

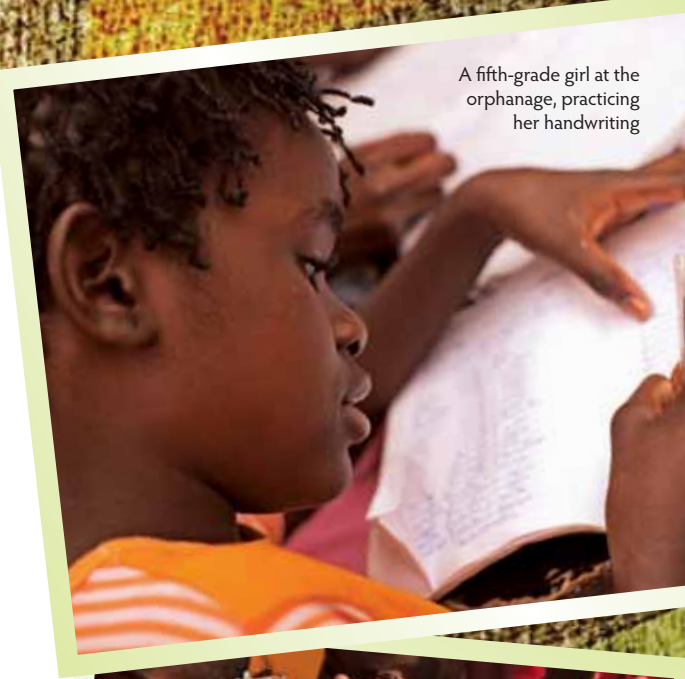
Giving Back to the Children

Katy's Israel family journeys to Africa to donate toys to orphans

*Written by Shetye Cypher
Photography Courtesy of Rosie Israel*

Katy teen Marie Israel with a new friend at St. Isabel's Children's Charity in Angola, where she helped pass out donations of toys and spread smiles

A fifth-grade girl at the orphanage, practicing her handwriting



When Rosie and Eric Israel began planning a work trip to Angola, Africa, memories of their time spent growing up there quickly surfaced. The trip turned into a family affair, and soon, the Israels' daughters Marie, 13, and Samantha, 11, began remembering their time growing up in Angola, too, before moving to Katy. They recalled the hardships faced by impoverished children in the south African nation and decided they wanted to turn their family trip into a way to give back. They decided to collect toys to take to St. Isabel's Children's Charity, founded by the Sister Domingas and Friends Foundation. Eric's company and other local organizations also donated financial aid to the orphanage.

Help from Katy Neighbors

Marie and Samantha went door to door in their Grand Lakes neighborhood, explaining their mission to their friends and neighbors who were all ready to lend a hand. "This all started when we were going to Africa and I wanted to do something that I would remember forever," shares Marie. "I asked all my neighbors if they would like to donate any toys to the children of Angola, [and] they were incredibly helpful."

Delivering Smiles

The Israels ended up bringing six 30-pound bags of toys to the children at St. Isabel's. "Angola is a difficult place to live, but the generosity of the people here [in Katy] has made this hardship a little more bearable for a few children," shares Rosie. "This is really a unique experience for us."

When they first arrived at the orphanage, Samantha could not believe that the children had absolutely no toys. "I was glad to be helping other kids who have almost nothing," she says. "When we started passing out the toys, the kids were grateful, so happy; they kept saying, 'Thank you.' I was so happy that the kids would have at least one toy each. I would like to do this again, because this was a great experience. We have already started collecting more toys."

In a country still recovering from a 27-year civil war, the Israels hoped they spread just a little sunshine in the lives of the many orphans whose families were lost or separated during the conflict. For their part, Marie and Samantha found many rewards in reaching out to others. "The experience to make children smile was amazing," shares Marie. "I am so lucky that I got the chance to help children who were parentless. I learned that you are very lucky with what you have and [for having] parents that love you very much. The smiles on the children's faces were unforgettable. I will continue to help people in any way possible."



Girls pose with their new toys, donated by Grand Lakes residents

"I WILL NEVER FORGET THE SMILES THAT OUR TOYS BROUGHT TO THE KIDS' FACES!"

- Marie Israel

Sharing Their Experience

Upon returning, the family wanted to share their experience with their many Katy neighbors who had opened their hearts and donated toys for the cause. "We prepared a frame with a picture from the experience, and they were really moved to know that the donated toys were put to good use," says Rosie.

Both parents and children felt the impact of giving back. "The parents were happy to hear Marie and Samantha tell the stories to their kids, while showing them pictures," recalls Rosie. "It made it a lot more personal than just getting rid of old toys. This experience put things in perspective for all of us, who are so lucky, compared to the kids in that orphanage."



Even though the Israels had a limited amount of toys for the boys at the orphanage, they were thrilled with anything they got

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Samantha Israel immediately connected with the girls her age at the orphanage

Encouraging Others to Give Back

The whole experience showed the Israels how lucky they are to live in such a great community and country, where all of their needs are met. "It is really hard for us to picture the life of some of these kids in a third-world country, without parents and with barely enough food to survive," says Rosie. "People here have very busy lives, and a gesture to help requires some sacrifice of time. But I hope that this will show people that since two kids can do it, anyone can help." Even though the initial project was spur of the moment, the Israels are still collecting toys that they plan to send through Eric's company. "Sister Domingas' orphanage has a website where they invite people to donate money for the children's everyday needs," Rosie shares, adding, "Or you can always donate toys to Marie and Samantha, and they will find a way to get them to Angola." KM

SHETYE CYPHER is a freelance writer who has enjoyed living in Katy with her family intermittently since 1976. She is also the journalism teacher and publications advisor at Mayde Creek High School.



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