

## Three Thirds in Action

Highlighting the people, events and actions that define our community



© Photos courtesy of Cameron Stark

# With These Hands

A powerful story of the type of home that love can build

by Cameron Stark

Connections Manager, Treeo in Orem, Utah

Land locked between Mozambique and South Africa sits Swaziland, a country about the size of New Jersey, where more than 60 percent of the population lives in poverty, the average life expectancy is 46 years old, and one in six children under the age of 15 are parentless from HIV/AIDS.

My first real impression of this country were the stories of women who sacrificed by taking in orphans, sometimes standing all night in their homes holding a tree branch to secure a wall of their one-room home to protect the children from vicious storms. Later I heard about substandard medical care from lack of supplies and doctors and yet was shown images of children who celebrate every day of life as a blessing.

Thanduxolo is one of those children; and he stole my heart long before I ever ventured to Swaziland. I first learned about Thanduxolo in May 2013, when this young boy was rushed to the hospital with a distended abdomen. At the government hospital, he was given medication to ease his pain and sent home to die. Fortunately, the staff at The Mkhombokati Care Point, a community center primarily for local children, didn't give up without a fight. They took Thanduxolo to the Women and Children's private hospital, where he was rushed into surgery and pleas for financial aid and prayers were sent out.

One of my friends had just returned from Swaziland and shared Thanduxolo's story with me. Without hesitation, I logged onto Children Hope Chest's

website and donated to a special fund that had been set up for Thanduxolo.

It was with similar eagerness that I accepted an invitation to join a trip to Swaziland shortly afterwards. At the time, I was in a season of transition in my life. I had left my job of 13 years to find a better work-life balance. A peace came over me after I had accepted, and I knew this experience would help me find that balance. But as luck would have it, shortly after signing up for the mission trip, I landed a new job with Leisure Care as Connections Manager for their new Treeo community in Orem, Utah. And even better, when learning of my trip, they were excited I was already working toward a three-thirds lifestyle of family, philanthropy and work.

*“My first real impressions of this country were the stories of women who sacrificed by taking in orphans, sometimes standing all night in their homes holding a tree branch to secure a wall of their one-room home to protect the children from vicious storms.”*

During the months leading up to the trip, our team collected school supplies, hygiene kit items and clothes to provide much-needed amenities for the Swazi children who regularly attended the Care Point. We planned logistics to repair and replace houses so mothers would have sturdy homes and could sleep in peace with their children. We learned basic SiSwati and planned a week with the kids at the Care Point that would leave their lives better.

Nestled upon a hilltop, Care Point is about 30 minutes outside of Manzini, Swaziland. As we pulled in on the first day, I saw two humble buildings, painted a light blue, with a sturdy tree between them. Just behind the tree sat a small greenhouse and a giant garden. After nearly 40 hours of transit,





Two boys eat pap for lunch at Care Point (left), while Thanduxolo and volunteer Kelly Johnson share a hug (above).

as I stepped off the shuttle, a sense of joy and relief enveloped me. I began soaking in the sunshine and absorbed the views from this awe-inspiring plot of land. Quickly, the surreal peace and quiet of the moment was interrupted by the need to start working, a process that was to repeat itself every morning I awoke here.

Our team of 14 greeted the Bomake, the five women who volunteer their time to cook and care for the more than 200 children who regularly visit the Care Point. We then had a quick team meeting to prepare for the day. It seemed the preschool-aged children knew when we were finished with our meeting, as they immediately started coming up the hill and into the Care Point at its conclusion. Upon seeing us,

they smiled and began running to see the new faces.

Before we knew it, almost every member of the team was holding a preschooler, kicking a soccer ball with three or four children, or playing some sort of game. Laughter filled the air, and these children were soaking up all the love our team was pouring out and were sharing love with us in return.

Meanwhile, the Bomake were under the sturdy tree, scrubbing large cauldrons with water and an old Altoids can to begin preparing pap (a corn-based porridge similar to grits) and beans for the kids' lunch. Oftentimes the meal these children received at the Care Point was the only meal they would have for the day, so the Bomake take the preparation very seriously.

These five women have been working together for years and toil in sync, like a perfectly choreographed dance. Each Bomake kept an eye on what the others were doing. As one task neared completion, another Bomake jumped in and began the next task to be efficient and spread the workload.

When the Bomake are not cooking or caring for the children, they create crafts, primarily bags, ornaments and clothing for Timbali Crafts. Together with dozens more Bomake from about 15 other Care Points in Swaziland, they use the money earned from these handmade treasures to support their families.

As schools let out for the older kids, they made their way to the Care Point for their lunch as the preschoolers finished up. They ate their pap and

then headed into the multipurpose building, where we all sang and gave a small lesson. It was here my heart truly began to melt.

Mbuso, one of the Care Point staff, started the lesson each day and led the Swazi children in song. Hearing their innocent and beautiful voices sing notes of pure love and joy simply took my breath away. Their blissful sounds often caused me to hide behind my camera, so the children didn't see me tearing up. I can still hear Mbuso leading the children in a fun-filled rendition of "Making Melodies," complete with actions. I was compelled to join in and learn the song.

Over the months that I prepared for the trip, my thoughts had often returned to Thanduxolo. Throughout

the previous year I had followed his progress as he underwent surgery after surgery to get him back to health. I hoped, during those months, that I would someday have the chance to meet him in person.

When Thanduxolo arrived for lunch that first day, I finally had my chance. I learned that he was recovering from yet another hospitalization the prior week. He was frail, and looked as if I could wrap my hand around his leg and have my index finger and thumb touch. As I greeted him, our connection was fast and deep.

After the lesson, we played with all the kids for about an hour, then our team would break into small groups to visit some of the homesteads that were in the most need of help. We took bags

of beans, fruit, household items, and corn maize for pap.

Throughout the trip we worked in teams that either played with the kids or worked at the Bomake homesteads. We painted a newly completed home and dug the foundation for a new one, so the Bomake would not need to hold up falling walls with a stick or secure the roof with baling wire tied around a boulder. While digging the foundation with a heavy pickaxe and clearing with a shovel, our group of four quickly appreciated the invention of the backhoe. We were much slower than the three Swazis we were sent to help and marveled at their speed and efficiency.

Thanduxolo didn't make it back to the Care Point until our last day. He

**These Hands:** *Continued on page 38*



**These Hands:** Continued from page 29

was still frail and simply sat watching the other kids play as he ate an apple. He would point out his family members who were running around the Care Point. Thanduxolo couldn't finish his piece of fruit, so he gave the rest of it to his younger brother Wakile. He saved other food for his brothers, placing it in boxes to take home. As the day came to a close, he took charge by corralling his siblings and instructing them to help. Each one immediately listened to him and completed their task. He proved that despite his frail frame, he was strong in spirit and wasn't going to let an illness stop him from living.

As we drove the family home, Kelly Johnson, one of our team members, carried Thanduxolo from the shuttle into his house. Kelly described this experience: "As we walked together to his home, Thanduxolo wrapped his arms around me. Not limp like he had been just a few short days before, but strong. He was thin, but intentional and strong. I don't know if he had any idea what he was doing for me in that moment. As he reached around me, he clasped his hands, tightened his grasp and tightly squeezed. My heart had melted for him earlier in the week, broke for him earlier that day, and erupted for him in that instant. I was reminded clearly and concisely that, despite our circumstances, the most important thing for Thanduxolo was the most important thing for me. Love. To be loved. To feel love. It is the only thing in this world that makes everything okay."

We set him inside on the one piece of furniture in the home, a love seat that had seen better days, and talked with his mother for a minute. As I gave him a hug to say goodbye, my hands could feel every bone in his ribs and every vertebrae in his spine. He smiled, said thank you and waved goodbye. Like Kelly, my heart erupted.

A couple days later when we packed up and started our trek back to the airport, we received word that Thanduxolo was again in the hospital for severe dehydration. He had been having problems eating food and drinking enough water. They were trying to find a vein to run an IV, but with his frail condition, that proved to be difficult. A few hours later, when we made a stop to stretch our legs, we learned that they were able to run the IV and Thanduxolo was doing better. He is still not out of the woods, but every day he gets a little closer.

During my trip, I fell in love with these children, who should be mad at the world for the cards they have been dealt yet were happy with the simplest of things. They reminded me that the most serious problems could often be solved with a smile and a hug. They taught me that all the excess I have in life means nothing if I don't have the basics, someone who will love me and look after me. I went to Mkhombokati to help the kids and Bomake, but they ended up helping me more than I thought possible. While I have returned to work at Treco in Orem, part of my heart remains in Swaziland, and I am so privileged to be a part of the Leisure Care family that allowed me to bless these kids.

To learn how you can offer support to the children in Swaziland, contact Children's Hope Chest at [www.hopechest.org](http://www.hopechest.org).

If you are interested in purchasing some of the crafts of the Swaziland Bomake, please visit Timbali Crafts at [www.timbalicrafts.org](http://www.timbalicrafts.org).

To contact Cameron about his journey, email him at [cstark@betreeo.com](mailto:cstark@betreeo.com). ♦



**BRAIN GAMES ANSWERS / From Page 16**

**Answers to Crossword Puzzle**

BASE	CHIDE	CHEF
AJAX	HOMER	REAR
TART	APPLE	INTO
ERIE	RESIDENCES	
	RAGS	AGENT
FACILE	SCARE	
ACHOO	THAR	ETA
WHERE	THEHEART	IS
NEW	SEEN	RINKS
	PAPER	REGAIN
OFTEN	MESH	
GREAT	LAKES	TOPS
LIAR	ELIDE	ISLE
EARL	SPLAT	SLOW
DRYS	TOLLS	TOWN

**Answers to Sudoku**

6	9	5	2	8	3	1	7	4
1	8	3	4	7	6	9	2	5
7	2	4	1	5	9	3	8	6
5	6	2	3	9	1	8	4	7
8	3	9	6	4	7	2	5	1
4	7	1	8	2	5	6	9	3
3	4	7	9	6	2	5	1	8
9	5	6	7	1	8	4	3	2
2	1	8	5	3	4	7	6	9

# “I’M FIT AS A FIDDLE.”

*And this fiddle has some nice biceps, too.*



**Take advantage of the PrimeFit fitness program brought to you by Leisure Care. Your own fiddle will thank you.**

At Leisure Care we understand that fitness often takes a backseat to, well, lots of other stuff. Which is precisely why everything about our PrimeFit fitness program has been designed to be fun, motivating and convenient. And, you will be glad to know, the exercise choices are vast. So vast, in fact, that the hardest part will be deciding what to do first.

Take a look at a few of the things available at many of our communities: a PrimeFit Gym, Balance Builders, walking programs, recreational sports, aquatic exercise, holistic offerings, and low-impact exercise.

Contact the PrimeFit staff at your local Leisure Care community to learn more. You might even want to ask them where the saying “fit as a fiddle” comes from. Because we have no idea.

1-800-327-3490  
[www.leisurecare.com](http://www.leisurecare.com)

