



Update from Shelvis and Nancy Smith-Mather December 2021

Now and Then

The first and second times I had a one-year-old child in tow, I lived in Yei, South Sudan. With Alice now reaching a year in the U.S., memories of Jordan and Addie's first years pop up frequently. When making the comparison between contexts, there is much that differs, yet some things remain the same.

Our family loved living in Yei. We loved it because of the incredible people we met. I loved the natural beauty of the landscape and the regular access to healthy food. I loved engaging in a new culture, gaining insight from the church in another part of the world, and learning more about reconciliation work.

And at the same time, the logistics of life were undeniably harder for us than in the U.S.

In Yei, we bought most of our food at a vegetable market 1.5 miles from our home. We usually walked there at a rushed pace. Office work finished at 5:00 pm and the market closed promptly at 6:00 pm with the blow of a loud whistle. With limited electricity for refrigeration and with all organic food, fresh vegetables wilted and turned quickly. Consequently, we visited the market multiple times a week.

Before kids, I would stuff my backpack full of Irish potatoes, sweet potatoes, rice, lentils, beans, onions, and cabbage. The lighter things, like tomatoes, avocados, kale, okra, bananas, and spices were placed in handbags, which swayed by my side with each step home. After Jordan's birth, he took the spot on my back, so the handbags became heavier. Walking the mile and a half home, the bags persistently pulled towards the ground, straining my elbows.

In the U.S., I can order my groceries online and either pick them up or have them delivered. The vegetables, however, are not as big and fresh. Also, I do not get to meet or greet someone with the purchase of each individual item like in the outdoor market.

In South Sudan, processed foods cost more than vegetables, and vice versa in the U.S. Even with a good amount of effort and expense, we still haven't been able to eat nearly as healthy while Stateside. We are grateful, though, for consistent refrigeration and the option to buy pre-made baby food.



Shelvis carrying Jordan around the RECONCILE International office in Yei, South Sudan.



Baby Jordan enjoys some healthy millet porridge in Yei, South Sudan.

Would you like to receive these updates digitally? Please email Kelli at kgilmore@rca.org to be added to the email list. You will receive more timely updates from the missionary you support and help us be good stewards of our resources.

Washing clothes by hand takes a lot of time and physical energy. To work at the office and care for our children, our family paid someone to wash most of our clothes and hang them up to dry. But, when the unpredictable rain came, we joined our colleagues in the dash through the office doors towards our houses to pull clothes off the line before they got drenched. In the rainy season, clothes, unable to fully dry, would sometimes mildew.

“What is that smell?” I would ask Shelvis. “Oh! It’s me!” I would answer my own question after lifting the collar of my shirt to my nose and breathing in the mildew.

In the U.S., we have our own washing machine and dryer. Laundry is now my favorite household chore. I so appreciate being able to do it myself with less physical exertion.

Bedtime routine with little kids can be trying in any context. In Yei, however, it took extended preparation. We boiled the bathwater first, then cooled it. This made the water safe in case the baby took a sip while bathing.

Keeping mosquitos out of a child’s net at night may seem simple. It is not. When morning light landed on a mosquito inside the net and touched on the red bites dotting my baby’s face, I always felt like a terrible parent. We earnestly tried to avoid malaria, but at some point all the children got it.

In the U.S., our kids can drink their tub water and mosquito bites are usually just annoying, not frightening.

Our access to medical care in Yei differed drastically.

“We only have the capacity to test for a few things here. If you want to know for sure what disease you have, you will need to go to Kenya or Uganda,” a caring doctor once told me. So, with Addie still nursing, Jordan two years old, and myself weak with illness, we took three flights and crossed two borders just to be able to test for more than a handful of diseases.

In the U.S., doctors have not yet told us to seek treatment in another country.

The list of differences goes on, yet what remains the same is actually more important. In both places, our one-year-olds have been scooped into the loving arms of family members and friends. In Yei, the general culture of adults offering kindness and care to other people’s kids meant our children felt well-loved and safe. In both places, when I needed help, people stepped in, watched the kids, provided a meal, and offered words of encouragement.

While the contexts have been quite different, we are deeply grateful for the experience of raising children in multiple countries.



We boiled and cooled the water before Jordan and Addie took their baths in Yei.



Nancy and Jordan arrive back in Yei, South Sudan after an international trip which took four flights and more than two days of travel.



A RECONCILE colleague pauses from work to pick up Jordan and swing him in the air, bringing a smile.

Thanks be to God.

Thank you so much for your support and prayers while Shelvis is in residence at the University of Oxford researching peacebuilding strategies in South Sudan, and Nancy remains in the U.S. with the children. While in the U.S. and Europe, we remain in contact with RECONCILE and get updates on the important work they continue to do. Please pray for our colleagues in Yei as they allow God to use them in the midst of many challenges. Thank you!