

Sharing a Life of Purpose

by Dave Irby

I was excited. I was coming home from my first mission station in Tacoma, WA. As usual I had no idea what the Lord really had in store for me.

George, as we all called The Reverend George Munzing had invited me to share some of my missionary stories at Trinity. Unbeknownst to me Mary Von Schimmelmänn called my mom and invited our family to have lunch with the Von Schimmelmänn family after the services were over.

It was a whirlwind romance and seven months after we started dating Susie Von Schimmelmänn and I were married at Trinity.

My best friend Bob's little sister was just out of nursing school and she had no idea what she was getting herself into? I was working for a non-profit soccer outreach organization and barely making ends meet.

I had discovered my life's calling a few years earlier taking a soccer team to Mexicali, sharing Christ in a men's prison and a boy's prison; but the question was - could Susie embrace the challenges we would undoubtedly face in our journey together?

Many times during our marriage it seemed like we would not be able pay our bills, yet Susie stood with me as I pursued my dream of taking soccer teams around the world - to make a difference in the lives of people who had little or no hope.

In Guatemala when she was six months pregnant with Nathan she used her nursing skills in a critical situation in the jungle. She even went boldly into a men's prison our team visited.

Nine months later Susie and Nathan were both with me as I took a team behind the Iron Curtain. Susie stood beside me as I took teams into some countries severely affected by AIDS and poverty and into Uganda as their civil war was ending.

Many times I traveled without her, and saying *goodbye* was always difficult.

Then we moved from Southern California to Salem, Oregon as we combined our ministry with the Cascade Surge soccer team.

In Salem Susie began working part time as an RN at a local medical clinic; I was coaching the Surge, and we were raising two sons and a daughter.

Life began to settle down; not that I didn't continue *my world travels*, but I was now traveling to mostly *safer places*.

Then *out of the blue* I received an email from a friend I hadn't heard from in over six years. He wanted to know if I was still taking soccer teams on international tours. His email said that he was working in Sudan. He had a direct invitation from the President of Sudan to bring a team to Khartoum to play the Sudanese National Soccer team.

I knew immediately that if I decided to coach a team to Sudan, *safety* would certainly be an issue. Sudan was in the midst of the longest running civil war in African history; Khartoum was the former home of Osama bin Laden and Sudan was on the US State Department Terrorist Watch list.

The civilian death toll in Sudan was heartbraking. All told almost two million people died through the fighting, famine and disease, and four million people in southern Sudan had been displaced.

On short notice three key colleagues and I flew to Washington D.C. to meet the Sudanese Ambassador to the United States. Over lunch he told us "you are part of the reconciliation process."

Once I arrived home from that meeting I knew in my heart that I was supposed to go to Sudan. Susie agreed to support my decision.

Quickly our world-wide recruiting network helped us put together a credible team for me to coach. Players from the USA, England and Africa signed on to join us in what Sudanese media would call "an historic event", that they likened to the "ping pong diplomacy" of President Nixon with China back in 1971.

Finally the day came when it was time for all of us to fly to Mozambique to begin our three country tour.

It was on a Sunday, when once again, I had to say “goodbye” to my precious Susie. When the service at our local church ended Susie and I huddled in a corner of the church foyer with our lawyer; signing an updated last will and testament, which we had rushed to have put together.

That night Susie and I said little to each other as we drove to the Portland International Airport. And then it was time. We embraced, but still said little, except for the words *I love you*; even though we knew it that this could be the last time we would see each other in this life.

Our team of professional soccer players played several matches in Mozambique and ran several soccer clinics for local youth; then just before our match in South Africa, and one week before we were to go into Sudan; we were summoned to an evening meeting.

We all knew of the dangers we would face, but until that meeting, the dangers had remained mostly *unspoken*.

That night our team leader told us, that whenever his organization took groups into places they considered extremely dangerous, each person on the trip had to write goodbye *letters* to their loved ones. He also said that we would have two opportunities to leave the tour before Sudan, as we changed planes in Johannesburg and again in Nairobi; *no questions asked*. The goodbye letters would be kept at the Johannesburg Airport for us to pick up once we returned from Sudan.

Later that night I knelt in front of the small night stand in my room and with tears streaming down my face I wrote my *goodbye letters*...first to my parents, then to *my* Susie and finally a letter to each of our *dear children*: Nathan, Ryan, and Hayley.

Under the watchful eye of the Sudanese secret police and the Sudanese military we played the Sudanese national team to a 1-1 draw in front of

10,000 people, with 10 million more watching on Sudanese satellite TV all around the world.

We were told that thousands of people in southern Sudan saw the match on television, and wept for joy, as they knew we had risked our lives, to let them know, that the world had not forgotten them.

The next day we drove across the Sahara Desert to the northern most part of Sudan to play one more match, in a town that rarely receives foreign visitors. Before we knew it, the referee blew that final whistle, signaling the end of the game; and the beginning, of the long journey home.

Fifty-six hours later my trip home came to an end. As my plane touched down at the Portland International Airport; there waiting for me with a warm embrace, was *my precious* Susie.



Ryan Susie Dave Nathan Hayley