

Child's death fuels resolve to help others

Supplies collected to assist Malawi's poor

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As a girl growing up in Saskatchewan, Helen Timoffee often heard the gentle parental lecture, "Eat your supper, there are kids starving in Africa."

And Timoffee wanted to help; she had a passion to do something for the poorest of the world's poor.

But it took an unspoken bond with a little girl named Isobel in Malawi to bring what she needed to do into focus.

"We had sponsored children through World Vision for years, and my daughter Karen and I were able to go to Malawi in 2006 and 2007. While we were there, we met Isobel, who was so tiny for her age," recalls Timoffee, a member at Deer Park United Church in Calgary's southeast.

"She sat on my lap, I cuddled her and she just looked intently at me with these big eyes. It was as if she was trying to silently say to me, 'You can do something.' Soon after we left the area, we learned that Isobel had died of the diseases that ravage that part of the world."

To fulfil her connection with Isobel, Timoffee is helping to organize the loading and shipment of a 12-metre sea container with sturdy moulds for water purification units, wheelchairs and walkers, more than 4,000 school books, mosquito nets, bikes, sewing machines, tools for mechanics, educational toys, soccer balls . . . whatever it takes to improve the lives of those under the care of Father Raphael Mponda, an Anglican priest in southern Malawi.

"After Isobel died, I was angry. Why had this happened to this beautiful, innocent child? But then I realized . . . she's done her work. It's up to people like me to do our part," says Timoffee.

Timoffee said she had to overcome fears of disease and snakes before travelling to Malawi in what would be a life-altering journey.



Courtesy, Helen Timoffee

Calgarian Helen Timoffee holds Isobel on her lap during a visit to Malawi. The little girl died not long after, spurring Timoffee to organize a major fundraising campaign to send supplies to the country.

"The poverty was just overwhelming at first. We felt so out of place in our good clothes and shoes," recalls Timoffee.

"But when you meet the people, you find this wonderful grace and generosity about them. Everyone shares what little they have. . . . Everyone's door is open to you; here, we hide in our houses."

The container drive is an example of inter-denominational co-operation. Timoffee has been working closely with Canon Robert Greene and the parish of St. John the Evangelist Anglican in Inglewood, who have an extensive outreach link to Malawi. The Salvation Army has come on board.

And Timoffee has made connections with people who know the ins and outs of brokering, insuring and shipping containers.

A recent dinner and silent auction drew more than 200 people and raised a big chunk for the shipping costs.

Timoffee plans to return to southern Malawi then to see how the supplies are being put to use.

"It will be a realization of a dream for me," she says. "It will be like I can say, 'OK, Isobel, I hope this helps.'"

More information on the Malawi container project is available on the Deer Park United website, www.dpuc.ca.