

Serving abroad | Clovis News

By Tiffany
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Pictured in front, from left, is Bill Cornell, Elisabeth Asrat, and Karen Cornell. In back, from left, is Zachary Curtis (student), Kerri Curtis, Champney Pulliam (student - our grand-daughter), Collin Lee (student), and Nathan Lee. SUBMITTED BY KAREN CORNELL — Special to Clovis Independent

In just a few days, eight people - including three Clovis Unified students - will board an airplane and travel around the world to Addis Ababa in Ethiopia. For two weeks they will deliver backpacks, school supplies, curriculum, and offer friendship to preschool age children in two rural villages.

The group is being led by Bill and Karen Cornell of Africa Community Transformation Services (ACTS), a nonprofit organization that was founded in 2010 right here in the Central Valley. The goal of the organization is to provide education, healthcare and resources that will enable communities to care for themselves. ACTS works in partnership with Horn of Africa Mission (HOAM), a church-planting ministry.

ACTS sprouted out of Fresno physician Dr. Markos Zemedé's idea to combine community development with church plants. It was Bill's idea to visit Ethiopia with Zemedé, and soon Bill and God convinced Karen of the idea.

In May, 2011, the Cornells traveled with Zemedé and a few other people to some rural Ethiopian villages south of the capital. Karen will never forget the moment the van doors were first opened and the moments that followed.

"All these children came rushing up and at the moment, for me, it was just amazing," Karen said. "They were talking really fast and smiling and laughing, and they want to touch you and hold you. It was emotionally overwhelming. They

are so beautiful.”

However, Karen said the children were all barefoot, vulnerable, and most of them were orphans who were being raised by a family member or cousin who might only be a teenager themselves. The idea for the program was to provide each child with education, a hot meal, and a uniform - all paid for through a \$20 a month sponsorship program.

“We spent three weeks in Ethiopia and absolutely fell in love with the children and the program and met a lot of people there,” Karen said.

When they returned to the U.S., Dr. Zemedu asked Karen to run the ministry, and she accepted the challenge. Since then, ACTS has built two school buildings, kitchens, and 400 children are attending school.

“Our goal is through loving the children, by teaching them, educating them, and trying to give them a head start, that they will be launched into a better life,” Karen said. “By loving them we are also demonstrating the love of Jesus. The majority of the population is Muslim, and we’ve seen many, many conversions since we’ve been there, but there is still a lot of work to do.”

This upcoming trip will be the Cornell’s seventh trip to Ethiopia, and Karen said the experience has given her a new appreciation for the most basic things.

“They don’t have facilities or a faucet to get a drink water,” she said. “They have to walk 30 minutes for water that they think is clean, but we couldn’t drink it ... I’ve tried to pick up one of those things of water that these women carry for 30 minutes, and they might do this several times a day. In a large family, a father will sometimes have to decide what child will eat today or if any of them eat today. Here (U.S.), people have resources. There, they don’t.”

Even in such poverty and so little resources, Karen says they have never felt unsafe there and are welcomed by the villagers.

“I knew I was accepted by the community when one of the women let me know my jeans weren’t appropriate, and I should be wearing a skirt like they were,” Karen said. “To me, that’s such a loving, accepting signal.”

Now Karen wears a traditional dress like the other village women and sorts lentils side-by-side with them on the ground.

“Our experiences have been wonderful and amazing,” Karen said. “Each time it’s hard to leave and come home. As much as I want to come home to my family and grandchildren, it’s just really hard to leave the village.”

However, this time the Cornells will be taking one of their grandchildren, 14-year-old Champney Pulliam.

“Champney actually had a heart for Africa even before we did,” Karen said.

Pulliam, an eighth grader at Kastner Intermediate, is excited for her upcoming adventure that is a life-long dream come true.

“When I was really little, this African musical group came to our church and showed pictures,” she said. “I started crying and told my mom I wanted to give shoes to those kids, because they looked like they needed help. When my grandparents went there, I knew I should go, because it was a sign. I’m excited to be with the kids and love on them.”

All of the group members attend Trinity Community Church in Clovis. Along with Champney, the Cornells are also taking two other students - each with a parent - to Ethiopia. A recent Fresno Pacific graduate, Elisabeth Asrat, is also going to do video footage.

Kerri Curtis and her son, Zachary, 14, a freshman at Clovis North, are among the group of eight. Kerri has been to

Ethiopia two times already, along with her husband, Chris, as part of the adoption process of their daughter, Jamela, 6. Kerri wasn't able to see much while she was there, though, and is looking forward to learning more about her daughter's culture.

"I want to really get to know my daughter's country in a more intimate way and be able to come back and share that with her and talk to her from a place of understanding and knowledge," Kerri said.

She also hopes for Zachary to have a new understanding of life.

"My hope for Zachary is for him to come home with his heart changed, and to really have an understanding of how different of a situation God can put two similar people in," she said. "While we're there, he'll meet kids just like him, but their lives are so exceedingly different. I hope he comes home with an appreciation for the fact that God really picks where we are going to be in our lives."

The Cornells are teaching the teens how to help, rather than be hurtful, in underdeveloped countries.

"It will be an incredible experience for young adults," Karen said. "It will be life changing. Our primary focus is, as always, relationship building, and loving on the children, and sharing the love of Jesus," Karen said.

The group will work in the preschools, sing and dance with the children, and play games with them. The three CUSD students are also putting together some crafts for the children. Karen said there will also be some language learning.

"We teach them in English, and they teach us in Amharic," she said.

Karen said the next goal for ACTS is to raise enough funds to build another preschool in another unreached village.

"We have been asked multiple times to come into other villages in the Horn of Africa to start a school and help take care of these vulnerable children and give them a head start ... and we hope we'll be able to expand, but in order to do that we need to first need more funding."

Details: actskids.org/index.htm