

From a College Chapel to an African Elementary School

BY KATHRYN HAUEISEN '85



Photo contributed by Brad Otto

Pastor Brad Otto's (WTS 2005) sense of call to launch Acts of Wisdom began at a Texas Lutheran University chapel service in 1998. Adjunct Professor Michael Birnbaum spoke about his passion to serve among the desperately poor Central Americans and invited students to join him on a mission trip to Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Otto signed up.

What he witnessed there planted a seed that eventually became the nonprofit Acts of Wisdom, launched in 2013. The organization's primary purpose is to provide schoolbooks and supplies, expand classrooms, build libraries, and equip teachers with materials to teach effectively. Over the past decade Acts of Wisdom has reduced school dropout rates from 35% to under 9%. The schools that Acts of Wisdom helps consistently score top ranking student performance levels.

Otto recalls how on his college mission trip, "I spent most of my time under an umbrella tree listening to a little boy named Jimmy read to me. He wanted to be a teacher someday, but sadly, that dream wouldn't come true for him, as it doesn't come true for many children around the world. Most boys wind up working with the drug lords and girls became prostitutes. That was my first look at poverty that close and it changed me."

When Otto accepted the call to serve Messiah Lutheran in Houston in 2009, he and the congregation partnered with Water to Thrive to build a well in Ethiopia. Since its inception in 2008 this nonprofit has installed over 1,600 wells, delivering clean, safe water to over 800,000 people in rural African communities.

In May 2013 Otto and Messiah members traveled to Ethiopia with Water to Thrive to build the well the congregation funded. "I saw the same kind of poverty I'd seen in Central America, and I witnessed a huge education crisis. I asked, 'Where are the books for kids?' They had one book for every ten kids. Students had to wait to get the book and by the time they did, the class might be on a different topic.

"Some of the larger nonprofits built the schools, but rarely furnished them so teachers could actually teach. This just seemed wrong to me. Here we are, the western white folks, coming to help this African community, but we don't bother to ask, 'What do you really need?'"

Otto realized, "I felt called, compelled to do something about it. I'd never started a nonprofit, though working as a congregational pastor is good experience for that. I went to a Half Price Books and bought a copy of *Nonprofit Kit for Dummies* for \$7 and followed it step by step."

People with the necessary skills and financial resources needed showed up and soon the fledgling organization had a board of directors, a name, a mission, and a donor data base. In January 2014 the IRS approved Acts of Wisdom as a 501(c) nonprofit. "I and the new board decided to start with the \$3,500 it would take to supply one school with the books they needed in Robit, Ethiopia. It started to click that this was doable. It was a solvable problem."

Otto was in an Ethiopian market on his first trip to visit the school when "Two kids approached me. I thought they wanted money, but it turned out they wanted pens. They needed them so they could do their homework. That was all they needed. Something we take for granted is the key to unlocking a kid's potential. Now whenever I take groups to Africa, I tell them to bring pens because the kids love pens. They use them for homework, to draw, write, imagine. The power of the pen."

Over the years Otto has developed a partnership and friendship with Ethiopian Johannes Wassie. The relationship started when Wassie was Otto's personal guide on his first trips. Today he is an Acts of Wisdom part-time staff person who checks on the schools, delivers the supplies, and helps keep track of the organization's paperwork. Acts of Wisdom has enabled him to evolve from his tour guide work to a local administrator for the organization. Wassie remains an excellent guide and interpreter translating between English and Amharic for visitors who want to do good for the communities they see.

Acts of Wisdom began with one school and a philosophy Otto picked up from Pastor Andy Stanley at Northpoint Church in Atlanta, GA. "Do for one what you wish you could do for many." That one school has expanded to four schools in Ethiopia, two in Uganda and one in Liberia. The Ribit school has grown to 2,000 grade school students. A total of 6,000 students benefit from the organization's work in the four Ethiopian schools.

Acts of Wisdom has expanded into Monrovia, Liberia where the number of students served grew from 60 students to 130, approaching 150. The current project is a \$250,000 capital campaign to build an orphanage for Liberian elementary school age youth with an adjoining six-bedroom guest house.

By providing housing for mission trip visitors, Acts of Wisdom can reduce the cost per visitor from \$3,000 to \$1,500 for a ten-day mission trip. Part of the campaign plan includes starting an endowment fund with \$25,000 to ensure funds are available to address future needs.

In Uganda Acts of Wisdom is building a classroom wing to house a student art project. Students learn art techniques to create art projects that Acts of Wisdom then sells in the States, sending the profits back to the school in Kampapa, Uganda.

In its first year Acts of Wisdom received about \$10,000, primarily from donors Otto knew personally. Over the past decade donors have contributed \$500,000. These funds cover the \$35 to \$40 cost for uniforms, vaccinations, school supplies, and food during the time students are at school. Donor dollars also provide some housing for teachers. The Ethiopian government pays teachers, but Liberian teachers donate their time and must cover their personal expenses. Acts of Wisdom is purchasing motor bikes for these teachers to help them with the five-to-six-mile trips they travel each way each day to get to school. The bikes give teachers more time and a resource they can use to generate personal income during the half days they aren't teaching.

Since its inception in 2013 Acts of Wisdom has provided 60,000 schoolbooks, all purchased in the countries where they are used. COVID-19 disrupted the three-trips-per-year schedule, but Otto is again planning mission trips. He'll lead three groups in 2024: Ethiopia in January, Liberia in April, and Liberia in the fall, on a date yet to be determined.

Otto realizes, "I have been incredibly fortunate in my life to never have to experience the difficulties I see in the world every day. I can't imagine what it's like to go hungry, to not have clean drinking water, and not have access to quality education."

Apparently, he can imagine it well enough to work with his seven-member Board of Directors and his growing list of donors to respond in tangible ways to the need for both safe drinking water and an education. It seems God has heard the people's cry for mercy and justice in Ethiopia, Uganda, and Liberia and tapped Pastor Brad Otto to do something about it. For more information, contact him through actsofwisdom.com or team@actsofwisdom.com.



Photo contributed by Brad Otto