



Helen & Gordon Smith: Opportunity International

Tell us how you became involved with BUMC?

We joined BUMC in 1962, choosing it because of our previous ties to Methodist churches and because of Bethesda Church's involvement – even then – in social concerns. Later, Bethesda's pastor introduced us to Wesley Seminary, where we have since both been very involved. And all of us have benefited from Jenny's experiences as part of a cohort group of outstanding young pastors from many denominations all over the country through the Lewis Leadership Center there.

You have been very active with Opportunity International. Tell us a little about the organization and how you came to get involved with their work.

Our work with Opportunity International – an organization we all can support through the Alternative Giving Opportunities during the Christmas season – began when a friend came to us with a proposal, and after meeting long time, very dedicated Board members, we signed on. Helen has served on their national board and Gordon on the board of their first full-service microfinance bank board located in the Philippines. A Christian organization that does not discriminate in their work, their focus then was on very small loans to entrepreneurs – mostly women – who used their earnings to buy required school uniforms and books for their children. Opportunity now offers life insurance, crop insurance and assistance for agricultural endeavors and education in 22 countries in Africa, South America, India, and the Far East.

Can you share one story from your work with Opportunity International that was particularly meaningful to you in terms of the impact on someone's life.

Through contacts in the Philippines, we began a program with ten students who were children of micro finance clients from all over the Philippines to finance their college education in Manila. Over sixty students have graduated from college, are now working in many different fields, and have established a foundation to provide educational experiences for students from their own provinces. One very exciting story is Amina's, who finished her degree at Ohio Wesleyan and graduated with high honors, who chose to return to the Philippines and work for the Opportunity entity that gave her mother her first loan. This spring she applied to Oxford, the London School of Economics and Georgetown University for graduate study and was offered a scholarship to all three. Now a student in the Georgetown program in Global Human Development, she submitted an essay for this year's Peter Drucker Global Forum, which was chosen as one of 23 from 490 submitted from 79 countries and last month traveled to Vienna, Austria to attend the conference and receive her award in the Schonbrunn Palace.

You also have an interest in higher education for students around the world. What role does your faith play in driving your commitment to education?

In 2004, another wonderful opportunity was presented to us while on a family safari in Tanzania. In a country where 74% of the people live on less than \$2 per day and 2/3's of Tanzania's eligible children are not in secondary school, we visited an elementary school where there were 100 children in a classroom with no books and often no teacher. We came home wondering how we could help, and after doing some research two of our children went back and visited six private schools with one of the safari company's employees. One school stood out. Started by Gemma Sisia, a young Australian woman who had gone to Uganda to teach and had fallen in love with her safari driver, she had returned eight years later to marry him and found the School of St. Jude with three students on a small piece of land near Arusha. At the time of the visit the school had 150 students who came from homes with dirt floors and no electricity who were chosen because of high need as well as the ability to benefit from the schooling. Since that time we have worked with the school and built the secondary campus. The school now has 1,800 students on two campuses all with scholarships from individual sponsors. The school places an emphasis on moral education and the students regularly rank in the top 5% in the national exams. Three years ago the first class graduated from secondary school. Many of the students did a year of community service by teaching in the government schools which still have a great shortage of teachers especially in math and science. Now most of the graduates are in college in African universities and five are studying in the United States – including one who has a full scholarship to Stanford – all committed to returning to Tanzania. Several years ago the current Australian ambassador to the U.S. climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro and also visited the school. Two weeks ago he hosted a wonderful gathering at his residence which enabled supporters from all over the U.S. to see and talk with Gemma and four of the college students.

Working with these organizations here and around the world has been a very exciting journey for us. We'd love to have you join us; just check out opportunity.org and schoolofstjude.co.tz or give us a call (301-469-8597).

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