



Where Is Home, Really?

A Covenant missionary kid finds her place in the world. | RACHEL EKSTRAND

As I hiked through the Charles de Gaulle airport in France at the age of almost eleven, trailing along behind the rest of my family, all I could think about was the McDonald's cheeseburger I was going to eat. That greasy pat of meat slapped onto a processed bun, accompanied by a thin slice of cheese, a couple pickles, some diced onions, ketchup, and mustard was like the holy grail for me—the symbol of entering the States and rescuing my savage soul from the three-year tyranny of lean

burgers and homemade buns that I had endured at the hands of my sweet missionary mother. (American fast-food joints hadn't—and still haven't—made it to the jungles of Congo.)

There were many other things that I looked forward to experiencing in the States: ordering pizza to be delivered to our doorstep, shopping in malls, sitting on soft grass, hugging my grandparents, indulging in junk food while watching afternoon sitcoms or Saturday morning cartoons, the smell of “new” (stuff unwrapped from plastic packaging,

freshly cut grass, household cleaning products—smells unique to modern countries), and driving on smooth roads.

Once we arrived, some of the things that I experienced were a surprise. I could no longer use English as my secret language to my brother and sister because the crowds of people around me spoke and understood it. Everyone at church lovingly greeted me with,

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“Welcome home, it’s good to have you back,” despite the fact that I had spent very little time in small-town Iowa. Traffic jams happened regularly even though everyone was licensed and had learned to drive according to explicit traffic laws. And before I knew it, I began to smell “new” after browsing through Wal-Mart, K-Mart, Target. I also had my fill of greasy fast-food after indulging at the road-side restaurants we visited as we drove to family reunions around the eastern U.S.

And then I realized: I didn’t want to smell new! I wanted to smell like me—like a girl who ran around barefoot, climbed trees, spoke in at least two languages every day, pulled on clothes in the morning without thinking twice about their style, and carried books on her head because it was more convenient. I missed homemade hamburger pizza and the market where vendors yelled their wares and prices in (very loud) monotone repetition. I wanted to play soccer on wild grass instead of on a plastic field or indoors. I missed my local friends and the *mpondu* concoctions we would make out of the manioc leaves we had “harvested” from their mothers’ gardens. I had had enough of the fast-paced, flashing, new American life and wanted to go back to being a simple jungle girl—and it wasn’t even the end of the summer. We were in the U.S. for a whole year. Oh joy.

I have gone through this process of re-entry, or “coming home” as many call it, eight times in my twenty-two years. Each time I become more aware of how out of the ordinary my life as a missionary kid in Central Africa seems to others, and how ordinary it seems to me. Sometimes we returned to the States earlier than expected because of civil wars in Congo—in 1997, we were relocated to Cameroon, so even my African home changed. Whenever I am asked to state where I call home, which is usually one of the first questions that comes up when I meet new people, my mind freezes and internal chaos ensues.

That’s what happened on the morn-

ing of my first day at North Park University in Chicago. When I walked into the dining room at eight in the morning, the room was mostly empty—apparently breakfast wasn’t the college thing to do. Still, I managed to find a table with a few other girls seated at it. I set down my tray loaded with eggs, bacon, pancakes, muffins, and juice

life you are at, which often confirms if you’ll be friends right away or not. But for a person who grew up in the Congo and wants to be accepted for who they are instead being just “the girl from Africa,” it’s not that easy.

Just a week prior to arriving at North Park, I had attended a re-entry seminar in New York for people like me—who

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(breakfast is my favorite meal) in front of an empty seat. When I looked up into the faces of the girls sitting there, they smiled in greeting and I knew the time had come. I needed to introduce myself. I took a deep breath, cracked a small smile, and tried to appear as normal as possible with my response, though my mind was whirling.

Now, this may sound a bit melodramatic—honestly, it’s not that hard to introduce yourself, right? Just state your name, where you are from, where you are at in school (or life), and ask the same in return. That way everyone can address you as an individual, have a general understanding of your background and determine what stage of

had grown up outside the States and needed to make the transition to American life. There, we were told to create a unique answer to the where-are-you-from question that didn’t make people assume we had grown up in the States (something like, “I’m from Pochontas, Iowa”—where my family was living on furlough that year), but that also didn’t make us center stage of a freak show. (“I was born and raised in the jungle of the Congo.”) The goal was to create an answer that led to a question. If people were paying attention, they would ask for more information; if people didn’t want to know, they would be satisfied with the simple answer and go on with their lives.



Rachel and her family at her graduation this Spring from North Park University: from left, Sarah, Carl, Cynthia, Rachel, and Peter.

At eight o'clock that morning I hadn't quite figured out my own middle ground answer. I knew that I needed to fulfill the social expectation of an introduction, so I opened my mouth and began: "Hi! My name is Rachel, I'm a freshman, and my parents live in Iowa."

There. I thought to myself. *I actually gave an answer that's not really weird.* The other girls introduced themselves and then went back to the casual conversation they were having before I sat down. I finished my breakfast in silence, feeling like I had somehow betrayed the secret of where I was from. Or, perhaps, it was just that none of them were curious enough to catch that I had answered a little differently than normal.

As the year went on, I met other people who did ask further questions and learned that I had grown up as a cultural mix of African and American. But even now, four years later, when I'm asked to introduce myself and tell where I'm from, I pause and feel the same inner turmoil I felt that first morning in the cafeteria. Where is home, really?

Is home the house you were raised in? Is it a certain group of people to which you belong, like your family or church? Is it a feeling, like the ability to rest? For many, it is indeed a place—they return faithfully to their hometown for homecoming football games and other such celebrations. For others, it is family—they make sacrifices to see each other regularly and continue to make precious memories together. For some, home is wherever they feel like they can let their guard down, be

of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo). When we left Congo the last time, home became my family. Wherever my mom made creamed tuna on rice and my dad played his baritone horn in church, wherever my sister placed her stuffed bear, Rose, on her pillow and my brother arranged his computer and speakers around his bed, that was home.

After my first year of university when my family returned to Cameroon and I stayed in the States to continue my studies, I could no longer return home on school breaks or call home when I had a quick question. Instead I realized that home—real home—is only found in surrendering to God and trusting in him with all my heart.

This spring I graduated from North Park University and promptly embarked on a mission trip adventure of flexibility to Lesotho, Africa, with a team of fellow North Parkers that reminded me of this truth about home. We had originally planned on going to Ethiopia, with detailed plans and high expectations of seeing God's hand at work in the lives of the people we would meet there. Then, some security issues in Addis Ababa the Friday before we were supposed to leave prompted a redirection of the trip—and we ended up in Lesotho.

Instead of staying at a small hotel in warm Shashamene, southern Ethiopia,

we rented two bedrooms and a kitchen in Maseru, the capital of Lesotho. Every evening we shared stories and laughter around the table. Instead of building simple houses out of mud and wattle, we spent most of our time using pickaxes and shovels to dig foundations and pit latrines through rock and clay. Instead of helping out at a refugee camp for a couple of days, we were able to visit an AIDS hospital and several orphanages—the huge smiles and heart-breaking circumstances of children in a country that has one of the world's highest AIDS rates tugged on all of our hearts.

Every day, God opened our eyes to new realities about this world and new truths about ourselves. He reminded

me that things in this world cannot be controlled and that we were not created to make this world home. Instead, we have been created to trust God and join him in the adventure he has planned.

To continue that adventure, this year I will be serving as a Covenant short-term missionary in Cameroon. I will wear many hats while I am there, focusing on assisting the teachers at Rain Forest International School and building relationships with students. Through it all, I am excited to witness how God will move and transform me. I look forward to learning more about how to make my heart's home in him, trusting that he will provide, and seeing more pieces of his plan for my life unfold. □



Rachel and one of the children she met on her trip in May to Lesotho