



Ambassador Spotlight: Idaho Believes

George Hage and his wife, Renée, were working with refugees in Boise, Idaho when George, an occupational therapist, developed a desire to serve people with disabilities in Africa.

When George learned about FWM in 2004, he ordered a GEN_1 wheelchair to display at a local conference for occupational therapists. There, he showed the wheelchair to Hernan Reyes, an artist who uses a wheelchair and paints with a brush in his mouth. George, Renée, Hernan, and *Hearts of Praise*—the worship team of New Heart Christian Ministries, a church of immigrants from Africa and Haiti—banded together to raise awareness and funds for the cause of mobility, calling themselves “Idaho Believes.”

Over the years, the Hages have participated in 19 wheelchair distributions on three continents. Hernan has sold original paintings to benefit FWM, and *Hearts of Praise* has opened the doors for George to share the vision of FWM with churches throughout Idaho.

Idaho Believes is currently on a mission to provide one wheelchair for every seat at Albertsons Stadium, the home of the Boise State University Broncos—a total of 36,387. With their determination, creativity, and heart for the people they serve, this passionate group of ambassadors will continue to inspire people in Idaho and beyond.



ESWATINI*

VOICES FOR MOBILITY

George and Renée Hage (top) and *Hearts of Praise* (bottom) spearhead ambassador efforts in Idaho.

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“EVERY LAST ONE”

*formerly known as Swaziland

When Echo VanderWal was eight years old, she sensed God calling her to do medical work in Africa.

Years later, she met a young man named Harry, who received a similar sense of calling when he was 17. They would eventually marry and earn degrees in medicine: Harry is a physician, specializing in pediatrics and internal medicine, and Echo is a physician’s assistant.

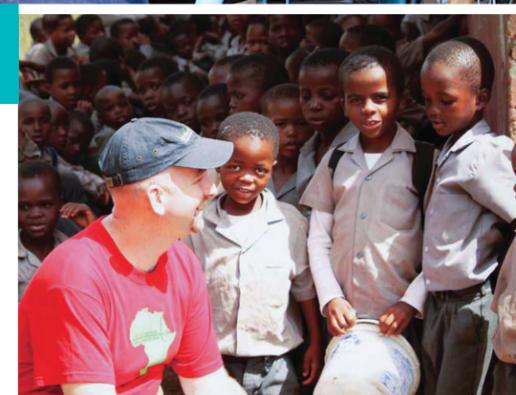
In 2004, they traveled to eSwatini, the landlocked African nation formerly known as Swaziland, and saw firsthand the devastation wrought by one of the worst health crises in the world.

HIV/AIDS was ravaging the country, orphaning one out of five Swazi children. The average life expectancy was around 40. People were not receiving the most basic of health care services, as most of the country’s 1.12 million people lived in rural areas without the means to get to a hospital.

Statistics showed that the country would be considered extinct by 2040 if drastic measures were not taken to address the overwhelming medical needs.

The VanderWals knew there would be no easy solution. They knew it would take long-term commitment to bring medical care to rural Swazis—one at a time, in their own communities.

They knew what God was calling them to do.



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FREE WHEELCHAIR MISSION



THE LUKE COMMISSION

In 2005, Harry and Echo VanderWal founded The Luke Commission (TLC) with the vision: “To end the isolation of rural communities to quality, compassionate healthcare.” Named after the biblical Doctor Luke, TLC recognizes the precious value of all people, regardless of age, status, or health condition.

When they first began, TLC offered four services through mobile hospital outreaches. “We listened and worked quietly, learning little by little as the days passed,” remembers Echo. “We held hands with the Swazis who showed us how to deliver compassionate medicine to the most rural communities, in the country with the highest HIV rate in the world.”

TLC now offers 28 different services, offering comprehensive health care to treat anything from a headache to broken bones, from poor eyesight to cataract surgery. In addition, school children are checked and treated for skin and intestinal

MOBILITY AFTER 19 YEARS

Mneni with his mother, who will no longer have to carry him on her back.



problems, fitted with new shoes, and given Scripture booklets.

Every patient will be seen by a physician and have their medical histories documented by TLC’s trained staff of over 200 people, many of whom are orphans who were hired and mentored as part of the VanderWals’ calling to address orphanhood in eSwatini.

The team will not leave until they have seen “every last one,” often well past midnight.

BUILDING TRUST THROUGH MOBILITY

In 2012, TLC began to partner with Free Wheelchair Mission to address the need for mobility assistive devices. “There are people crawling around on their hands and knees, and while you’re still trying to find a solution to HIV, we know that there’s already a solution to disability,” relayed Echo. “Partnering with Free Wheelchair Mission has changed the scope of what we do.”

Echo estimates that one wheelchair, given to a Swazi person with a disability, can impact up to 600 people. “We’ve found that one person crawling around on their hands and knees affects the entire community... Nobody (in the community) feels dignified when someone is forced to crawl.”

Giving a wheelchair—an immediate, tangible solution to the need for mobility—helps establish trust and strengthen TLC’s relationship with the Swazi people.

One recent outreach involved a 19-year-old boy named Mneni, who cannot walk, feed himself, or speak due to a congenital disability. His mother, who serves as his full-time caregiver, would carry her adult son on her back wherever he needed to go.

A wheelchair was beyond the family’s means. Their sole provider had been Mneni’s late father, who earned just enough money for food by weeding fields. Ever since he passed away five years ago, his family has often gone hungry. The two oldest children are willing to work but simply cannot find jobs.

Determined to get Mneni a wheelchair, his mother brought him to a TLC mobile hospital outreach



IMPACTING RURAL COMMUNITIES

TLC estimates that the gift of a single wheelchair can positively affect up to 600 people in a rural Swazi community.

held at a nearby school. “I’ve thought about getting a wheelchair for my boy all this year,” she admitted. “I’ve never had a chair I can push him in.”

While a TLC staff member was taking measurements to fit Mneni with a new GEN_2 wheelchair, Mneni reached out to embrace her tightly and refused to let go, despite his mother’s attempts to pry him away. Mneni’s mother related that her son had been unusually excited all morning, as if he knew this day would change his life.

She fought back tears when she saw her son sit in a wheelchair for the first time in 19 years. “You show my boy love,” she said, her voice trembling. “And to me.”

In addition to wheelchairs, TLC also distributes walkers, crutches, canes, and other assistive devices from Free Wheelchair Mission’s *Mobility Beyond Wheelchairs* program. “Not every person with a disability should be in a wheelchair,” said Echo, explaining that some mobility conditions could be helped with crutches or corrected with surgery.

For this reason, some containers from Free Wheelchair Mission contain surgical supplies in

addition to mobility aids. Of the 20–25 containers TLC receives every year, “the *Mobility Beyond Wheelchairs* container from Free Wheelchair Mission is probably the highest quality that we have received,” stated Echo. “The expiration dates were long; everything was new. That makes a big difference. It allows us to value the people we serve.”

Free Wheelchair Mission believes that excellence in what we do is a God-honoring way to show love to the people we serve.

We are blessed to partner with like-minded organizations such as TLC, who share the same heart and will to do what it takes—with love, dedication, and excellence—to express the love of God to a hurting world.



Blessings,

Don Schoendorfer

Don Schoendorfer
Founder and President
Free Wheelchair Mission