbabwe. At the latter, Pastor Steve reunited with Pastor Alfred Chana, whom he had met 10 years ago, when Chana was the bishop of the Lutheran Church there and when Ascension's Gifts of Hope included a project called Bricks of Hope for Zambia. Chana is now chaplain at Ebenezer, which includes a home for children, a school, and a 40-acre farm.

"They're doing great work there," remarks Pastor Steve. He also notes that former Ascension members Larry and Jane Lee Winter, now living in Arizona, are major supporters of Ebenezer.

They saw Victoria Falls, known locally as Mosi-oa-Tunya, which translates to "the smoke that thunders" in the Tonga and Lozi languages. The massive falls could be a mere trickle in six months as they are dependent on the seasonal rainfall cycles. They are situated on the borderline of Zimbabwe and Zambia.



*Top: Wildlife at Hwange Park, our team traveling on small plane.
Above: Ngamo School Student.
Left: Pastor Alfred Chana
Below: Choir singing at the Ebenezer Child Care Trust.*



The team moved on to Zambia, and attended Sunday worship services in a Lutheran church in Lusaka. "The Zambian people are very proud of the fact that most of the country is Christian. A lot of things are faith-based," comments Pastor Steve.

Then it was on to the building site near Kabwe.

There are roughly 220 houses in the tidy community of Habitat for Humanity-built brick homes, complete with its own water tank system and faucets to use.

The team started with training by their Habitat build supervisor, Paul. Photos show the team mixing concrete, hauling bricks and sheet metal, and laying brick after brick after brick.

"To each home there are 2,000 of those cement blocks," notes Pastor Steve. "We moved most of them, not all of them. There are workers who are in charge there. One of the guys actually lives in one of those homes," he adds. "He started five years ago and now he's a really good construction worker. His name is John."

John is among the 32 new friends Pastor Steve has added to his prayer list.

It appeared to be backbreaking work. Was everyone aching and sore?

"Oh, yes," Pastor Steve replies. "By Thursday and Friday of that week, in the cafeteria members of our crew were just sleeping, either on the table or on the cement floor. They just laid down and slept through. It was so tiring."



But there were many moments that kept everyone fired up and ready to go.

"When Mary first met us, the concrete floor had been poured for her new home, and some of the concrete blocks had been prepared, she was on her knees, she was so grateful,"

notes Pastor Steve. (See below.)

There were songs, sung by neighbors at the site, wafting through the air. They sang of Jesus being with us always.





Also, notes Pastor Steve, "One of the highlights was being able to play with children there. Every day we would break for lunch and go to the schools where the women of the community had prepared a lunch for us. Then we'd go outside and play with the children." They sang camp favorites like "Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes" and "Jesus Loves Me." And they even attempted the Pastor Steve favorite, "Hip Hip Hippopotamus."

By the final day, amazingly, there was a house. Two bedrooms and a living room, with a separate building for a latrine and shower in back.

Only some finishing work on interior plastering and windows was left for the Habitat workers. One of them told our Ascension group that they had worked harder than any international group of volunteers who'd come there. (This we have no trouble believing!)

There was a ceremony to celebrate. Some of our volunteer group joined with the local people to dance to the beat of drums. Mary gave a speech. And then, Sherith Squires symbolically handed over the key to her new home. It was enough to make one laugh and weep with joy.

There was a long trip home fraught with reminders of the turmoil of these times. (At the hotel where the team stayed, a USAID truck sat unused in the parking lot next to Habitat for Humanity, Save the Children, and World Health Organization vehicles, while stories swirled of friends who'd just lost their jobs. And for awhile, when the U.S. base in Qatar was bombed by Iran in retaliation for U.S. bombing, there was uncertainty about whether there would be disruptions in flights back to the States.)

But for that stretch of arduous days in that remote land, the team was one with the Spirit, doing God's work. And the memories of that time are the gifts the team will have for the rest of their lives.



*Top: Village children; Center: celebration, Sherith Squires presents key to Mary
Left: Team in front of Mary's brand new house*