



Great Falls author Jamie Ford was a pin cushion for training in the use of medical supplies his family brought to Tanzania. COURTESY PHOTO



Benefit nurse Leesha Ford returned to Tanzania for several weeks in November to build on her family's first visit in June. A baby born in the clinic where she volunteered was named in her honor. COURTESY PHOTO



When Leesha Ford and her family visited Tanzania, they saw orphans in ragged sweaters. When she returned a few months later, Ford brought sweaters purchased in country. COURTESY PHOTO/LEESHA FORD



People began asking for the "nice mzungu" at the clinic where Leesha Ford volunteered in Tanzania. COURTESY PHOTO/JAMIE FORD

Win holiday cool points without all of the stress

Middle school years were awkward, painful and uncomfortable. If anyone regales you with tales of fun times and worthwhile memories during those excruciatingly acne-prone years, then they're lying. Or they were raised on a remote island and their only friends were covered in fur, which would make acne a moot point.

Fads come and go in those "want to be like everyone else" years, and I remember pegging my jeans and wearing my shirt inside out and backwards. Wait, maybe I was the one raised on a crazy remote island.

But the one memorable fad was "cool points." If you tripped in the hallway or dropped a tray of food in the cafeteria: minus 20 cool points. Got out of detention by saying you had a funerals: plus 30 cool points. I can't remember if we actually kept track, but I do remember the dialogue and script that ran in the background of our pimple-filled screenplay.



ELIZABETH HILL
Readily A Parent

So, maybe you weren't raised on the same island as me and had cool points to collect, ratify and bestow but it seems that unconsciously we're all still stuck in the seventh-grade hallway keeping a running tab in regards to parenting. I feed my children spinach-tofu-quinua-starfish smoothies everyday; plus 40 cool points; you forgot to send homemade Pinterest-endorsed valentines for your child's class: minus 50 cool points.

It seems to get worse around the holidays in how we ramp up, catalog and peacock-around our holiday traditions. You know what? I am in the negative. I stink at building snowmen, my gingerbread houses typically collapse and staring at 20-plus plates of cookies waiting to be delivered makes me break out in hives.

Sending Christmas cards and spending too much on pictures that will just make it into the next edition of "Awkward Family Photos" makes me wish I wasn't so darn friendly or had a bottomless bank account.

So, indulge me in passing along Five Legit Holiday Parenting Cool Points.

1. Holiday traditions are important only because they convey meaning, love and a pattern to our lives. They are the candy wrappers of memories — the tool of remembering good and sweet times with those we love. Like anything in life, they can be taken to extremes.

2. We eat healthy foods and exercise so we can hopefully live long enough to see the ice caps melt. The same goes for parenting. It's the longest-term investment you can ever make. You sacrifice, love, enjoy and teach these little ones so they will one day be the kind of people you'd want to be neighbors with. So, make sure your traditions are purposeful. What are they pointing toward? Family? God? Community? Service? Just plain fun?

'TRAUMATIZED IN A GOOD WAY'

Volunteering in African village a powerful experience

By Kristen Inbody
Tribune Staff Writer

For nurse Leesha Ford, the differences were staggering between Benefit Health System, where she works, and the rural Tanzanian clinic in which she volunteered.

The clinic's 13-bed hospital in the village of Pommern was without electricity, and only at her second visit, did it have a sink with running water.

The medicine cabinet in her Great Falls home was better stocked than the remote clinic.

Polio and malaria are still problems for the people who live in the area.

Ford returned to Pommern recently to follow up on projects her family became involved with during a June service vacation to Tanzania.

The Great Falls Kiwanis Club, of which Ford is president, bought the clinic's nurses a motorbike (the only other motorbike in the village came from the Clinton Foundation), and part of Ford's return was making sure men weren't monopolizing the bike, which is meant to help the nurses

with public health outreach.

Kiwanis also has a presence in the village through the Eliminate Project, a Kiwanis International effort to eliminate maternal/neonatal tetanus. Kiwanis and UNICEF are using vaccines to help combat the hazards of births on dirt floors and umbilical cords cut with rusty instruments.

Ford said tetanus, which kills women and nearly 60,000 babies each year, is an excruciating death for newborns, who convulse in agony.

Vitamin distribution was another project on which Ford

checked. About 50 percent of the children are stunted by chronic malnutrition at the children's boarding school in Pommern. They're not starving, but they eat ugali, a corn meal porridge, almost exclusively, with only a monthly protein serving.

"For the most part, they're fed better at school than home," she said.

The vitamins were a "quick fix," Ford said. The longer-term project was building a chicken coop for the secondary school,

Tanzania

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with training on chicken care and egg collection. Eggs are about 20 cents each in this area where most people live on \$1 a day.

During her previous visit, Ford noticed children in shredded clothes and bare feet, which means vulnerability to worms, tetanus and snakes. When she returned to the village, she brought hundreds of sweaters and shoes from Dar es Salaam to distribute to orphans.

"They were pulling on sweaters and running their hand over them with shock on their faces," she said.

The students share one book and one pencil for about every six to seven children. Toothbrushes are a total luxury, so she returned with lots of those, too.

Melissa McDunn, another nurse who joined Ford on the trip, brought kits for girls with underwear and reusable menstrual supplies so they don't have to miss school.

Babies in Tanzania now carry the names of the two Great Falls nurses, with McDunn's namesake born on her birthday.

Finding a way to contribute

With 18 suitcases (10 packed with what added up to 500 pounds of medical supplies), the Ford family set out in June for the village that would soon have a lasting impact on their lives and draw Leesha Ford back a few months later.

One of the best moments of the trip for Ford was unpacking those suitcases and stocking the clinic with iodine bottles and other supplies, with bare shelves suddenly full. The supplies were discarded by Benefis, which donated them to Ford.

Ford researched many nongovernmental organizations, and Global Volunteers stood out. The program's motto is "Leave your mark on the world," and "volunteer vacationers" travel to places like the Cook Islands, Vietnam, Peru, China, Appalachia or the Blackfeet and Crow Indian reservations in Montana. They collaborate with local leaders and United Nations agencies.

The program has a reputation for safety, with opportunities for the whole family to use their skills and do actual work. Organizers aim for self-sustaining projects based on what the village decides is needed using local supplies.

Leesha Ford, her husband novelist Jamie Ford, as well as Haley, Lucas, Madison and Taylor Ford, Kassie and Karissa Procopio and Brittany Shipman volunteered in Pommern as teachers and laborers. Jamie Ford also fulfilled the role of test subject so staff could learn how to use the medical supplies the family brought.

"I know now why we brought the kids," Jamie Ford said.

"At first I was skeptical. I thought the expense to get there could be a donation instead. We all knew Leesha would have desirable skills, but we didn't know how we could contribute," he said. "I was proud of my teenagers. They were enthusiastic and confident."

Most people he met in rural Tanzania travel about 50 kilometers in a lifetime, so contact with the wider world is meaningful.

"People are so happy you came to see them," he said. "We brought photos of the Grand Canyon, of Montana, things they would never see otherwise."

The pictures of the family, and evidence dogs are kept inside and are part of the family, were also a revelation.

"We spend more on our dogs than they have for their kids," Leesha Ford said.

The fellowship was hugely meaningful for their family.

"When you put a face on poverty, it changes you forever," Jamie Ford said. "Our kids are teenagers, and this was the last chance to do it while they're young, before college and their own families, a last push for social responsibility to the world, their community, their neighbors. And, if you can travel to a bush village in Africa, you can travel anywhere."

The teens taught math, music, English, art and games in the school. Students came to classes during their vacation just for the chance to learn and interact with the Americans.

"The (Tanzanian) kids spoke a smattering of languages. They were smart kids, tremendous math skills," Jamie Ford said.

Once it was clear the teenagers didn't need any help at the school, Jamie Ford helped carry bricks for a new bathroom, part of a 40-person effort that used the village's truck to transport 12,000 mud bricks.

Global Volunteers is working on a project to bring sinks for hand washing, toilets and a shower head for the secondary school. The organization has laid 10 kilometers of piping so running water is reaching key points in the village.

The Fords also were struck by the kitchen at the school, a 12-foot-by-12-foot space with no ventilation for the open fire. Smoke inhalation has been fatal for the school cooks, producing an effect like coal miners' lung. The Fords left a donation to help build a new kitchen with a water spout outside for washing hands and a sink for dishes.

"It was neat to see the kitchen going up" in November, Leesha Ford said. "Making the donation to the person overseeing the project, it really does get done."

Such a trip did mean cold, rare showers, among other challenges. The family stayed in a 108-year-old building with no running water, but with access to bottled water, a cook and beds. The only safety concern was the poor roads.

"We told the kids to think of it like roughing it," Jamie Ford said.

At 15, Leesha Ford was an exchange student to Chile and the only one placed with a lower-income family.

"I had seen it differently and wanted to share that with my family," she said.

She was "traumatized in a good way, which is what we wanted to do to our children," Jamie Ford added. "My kids are really into the 'Hunger Games.' This was that moment where the kids realize we're the capital."

A family dream

The trip connected one more generation of Leesha Ford's family to rural Tanzania.

A dream of Leesha Ford's mom was to do service in Kenya. She died of cancer before she ever saw Africa, but in honor of that, Leesha Ford brought soil from her mom's yard and planted it in a plant nursery in Tanzania.

"I did a soil exchange to bring a piece of that back," she said.

The connection is ongoing for her children, too. She said the experience has helped her children be more able to say yes to challenges — including interest in returning on their own to Pommern.

"We have kids who want to go back," she said. "I don't think I could stay away."

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