

Grand-Bassam, October 2021

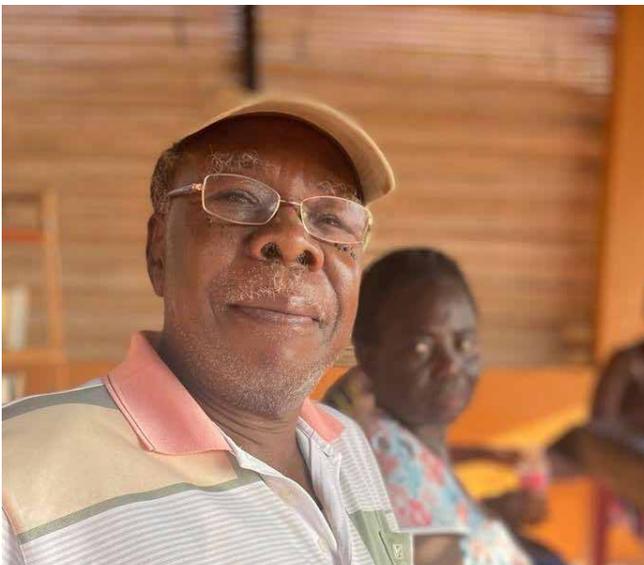
*Having a place to go is a home.
Having someone to love is a family.
Having both is a blessing.*

Donna Hedges

Dear Sponsors,

I hope with all my heart that my lines find you in good health. All is good with us; the children are well and healthy.

In Ayobâ, our village, everyone also feels at their ease, our seniors have settled in very well. And the nicest compliment I received, which moved me to tears, was when our «Papa Gilbert» told me one day: «Maman», (he is 74 years old), «I have arrived at home.»



Papa Gilbert

Arrived at home. This means that this poor, cheerful man, who suffers from Parkinson's disease, high blood pressure and arthritis, had NEVER felt at home before. I found him in a miserable hut with his son Samuel, who had fallen from a coconut tree ten years ago and has been paralysed ever since. It really got under my skin when I really realised what it meant to be «at home». And when our students write to me before the holidays, «Maman, we are coming home», I am just happy and grateful. Because yes, even though they were abandoned as AIDS orphans, today they have a home!

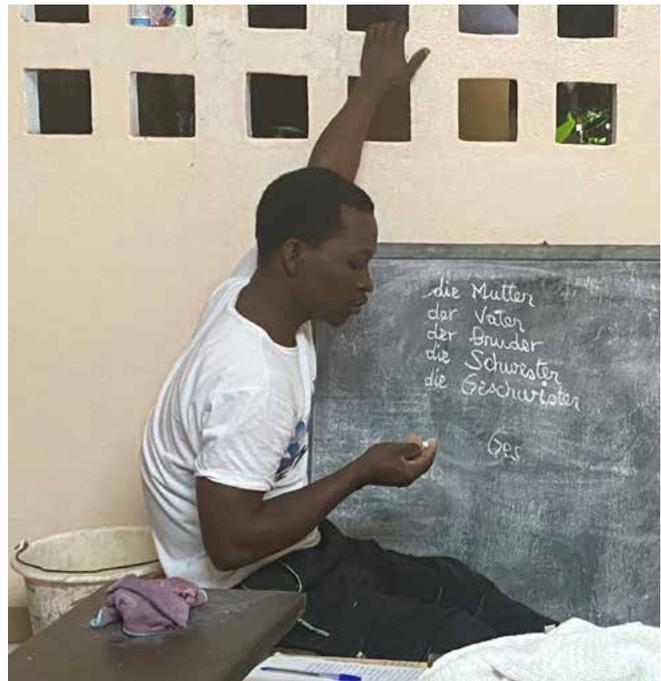
Samuel is also with us; he now wants to catch up on his Baccalaureate and study. He is very intelligent and I am sure that he will master his life despite his paralysis. He shares the little house with his father and they often play Scrabble until late at night. But I often see Papa Gilbert playing Scrabble alone, I asked him how he did it. He laughed and said: «Oh Maman, it's very simple. The right hand is me and the left hand is my opponent!» Later I taught him to play dominoes - every free minute he reminds me, and then we play. And when he bangs on the table with his free hand because of his Parkinson's

and I tell him, «Please be patient, I need time to think», he laughs his wonderful laugh and is happy, and I no less.

REINE ESTHER

In my last letter I mentioned that I wanted to tell you more about one of our children. About Reine, the girl who, on her own initiative, wanted to do good for the children in Odoss, the slum behind our Centre. I had already started writing in April and then put it aside for this new letter. And it obviously had to be that way... it is sad, you will shortly understand why:

Fifteen-year-old Reine lived with her grandmother in another neighbourhood before she came to us eight years ago; her parents had died. Across the street from her hut lived a couple of Catholic sisters who took care of the schooling of young girls. Sister Christina loved Reine very much, but noticed that the girl was always ill. So she came to us. We did various laboratory analyses and had to conclude that little Reine was very ill, that it was even bordering on a miracle that she was still alive. She was infected with the HIV virus and also suffered from sickle cell anaemia and beta thalassaemia, a severe blood disease. The prognosis for life was between 14 and 15 years, but Reine would not live that long if she did not receive «fresh» blood every six weeks. We took her to a haematology clinic each time, without these blood transfusions she would have died long ago. The treatment is expensive, and it hurts me very much to know that there are certainly many children who suffer from this disease and die from it when they are still small. So in Reine's case, a certain amount of her diseased blood was taken every six weeks and replaced with healthy blood. But these transfusions lead to an iron overload, which cannot be broken down by the body. The iron is deposited in the organs, and deformities



Samuel is also learning German

occur - hence her small stature and peculiar head shape. Her spine was also very crooked. And yet: Reine was never unwilling, never in a bad mood, always cheerful and positive, and as described in the last letter, she loved to help others. But often, we had to take her to our hospital when she suffered a heart attack and needed oxygen - her heart was no longer strong enough. Once or twice we also thought it was the end, but each time she came round. She would have died a long time ago if she wasn't with us.

Meanwhile, her old grandmother lived with a son-in-law in her village. But one day she was expelled by him - she suffers from Alzheimer's and always did «funny things». I don't know how she got to Abidjan, without money, without any memory of her old quarters. She was brought to us by a woman who picked her up on the street and found the address of the Centre in her handbag. Now she lives in Ayobâ, and Reine was extremely happy to have

found her «Grand-Maman» again after eight years. She took care of her grandmother with much love and patience, but most of the time her grandmother did not even recognise her.

Reine was incredibly excited that Sarah, our youngest daughter, was coming in July to enjoy the summer camp with all of us. A few days before Sarah's departure from London, the two of them skyped and Sarah showed her cherries and promised to bring her lots of them. She showed her how to hang them around her ear, the anticipation was immense - I remember it like it was yesterday. The two of them skyped on the fourth of July, Sarah would come on the tenth. However, Reine had not been feeling very well for a few days, but the specialists could not find anything abnormal. She didn't need blood and didn't have malaria, and yet there was this malaise. On Wednesday morning, the seventh of July, at seven o'clock, Reine was sitting on her bed, tired but happy, because "Sarah was coming soon, with cherries!" «Yes,» I said to her, «have a good rest.» She took her breakfast and I went to my office. At ten o'clock they came to get me! There

was a great commotion, all three doctors as well as the nursing staff were standing around her bed. Reine was receiving oxygen and was on a drip, but she was already in a coma. I could only give her a kiss on the forehead, bless her and caress her and she had already died. It was a huge shock; we couldn't believe it. It was unbelievable, even though we actually knew that her life had already been lived to the maximum.

I asked the nurses to tidy her hair and put her head on a nice pillow, because I had to inform the other children. I wanted them to be able to say «au revoir, goodbye» to their sister, because only then would proper mourning be possible. Everyone was deeply saddened, because how could we have imagined that Reine would have to go right now! I explained to them that our Father in Heaven had called her, that HE had opened His door for her and that she would now become an angel watching over us all. How sad it was to see them all come, one after the other, with flowers in their hands, and how incredibly strong it was of them to kiss Reine on the forehead, recite a prayer or a sura, or just silently wish their sister a good journey. It was just like two years ago when Clarisse died.

Reine's grandmother had already been with her for several hours - she had come over from Ayobâ on her own, quietly, as if she had sensed it. This may sound almost creepy, but she was there. She also had the strength to come with us to the funeral two days later. Apart from a few Catholic sisters, an aunt and the grandmother, Reine had only us. And yet there were over 90 of us at the grave, all the staff, all the children, her brothers and sisters, all of us, her whole big family accompanied her «home». Peace be with you, Reine, we will never forget you - and I have a new scar in my heart again.



Reine's grandmother

Sarah was also heartbroken and inconsolable, she had loved Reine so much. I could only tell her what I tell myself again and again, and what I cling to in order to get the strength I always need when a child dies: «Tout ce que Dieu fait est bon» - everything God does is good.



Our Reine, here with Abraham. We will never forget you!

Dear Sponsors, thanks to you we are able to help thousands of people and give hundreds of them a «home» and a family. I am grateful to you from the bottom of my heart. God bless you.

With my deepest respect

Lotti Latrous

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