



# SportsFriends

2020

## STORIES FROM THE FIELD

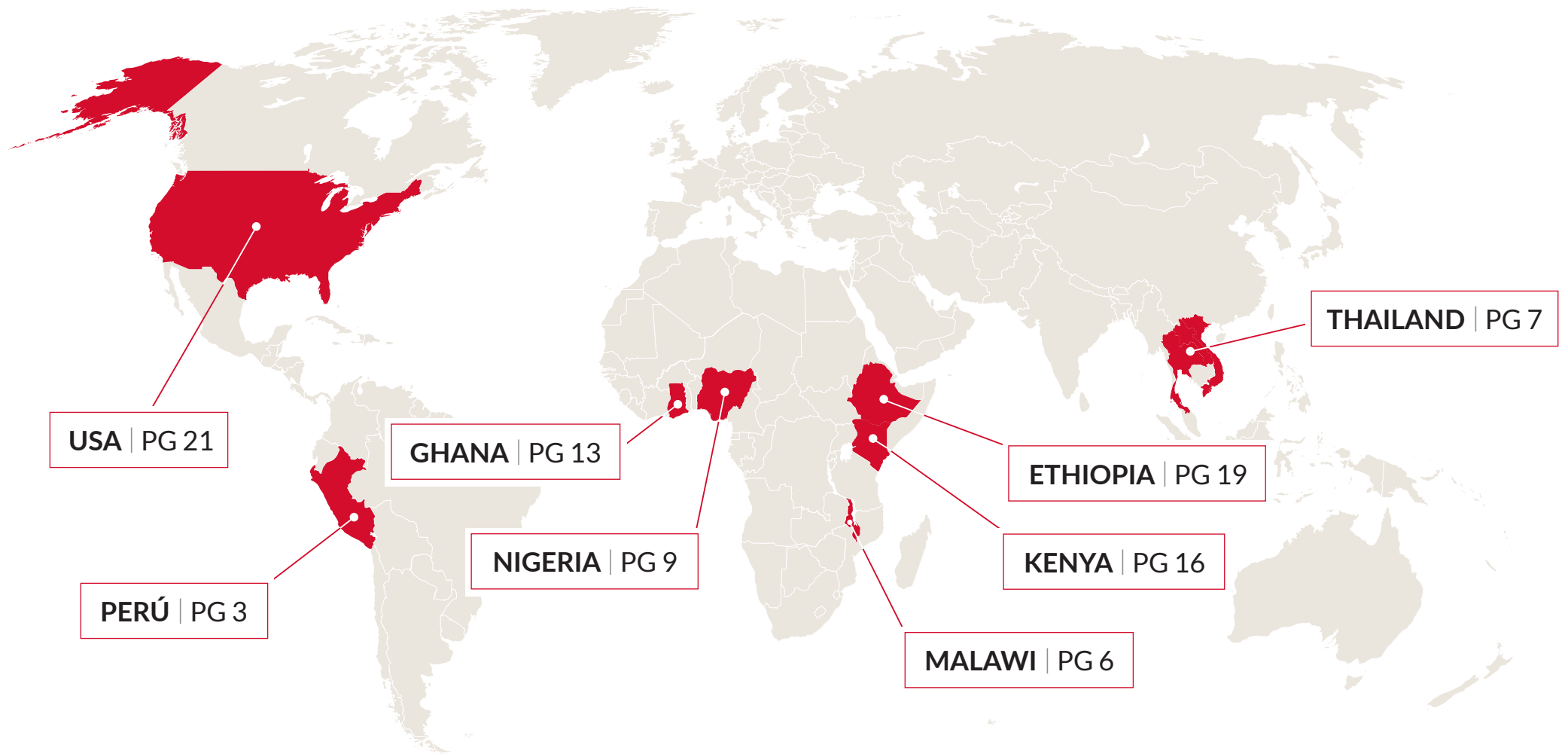
*Stories of transformation from our Sports Friends teams around the world*

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**SportsFriends**  
A MINISTRY OF

**SIM**



It is always a joy to hear stories of transformation from our Sports Friends teams around the world.

Often, the stories begin on unassuming fields of dust. Moving through one faithful coach and a ball, we see God's spirit call forth new life in remarkable ways. In the beginning, God breathed into dust and transformed it into something living and beautiful, and He is still doing it today.

As you read these stories from eight of our ministry locations around the globe, we invite you to praise God with us! Each story is an answer to prayer.

Thank you for partnering with us as we seek to introduce young people, their families, and their communities to the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

Blessings,

**Tripp Johnston**  
Sports Friends Co-Founder and Director





Norma with her team

## PURSUED BY LOVE

Sports Friends | PERÚ

In central Lima, there is a community built up along the sides of a hill known as Cerro el Pino, the Hill of Pines. Home to around 20,000 people, El Pino is a densely populated area originally developed in the 1980s and 90s by people who fled from terror inflicted on the countryside by rebel groups. Still, most residents are those who have moved into the city in hope of better employment opportunities.

There is a church in the community that loves its neighbors with the very heart of Jesus. Three particular women are bold to walk as He did, to seek out the individuals living hopelessly in the daily grind of this world, and call them out of darkness and into His glorious light (1 Peter 2:9).

**NORMA** has a deep love for souls, is full of faith, and eager to give her energy for children who need to know the love of God.

**GLADYS** is an ER nurse. She is keen, hard-working, and dedicated to the well-being of others in need.

**RAQUEL** lives in Cerro el Pino, and is street smart. She has contacts and connections, knows the neighborhood, and is strategic in her service.

When Pastor Ernesto and these women heard about the ministry training Sports Friends offers, they were eager to apply it in their outreach. The women completed Sports Friends' Basic Training to become coaches in 2018.

After running a VBS for kids in El Pino in January 2019, Norma, Gladys, and Raquel advocated for more time and opportunity to love them. With the church's support to begin a Sports Friends team, they told the children about the exciting new activity.

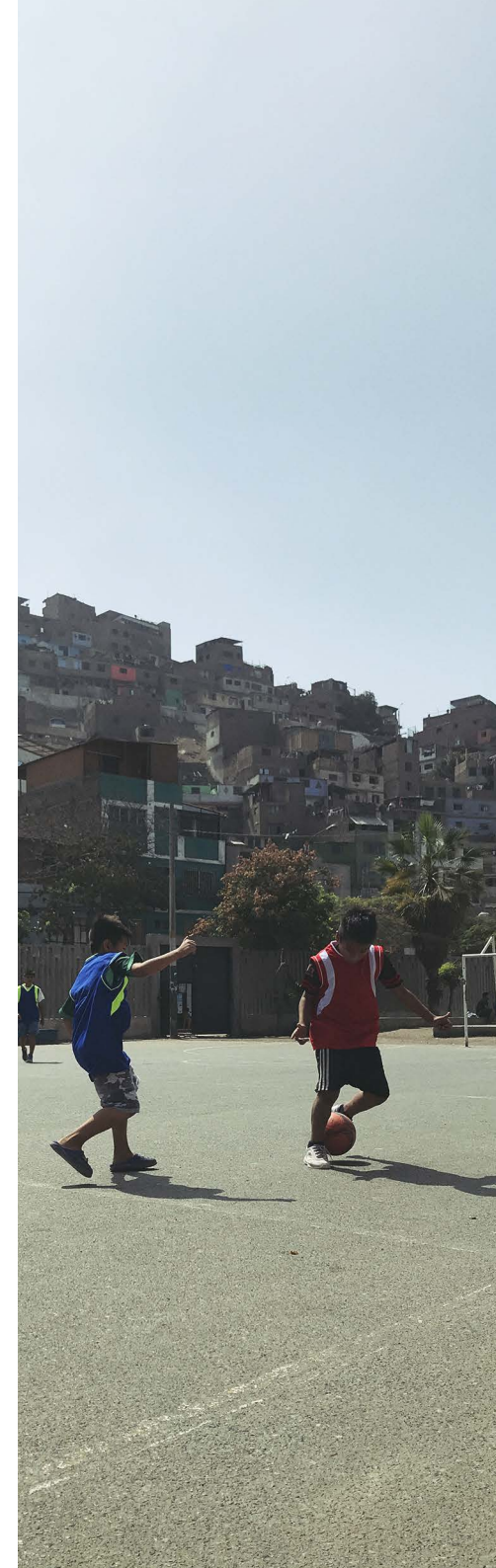
On the first Saturday, Norma met up with her VBS kids, then sent them back into the community to find their friends. The parents freely gave permission, happy the kids would be out of the house and playing in a safe environment.

Their first big challenge was finding a place to play. The community is built up the sides of a small mountain, with no open (or flat) space for a soccer field. Norma told them confidently, "God can provide a soccer field for us." She encouraged the kids to pray. Within three weeks, Raquel heard from the local authorities: they'd been granted play time on Saturday afternoons on the field built next to the market, at the bottom of the hill! It was a simple concrete slab with soccer nets, but this is where people from the hill play.

Soon emerged the second big challenge: competition. The men of the community were accustomed to making the field their own on Saturday afternoons. The women and children couldn't very well stand up to their pressure. Again they prayed. They asked God for favor with the local authorities, and relief from the bullying of the men. Again, God moved in response to His children's requests. Now the children regularly meet in peace with these coaches who love them and advocate for them.

There is no question that the trajectory of our lives changes when an unexpected love pursues us.

*Father, we ask for Your continued and expanded ongoing protection, provision, and joy, and grace for Norma, Gladys, and Raquel, and the children. Bless them each with increasing revelation of Your heart. Keep them in the shadow of Your wing, and grow the the children in wisdom, stature, and favor with God and man. In Jesus' Name. ■*







## NEVER FORSAKEN

Sports Friends | MALAWI

**17-year-old Suzeni is in some deep waters: persecution from her own father.**

Suzeni's father believes in African traditional religion. His daughter follows Jesus, and she knows that she is a daughter of the most high God. But her earthly father is angry about this other "Father" that Suzeni loves so much and constantly talks about.

Suzeni came to know Jesus 3 years ago through her Sports Friends netball coach. Just like Jesus came for us, her coach came to her; loving her, walking through difficulties with her, and pouring out God's word into her life. But, as those who follow Christ know, this life is full of troubles.

It came to a head when Suzeni's father forced her to stop attending her local church and tried to make her renounce her trust in Jesus. He said that she must be obedient to her first father (him), by practicing magic and witchcraft. The pressure and persecution was great, but Suzeni did not give in.

Suzeni testifies powerfully about how she has clung to Christ and her relationship with Jesus continues to

grow in the midst of all these challenges. As her cup overflows with the joy of the Lord, her earthly father has made her a target of ridicule and has cut off all his parental support for her. She receives no benefits from him. No school fees. No love from him.

Though her earthly father has separated himself from her, Suzeni continues to grow in faith. She knows what it means by, "You will be hated by everyone because of me" (Matthew 10:22). Yet she continues to go to the only fountain that brings life: Jesus Christ.

When her netball coach got married and moved away to another town, Suzeni was ready and willing to take over the role of being the coach. She now leads and brings the netball team into times of worship to enable the girls to encounter the love of God for themselves.

We praise God that He has already breathed new life into many of the girls on Suzeni's team. Please pray for Suzeni, for her father, and that many others would come to know that they have a wonderful Father in heaven who sent His Son Jesus to be their Savior. ■





## PLANTING SEEDS OF HOPE

Sports Friends | THAILAND

The Esan region of northeast Thailand is often described as one of the hardest places to do ministry in Thailand. Christians are few and far between, Buddhism is strong, and drug addiction is widespread. Although there are some church-planters in the region, the sheer size of the area means that gospel workers are often spread out and isolated with limited resources. The local Christians truly lean on the Lord, living by hope and perseverance, knowing that they probably won't see much spiritual fruit in their lifetimes.

One of these Christians is Coach Mhee. Through sports ministry, Mhee coaches 25 boys, using soccer as a positive alternative to the temptation of drugs. Mhee grew up following the tradition of his family's Buddhist culture in a village close to the Laos border called Sang Khom. However, when he was 23 years old, Mhee moved to the United States where he lived with his sister, a Christian. During his time in the U.S., Mhee learned about Jesus and began to follow Him. After two years, he decided to return to Thailand, so he could attend seminary and take the gospel to his own people.

While at seminary, Mhee met his wife, and they both felt God calling them to be missionaries. After finishing their studies, they made plans to start cross-cultural ministry together, but it didn't work out. Instead, they were asked to join a church-planting team in Chiang Mai, Thailand. For 13 years, they led a successful church-planting ministry, and the Lord blessed their work.

During this time, they regularly visited Sang Khom where Mhee grew up, as most of his family still lived there. Mhee and his wife saw an enormous need in his hometown and felt the Lord asking them to move back and begin ministering there.

They have now been back in Mhee's home village for two years. Many things have changed since Mhee grew up there, and his wife is not from that part of the country. In many ways, they feel like cross-cultural missionaries!

In this farming community, Mhee works his land to live sustainably; he has never received a pastor's wage. He strives to help others in his village as much as he can, but his focus is working with young

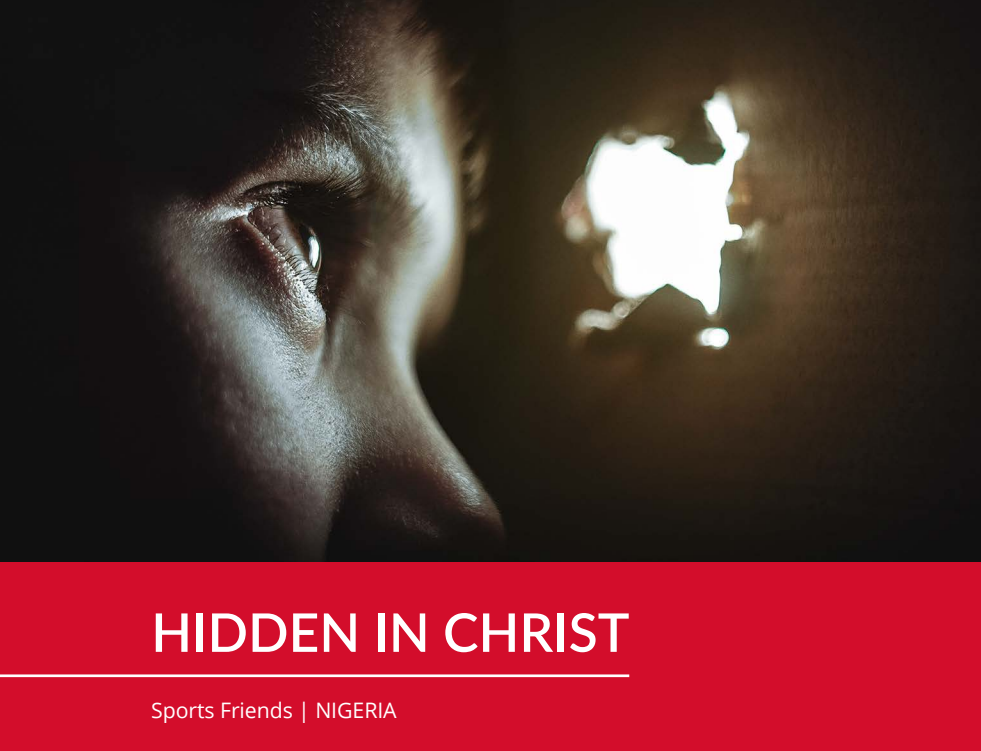


people in Sang Khom through English and sports ministry. They also hold a small house church called "Home of Hope," and are committed to holistic evangelism and discipleship.

Coach Mhee's vision is beautiful. He wants to disciple young Thai people and send them out to live as Christians across the country. He believes they can have a great spiritual impact on Thailand, and sports is one of the tools Mhee uses to do this. The reality is, though, that many will leave the area to further their education without accepting Christ. This could be discouraging, however, Mhee knows that seeing any gospel fruit at all is rare in Thailand. He is content to plant seeds and hopes in the Lord that one day these young people will turn to Jesus and put their trust in Him.

*"If God can change me, He can change them," says Mhee.*

Being the only Christian worker in the area is lonely, and Mhee often longs for fellowship and encouragement. He is thankful for the Sports Friends staff who come to visit and encourage him and his soccer team. Saturday Day Camps bring kids from all over the area to learn skills, hear gospel stories and testimonies, and play in competitions. The Sports Friends staff spend time encouraging Mhee, and with his strong passion for making Christ known, Mhee is able to persevere even in the hardest of places. He tells us repeatedly that no matter how difficult the job is, working with God is fun, too! Mhee's task is enormous, but his faithful God is bigger still. ■



## HIDDEN IN CHRIST

Sports Friends | NIGERIA



Training coaches is an integral and expanding part of the Sports Friends ministry. While it takes many forms and is an ongoing work, the Basic Training is the foundation. Churches send men and women who would like to voluntarily run a local sports ministry team to a Basic Training for overview and instruction in the models of Live, Lead, Minister, and Coach. They learn how to be the light of the world in the context of sports, so that many young people will see Christ in them in a real-life, daily setting.

Sports Friends partners with churches all across Nigeria, and is present even in areas of intense difficulty. There is longstanding conflict all across northern Africa, where tensions between nomadic herdsman and

landowning local farmers have fought bitterly over rights to necessary natural resources; the death toll in just the past three years is nearly 4,000 (Amnesty International).

A recurrent and terrifying event is the raiding of a village by herdsman that have been wronged or offended, who then retaliate with brutal and widespread violence. One of our recent Basic Trainings experienced one of these attacks. After completing the first day of training, everyone expected to return for a full and productive second day. Then cell phones began to ring with the alarm: the herdsman were attacking the town. Gunshots were heard. The coaches in the training facility did not flee; they waited. Nearby homes were burned.

Our Sports Friends Nigeria Trainer, Moses, was there directing the weekend when all of these unexpected and uncontrollable events happened. He told us:

*"The herdsman entered where we were doing our training; we thought this was the end of our lives. Somehow the Lord delivered us. No one was touched. The facility was not even burned... when they entered the town, they were shooting. Here they just walked out. They did not shoot anyone; no one was injured."*

When the staff asked if the new volunteer coaches wanted to cancel the remainder of training because of the trauma, they said no. They wanted to complete the Basic Training.

*"They knew this was a miracle from God Himself, and that God wanted them to continue in this ministry. They are now willing to volunteer in the larger church; it [the training] has served the church... Right now, this church is doing very well."*

Praise God with us for His miraculous protection of His people at this Basic Training! We thank Him for saving the lives of our brothers and sisters, and for His intervention: in a setting of destruction and fear at the hands of man, He delivered and strengthened these new coaches to lead new teams in confidence of His powerful presence in their lives. Pray with us for our Sports Friends staff, coaches, young people, and their families who live in these regions rife with conflict. Pray with us for Nigeria, and for the ultimate peace that comes through knowing Christ. ■







## TWO MIRACLES FOR ONE BOY

Sports Friends | GHANA

In northern Ghana, West Africa, there is a town called Tamale. Fifteen-year-old Sherriff grew up on the outskirts of Tamale with his family, who are subsistence farmers. When Sherriff was about ten years old, his parents noticed a growth developing in his right nostril. They were hoping it would resolve on its own, but over the years it grew larger. They attempted to obtain medical care but were unable to pay for an operation that would remove the tumor. After a few years, the mass was protruding out of his nostril and obstructing it completely, as well as attracting flies constantly.

Sherriff began to live in isolation and shame, as his peers and even siblings mocked him continually because of his appearance. He hid, avoiding the public and even his old friends. He was very intelligent, but his academic performance declined as his hopelessness grew. Sherriff and his family deeply needed to find compassion and the embrace of a community, as well as guidance and assistance. Isolated but unable to bear their burdens alone, they were driven to despair over the situation. Sherriff found himself quietly

and painfully observing life as the others around him lived it.

During his time of distress and hopelessness, a Sports Friends team formed and began practicing close by, under the leadership of Coach Daniel. Sherriff began attending the practices regularly, but only to watch, sitting alone under a tree. Coach Daniel took notice of this and invited him to play on his team. He encouraged his other players to love and accept this lonely young man, treating him as a friend and teammate. Though Sherriff's family was not Christian, his parents quietly agreed to let him participate on a Christian team, as they were happy for him to play where he was accepted, protected, and mentored by a loving coach. Sherriff grew to be confident in his relationships on the soccer team, and he began to share some of the bitter pain surrounding his deformity. Coach Daniel became an anchor of encouragement to him, both on and off the field.

After a few months on the team, the Sports Friends Ghana leadership met

Sherriff and began to ask God for a way to help him further. They shared his story and advocated for him before God's people, who were eager to respond. Within ten days, the resources were provided for Sherriff to have surgery to remove the tumor that had for years been such a source of suffering to him. His life soon returned to his past experience of acceptance and "normalcy", and now he participates in family, social life, academics, and soccer with a new energy and expectation of good. But God had even greater plans for this boy, and he was eager to introduce him to a whole new life.

Through this display of God's love for him personally, Sherriff's heart was softened to receive the gospel. He learned that Jesus Christ is the solution to every need, and joyfully put his trust in Christ. He attended residential camp soon after, and began to grow in his faith. His life is now marked with the peace of Christ's presence; he is actively involved in Bible studies and is attending the local church. As he grows in his faith, he is encouraged by his coach and he walks in the promise that Jesus will never leave him or forsake him. Sherriff's parents were also so moved by Christ's love that they courageously declared in public that they wanted their son to "be a Sports Friends boy".

Praise God for His compassionate love and tender mercy toward Sherriff. Pray for him to grow in faith and share his story bravely. Pray also for other young people in Ghana who are facing hopeless situations, that the love of Christ will be revealed to them so they can walk in new life. ■







Jane



## BEYOND SHAME

Sports Friends | KENYA



*"From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us." (Acts 17:26-27)*

Precious Jane is nineteen years old and lives in rural Kenya with her mother. Jane has Downs Syndrome, and her community does not know how to receive her. The strong cultural stigma surrounding disability results in a shame that literally locks children in the back bedroom and behind the protective gates of the family compound. Jane spends her days and nights lying in the dust within her physical walls, her family lying desolate and bereft within the belief that they have been cursed. Sorrow and self-hatred have reigned in their lives for years, as they have been

cut off from love, community, and hope by lies of rejection and shame.

When Sports Friends staff arrived at Jane's home to take her to Camp Baraka, everything changed. She had never ventured outside the walls of her family compound, hiding from the hatred of those who don't understand her. Now receiving personal visitors and preparing for a very special trip had her wild with joy. Her siblings had never seen her leave the home, and their excitement filled the air. Jane had never even seen a motorbike, but she and her mother climbed onto one with their escort, then took a two-hour bus ride that introduced Jane to a whole new world beyond the confines of isolation. She was mesmerized by the landscape, the expanse, the people around her.

Camp Baraka is a Special Needs Camp organized by Sports Friends to



serve children with disabilities and their families. It is structured to surround them with love, compassion, joyful inclusion, and gentle care. The children are each poured into by two volunteers assigned to serve them personally for the three days. They are fully invited to enjoy games, art, music, and play organized specifically for them; they experience the joy of life with their caregivers and other equally suffering children surrounding and embracing them. While the children play and are very well tended-to, their family members are shown hospitality and tender compassion in trauma healing sessions. Their mothers are assured that God has not cursed or abandoned them or their child. He is with them and His love is real, but the enemy has loudly lied to them for years. A foot washing ceremony drives out rejection and despair as Jesus literally touches and cleanses shame through the hands of His people.

When Jane and her mother left Camp Baraka, they left with a clear picture of the truth. Filled with hope and on the road to healing, they were equipped with a powerful recognition of Jesus' love for them. When Sports Friends staff visited the family a few weeks later, they did not enter a compound heavy with despair, but were welcomed with smiles and hearts encouraged by hope. Though Jane is nonverbal, she had a visibly brightened countenance and curiosity, and was excited to see them. It is a new day for sweet Jane and her family. It's a day marked by the morning's new mercies and the proven faithfulness of God.

As Sports Friends Kenya reaches out to the special needs community through Camp Baraka, we are working to break down walls of shame, hatred, and discrimination. We pray that as we love the hidden and cast-out in Jesus' Name, He will continue to transform individual lives and strengthen their surrounding communities with understanding of the dignity and special gift their special needs neighbors bear.

*"I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well."  
(Psalm 139:14) ■*







## JESUS WASHED MY FEET

Sports Friends | ETHIOPIA

*"Before I formed you in the womb,  
I knew you." (Jeremiah 1:5)*

Sara was knit together by God, and delivered to the world in Jimma, Ethiopia. Her mother, captive to an unhealthy lifestyle when Sara was born, knew she could not raise a baby. As is a devastating but common practice, the unwelcome baby Sara was abandoned to her fate near the edge of the local dump.

*"Where can I go from your Spirit?  
Where can I flee from your presence?  
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;  
if I make my bed in the depths, you  
are there." (Psalm 139:1-8)*

A woman took notice of Sara at the dump, and carried her home to grow up alongside her own children. But this woman could not love Sara as her own child, and burdened her with extra housework and heavy demands to provide for the family by selling injera. Still, the little girl's heart was made for love, and she longed for it. She recalled that the "best day ever" in her life was "the day my mom kissed me."

*"If you, then, though you are evil,  
know how to give good gifts to your  
children, how much more will your  
Father in heaven give good gifts  
to those who ask Him!"  
- Jesus, (Matthew 7:11)*

When Sara came to Sports Friends Camp, she was eager to receive the kindness of her coach and staff. She was very talkative and shared her story openly. During camp there is a very special foot-washing ceremony where staff humbly love and honor the young people, made in the image of God, whom they serve. When a woman named Hiwot washed Sara's feet, Sara told her, "When you washed my feet I felt like Jesus Himself had come down to wash my feet. I didn't know anyone could love me. I thought I was the kind of person that wasn't lovable."

*"Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have  
washed your feet, you should also wash  
one another's feet." - Jesus, (John 13:14)*

It took Sara a little time after she clearly heard the message of Jesus and His love for her to decide she was ready to accept Him as her own Savior. She told her team leader she was ready to repent and believe Him. As part of a Sports Friends team she is embraced by coaches that are investing in her life, and a local church that is committed to helping her learn to walk as a daughter of God, no matter where life takes her.

*"Neither height nor depth, nor anything  
else in all creation, will be able to separate  
us from the love of God that is in Christ  
Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:39) ■*







## WONDERFUL TO BE A COACH

Sports Friends | USA

A once-dead parking lot near an urban church in the United States has become a Wednesday-night spectacle. It's the weekly Futsal gathering. The nets and goals are set up to beckon 30-50 young refugee men from the community to come together and play small-sided soccer. This is where high-schoolers and young adult men can leave the difficulties of their lives behind for just a couple of hours, and enjoy time playing together and hanging out with the local church members who show up to meet and play with them. The court has been provided by the church for this express purpose.

The problem is, trouble doesn't leave our hearts even when we leave its space. These young men, created in the image of God, have walked roads marked with incredible loss, trauma, PTSD, grief and pain. They have lost their sense of value, of belonging, of good purpose.

Adolescence is a turbulent time in the best of circumstances, but in such an environment of brokenness with no true hope to cling to, the only way a 17-year-old man knows how to process the struggle is to fight the nearest visible opponent. So Wednesday night, the time dedicated to community building and relaxation, frequently turns into heated verbal, and oftentimes physical, assault.

One Wednesday, Coach was driving home three teenagers when their own frustration initiated conversation about deep heart issues. *"Why do we fight?"* and *"We do not have the power to be peaceful in such circumstances."* The field has brought down the facade. In the high energy and competition of the game, the mess inside is revealed... which means it can be addressed. As they opened up and shared their inability to maintain peace and self-

control in the face of mockery and harassment, the Holy Spirit reminded Coach: You used to be just like them. He reflected on his own young adulthood full of conflict and contention. Suddenly one young man asked, *"Coach, did you ever fight? Why don't you fight now?"*

So he authentically shared how he used to get into fights, had no self-control, and used his words to make fun of people and tear them apart. *"Now,"* whispered the Lord to Coach's heart. *"Now is the time you share clearly with them. Tell them of the Prince of Peace. Tell them now."* So he did. He told of another coach who'd loved Jesus and loved him in the middle of his own mess. How he was introduced to this Jesus who brings not the sword, but unshakeable peace. He told them how Jesus is the only one who can give the power to turn the other cheek. Jesus has changed everything for Coach, and that night the effect rippled a little further into more young lives.

It is a wonderful thing to witness the authenticity of a young man's struggle happen amidst a group of Jesus-followers who will help him navigate until he finds the Way. It is a wonderful thing to build such relationships of trust that a young man can be vulnerable and seek answers to the question of his heart's need. It is a wonderful thing to be a coach. ■

