

# Despite Hardships and Snakes, Cameron Park Couple ...

By Linda Holderness

During 22 years of civil war, a generation of children in what is now South Sudan, in central Africa, could not attend school. As a result, the world's newest nation is also its least literate. Three-quarters of the population cannot read, and education for girls is limited.

In the village of Atiaba, with an 8

achieve this success. Not long after the war ended in 2005, Mary began experiencing a spiritual restlessness. Her church, Faith Episcopal, frequently hosted missionaries as guest speakers, and she was feeling a tug to join them. At the time, she was happily teaching English at Rescue's Pleasant Grove Middle School, and Jim, retired from the state, was immersed in a labor of love crafting wood furniture. She broached

Their first offer was from Jerusalem, "living in a fancy apartment serving tea to important people," Mary recalls. "It was the last thing we wanted, but it took a lot to say 'no.' "

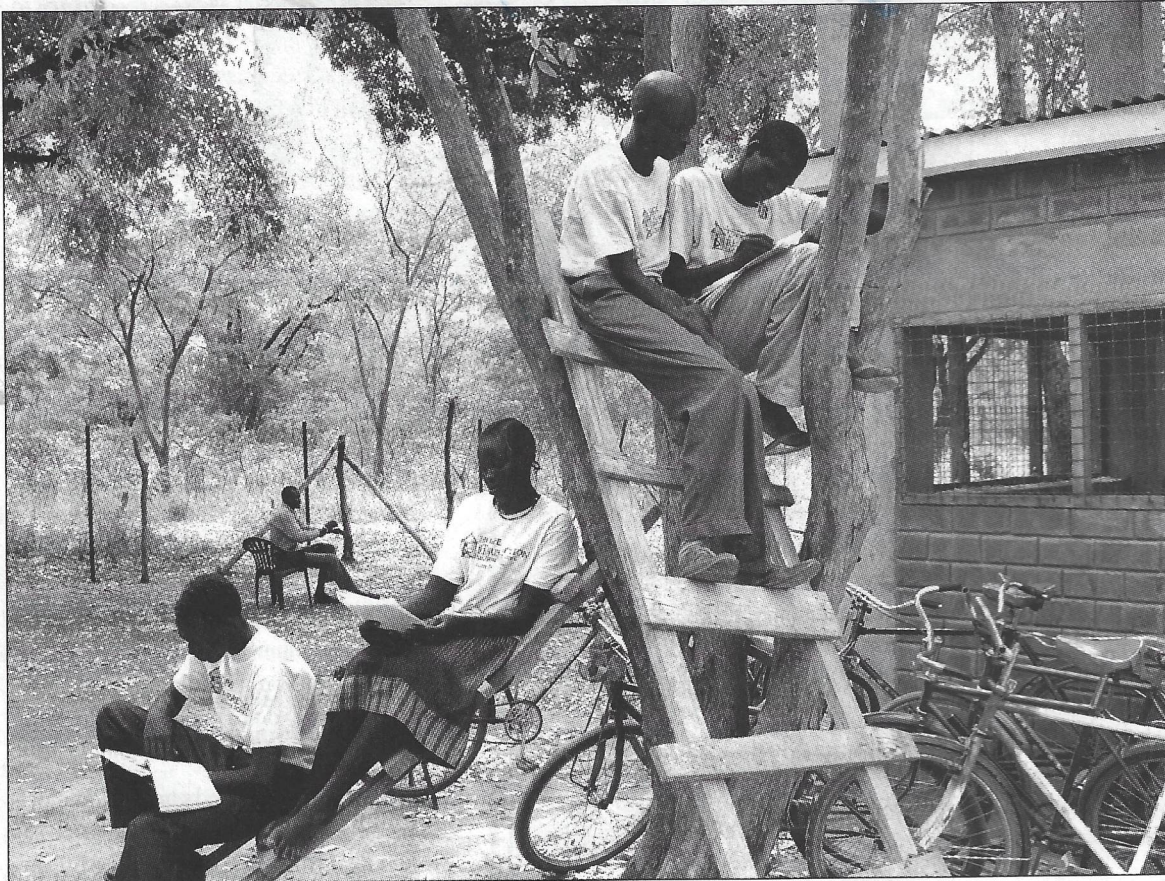
Then the phone rang again. The nonprofit Hope for Humanity in Virginia needed missionaries to set up a secondary school in a remote part of South Sudan — no running water, toilets or electricity; solar bags for showers; a classroom to sleep in; and snakes galore. Mary and Jim would do it all — buy supplies, design curriculum (a specialty of Mary's), hire teachers, recruit students, teach. A passionate educator, Mary was undeterred by the hardships. "Perfect," she responded.

Looking back now, she muses: "I think of all the ways I wasn't qualified to go. But sometimes the qualification is simply 'yes, I'll go.' Sometimes that's God's call, a willingness to do."

Hope for Humanity had built Hope and Resurrection Secondary School but didn't have the funds to operate it. So the organization reached out for missionaries with the

national Episcopal Church, which put them in touch with the Higbees. The couple spent four months researching and planning, including visiting the "little village in the middle of nowhere."

Textbooks and supplies had to be purchased in Uganda. "This was a huge task," Mary remembers, "and we couldn't



*Textbooks are precious and can't be taken home, so students return on weekends to study. Most walk, but some ride their bicycles crafted from found parts.*

percent literacy rate, that dynamic is changing. Thanks to caring people like Jim and Mary Higbee of Cameron Park, this impoverished community has a co-ed high school that has graduated hundreds of students and sent many off to college.

Several dreams came together to

the idea with him: Could they leave their settled life for the rigors and deprivations of mission work?

To find out, the couple completed a process of discernment and training through their church. "I had to really believe I should do it," Mary says.

## ... Helped to Start a School in South Sudan

have done it without the absolute kindness of many people. They just popped up before us.” “They” included a nun with the Sisters of Loretto who provided syllabuses, the bookseller who packed everything for them and the trucker who drove them around.

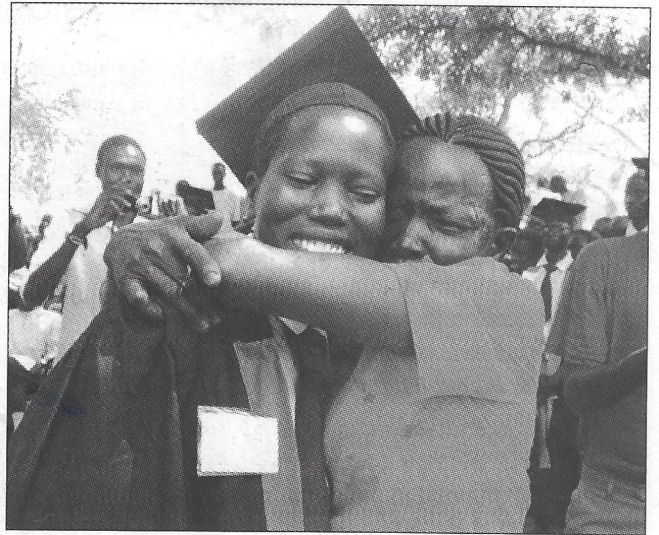
Despite the illiteracy in Atiaba, the yearning for education was intense. When the couple began interviewing prospective students, “they just started showing up – they came out of the woodwork,” Jim recalls.

The school opened with 60 freshmen, half of them older students who had missed their schooling during the war years. “These students,” Jim says, “wanted to go desperately” – so desperately, some of them walked seven miles each way to get there. Three were girls – not enough, but a start. Mary taught English. Jim, who was not a trained teacher but had subject matter expertise, took on physics and math. Local teachers handled other subjects, and a priest covered religion.

One early challenge was hunger. The Higbees quickly discovered many students were trying to learn on empty stomachs. “They eat what they grow,” Jim says. “There’s nothing convenient about food in South Sudan.”

With a gift from Faith Church, the school began providing high-protein lunches of rice and beans, ingredients they could store without refrigeration. Mary and Jim hired two moms to prepare the meals – building and laboring over wood fires each day. That was Mary and Jim’s daily diet, too. “If we got a little cabbage or eggs or mangoes, that was a treat,” Mary says.

The Higbees taught at Hope and Resurrection for the 2008 academic year. Local teachers have taken over, but



*Elizabeth, a jubilant graduate, is hugged by her mother, who most likely cannot read.*

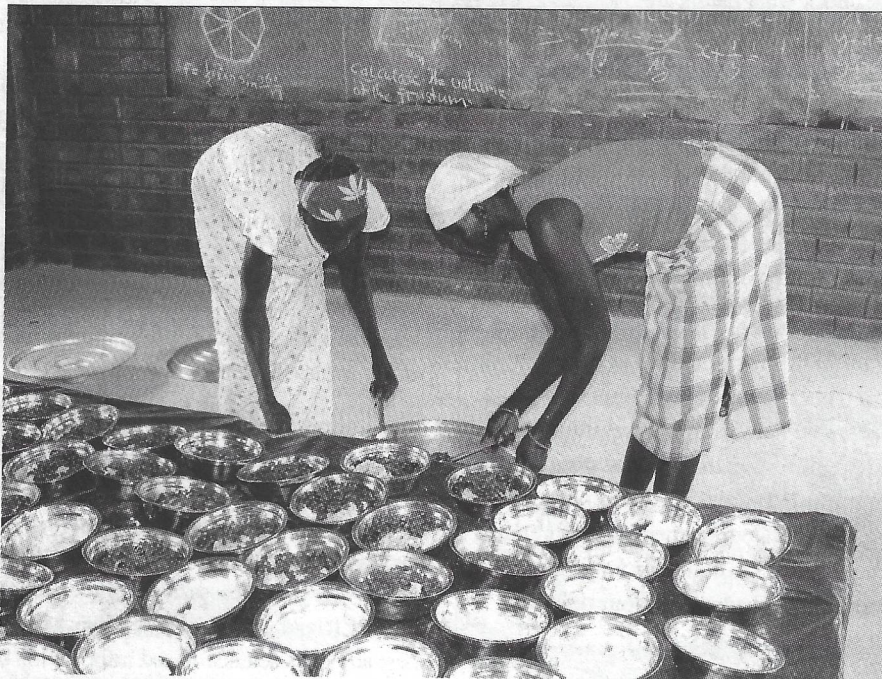
the Higbees continue their support. “I can’t imagine having that profound an experience and coming home and just being done with it,” Mary says. “One of our callings is to encourage mission work. If this school didn’t exist, where would these students be?”

After 13 years, Hope and Resurrection thrives. Families move to Atiaba to enroll their children. More than a third of the 350 students are girls, who no longer marry at 15 but appreciate their worth and pursue their dreams. A woman alum with a university degree is co-administrator.

Two years ago, Mary published a book, “*Lessons From Afar*,” that recounts the story of their year in South Sudan. “The experience changed our world view and enriched our lives,” Mary says. “Sometimes you just can’t believe how far your heart can stretch.”

If you would like more information on Hope and Resurrection School, or to donate, please visit [hopeforhumanityinc.org](http://hopeforhumanityinc.org).

*Linda Holderness is a freelance journalist and book publisher. She works and lives in Folsom.*



*Ayen and Rebecca have been preparing the daily lunch of rice and beans since the school opened. For some students, this is the only meal they get all day.*