

# Woman helps raise money for church in Botswana, Africa

## Angels Among Us

By Sharon Kornacker



Theresa Curtin has been involved in mission work in Africa for 18 years.

It all started in 1985 when Theresa traveled with her son Mike to Botswana to visit her other son Paul, who at that time was working under the sponsorship of Canadian University Students Overseas program setting up cottage industries in the small villages around Botswana.

While in Botswana, they rented a camper pick-up truck, purchased supplies such as gas, food and water and ventured forth on a 10-day safari across the Chobe and Moremi reserves.

"We slept in a tent in the wilds of Africa and viewed hundreds of animals from the top of the truck during the day as well as at night," said Theresa.

"There was no one out there but us and the animals.

"No roads, only paths through the grass and rough river beds. Maybe once a day we would meet another group of

people traveling in the other direction."

At the half way point in their journey, they stopped in the small town of Maun, in the Kalahari desert.

While there, they visited the Catholic mission and met a very poor young priest, Father Frank Nubuasah. His church was a produce shed with benches for the people to sit on, a table for an altar and a

tabernacle made from a box painted gold.

The young priest lived next door in a compound of small huts surrounded by a bamboo fence to keep the animals out.

After a lot of picture taking and a short visit, Theresa and her sons continued on their journey.

The encounter with Father Frank left a lasting impression on Theresa, and months

later she received a formal invitation to the opening ceremonies of his new church built by the local bishop.

Unable to attend, she sent him a gold chalice

which she was able to obtain from a fourth degree Knights of Columbus member who had passed away.

This became his prized possession.

"After seeing the poverty there I was inspired to try and raise money for Father Frank," said Theresa.

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Photo by Sharon Kornacker

Theresa Curtin stands before a collage of photographs she took in Africa.

# Involved in mission work for more than 18 years



Photo submitted by Theresa and John Curtin

Theresa with her son John Curtin at the opening of the church their family and friends built in memory of her husband Jim in Francistown, Botswana, Africa.

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 She approached Blessed Sacrament Church's mission group asking if they would match any money she could raise. They agreed. After raising \$300, the church could no longer continue to help support her effort.

Using her creative skills she made and sold many wreaths and other items. One day she had an inspiration. Why not offer mass cards to friends and relatives? They would give a \$10 stipend for Father Frank to say a mass in memory of a loved one or for someone's special

intentions. She would then send the stipends and cards on to Father Frank. This has turned out to be a successful fundraiser. Theresa, her family, relatives from afar, friends and acquaintances all give masses at funerals, birthdays,

anniversaries or any occasion. "As I spread the word about my mission work, more people become involved and now I have almost 50 co-supporters," said Theresa.

To assist with fundraising she also hosts an annual mission party where her supporters can socialize, hear letters and receive updates from Father Frank regarding how their donations are being spent.

All donations go directly to the mission. Theresa incurs all administrative costs including sending a newsletter four times a year and thank-you cards to supporters.

Theresa hadn't seen Father Frank for many years but has kept in close contact through letters. He was able to come to Pittsburgh to study for his master's degree in Spirituality at the university and Theresa and her two sons were able to visit with him for a few days. He arranged to visit Chatham to meet everyone supporting his mission before returning to Africa.

"I felt meeting with him was important so that everyone knew who he was and where their money was going," said

Theresa. In March 2000, he was invited to a friend's church for the millennium celebration in Utah.

By now he was ordained the first Bishop of Francistown in Botswana. Once again he arranged to visit Theresa to meet with her co-missionaries, celebrate mass and have lunch with them.

Three weeks after his visit Theresa's husband, Jim, passed away.

At his funeral, Theresa asked that all donations go to the Curtin family private mission in Botswana.

"With this money as a start, I decided to build a parish church in Botswana in memory of Jim," said Theresa. "I wondered if I was doing the right thing, until one night while channel surfing, I came upon a documentary on Vision TV - The Emerging Church in Africa."

It was at that moment Theresa's questions were answered.

"Churches are built not only to meet spiritual needs but to create a sense of community," she said. "It gives the people a place to gather and gives the priest and nuns an opportunity to help with the children's education."

The sisters in the

orphanage across the street clothe and feed the children making sure they get to school. They cook stews in a huge pot over an open fire and send the people home with food. They are able to help the adults with their many problems. HIV is rampant.

Father Frank in a letter to Theresa said, "the people are dying like flies around them. People come everyday to funeral masses."

"My family believes in what we are doing and have made a significant contribution in support of our endeavour to create a Christian community in a far away place they may never see," said Theresa. "St. James Church is a memorial to their dad, a great father and teacher who spent his life participating in and supporting the church, and contributing to his community through volunteer work in the Knights of Columbus and the Canadian Legion."

She added, "His fourth degree gold chalice, presented to me at his funeral, will be used daily on the altar of St. James Church. It has been a big undertaking. I still have a lot of funds to raise but this is my life's commitment. I feel called to do this."

The church isn't paid for yet, it needs pews and a floor. The people carry their chairs with them to church. But the opening of the church, that Theresa and John Curtin attended gave them the opportunity to see the happiness and smiles on the people's faces and their disbelief that someone so far away would want to build a church for them.

"It just makes it all worthwhile," said Theresa. "I personally feel that our work in the church and in the missions is not an obligation, but an opportunity to share our talents and resources with others."

After reflecting she added, "At the same time, we can use our sense of community to help build another."