

# Called to serve:

# A missionary's story

At 16 years old, Grace Miller was sent to Massachusetts to live with an aunt who ran a missionary home. It had been a year since her mother died, and the only life Grace had known was with her parents or with her mother's family in St. John's, Newfoundland, (now Canada).

Once she settled in Linfield, Mass. with her father's sister, Grace attended high school in Wakefield. She also observed the work and purpose of the missionaries in her new home with her aunt.

What she saw changed her, and the course of her life.

"I felt the Lord spoke to my heart to become a missionary. Because of that, I needed training," Grace said.

She attended Zion Bible College in East Providence, R.I. for three years, graduating in 1955. She went on to one year of nursing school in Toronto, Canada.

"I came back to the missionary home and wanted to do the full three years of nurse's training," she explained. Grace graduating from nursing school in 1960.

"I went to Liberia, West Africa in 1961 and I treated everything on two or four legs that walked in (to the clinic)."

Grace lived and worked on a missionary compound run by the Open Bible Standard Church, located 100 miles from the capital city of Monrovia.

In the 1960s and 70s when Grace served there, Liberia was a free country. The government granted several acres of land to churches to create compounds. Where Grace was, there was a school, a church, a clinic, two homes for couples and a house for ladies, where the single nurse and the school teachers, sometimes one and sometimes two

or three teachers, lived.

There was also a boys' house and a girls' house occupied by children from the area who earned their keep on the compound by working as well as going to school. The boys did the outside labor and the girls helped inside. As the clinic nurse, Grace would have the assistance of one of the girls to help with translation and making sure medical information was correctly conveyed to the patient.

When she first arrived, Grace learned her role alongside another nurse who had been serving at the clinic. Just 7 months after Grace arrived, the nurse's husband had a heart attack and was sent home to the states with his wife by his side.

"I just kind of fell into it," Grace said of her work. "You ever hear of a one-armed paper hanger?"

Grace was the only medical provider at the compound, and was on call seven days a week, 24-hours a day. It was a full two years before was able to go to Monrovia and see the big city.

"We had missionaries in Monrovia and if we needed something, we could get word to them," Grace said of needs at the clinic. "We had a good supply of medications."

Every day people in need of medical help would walk to the clinic, sometimes a day's journey for them, sometimes three-day's journey, or more.

Grace would go to the patient in their village if she could take the time, using a bicycle she had to speed up the trip.

At the clinic, Grace would start the day gathering those who walked in.

"I gave a little talk in the beginning about the story of salvation –



*Grace Miller, dressed in native garb, carrying a child in West Africa during her mission work.*





Grace Rothenberger is retired and residing in Myerstown PA. Photo by Carol Kline.

that's why I was there – and then we passed out tickets and they came in (to the exam) by ticket number.

"I learned the language and a had a girl who helped with what I didn't say right."

One day a client walked in to the clinic with a chimpanzee, named Bongo, who had a rash on his arm. Knowing nothing about chimpanzees, Grace decided to go about treatment as she would a child.

"We put babies on the scale to see how much they weigh, so we put Bongo on the scale and gave him medicine based on his weight, just like he was a child," Grace remembers. "Bongo got better."

The missionary cycle was three years at work, one year of furlough. During furlough, missionaries had a home base (for Grace it was a church family that adopted her, since her aunt no longer ran the mission home). Missionaries traveled to other churches showing slides of their mission work and talking about the spiritual work of bringing villagers to Christ, and the physical work of caring for the ill.

On her first furlough, Grace gave a talk to a church in Connecticut, sharing photos from Liberia and talking about getting to villages by bicycle.

"In one night from the one church they gave me enough money to buy a motorcycle," Grace said, which would make it more efficient to visit patients in villages outside the compound.

On her second furlough in the late 60s, seven years after starting missionary work, Grace used her year to go to nurse midwifery school in Kentucky.

"Having delivered 500 babies in a foreign country, I went there of my own volition," Grace said. While at midwifery school, she made a friend serving as a missionary in the Lutheran church, and cemented a friendship that would last a lifetime.

Six months before January of 1973, when Grace was due furlough, she was making a house call to a village for a woman delivering a baby. Arriving on her motorcycle, Grace put the bike in neutral and was gliding toward her destination when she was hit in the side of the head.

"These were true bush people. She didn't understand the motorcycle or the movement of it, and she reacted (out of fear)," Grace explained. The assault caused Grace to wreck her bike, and she heard her knee snap on the way down.

The woman who assaulted her was the patient's mother, and Grace remembers "the baby came in spite of me."

Grace went from healer to patient, and spent six months in a hospital in Monrovia

until she was well enough to come back to the states. She continued to focus on her healing at home, and did not resume missionary life because of the injury.

Though she lived on the east coast, Grace became mobile enough to travel, and went to visit an aunt out west. While visiting, she went out with friends there and was introduced to Edwin Cook. The two were married on Feb. 14, 1974. They remained in California for four years, then moved to Florida. Edwin was a salesman for Sears, and Grace resumed her career working in nursing home health care.

Edwin passed away in 2000, and Grace remarried in 2002. She was married to Herbert Rothenberger for 10 years until his passing in 2012.

Grace's lifelong friend, the fellow missionary from midwifery school, lived in Pennsylvania, and in 2015 Grace moved to Stoneridge in Myerstown to be near her and continue their friendship in person. First married at age 40, Grace did not have children of her own, but has step-children by marriage.

Her fellow midwife is not her only present-day connection to her life of missionary work.

On the first Saturday of the month, Grace gets on a conference call with the men and women who were formerly the boys and girls working on the compound. During Liberia's first civil war, which started in 1989, many of them came to the United States.

"They are in their 60's today," Grace said. "It's hard to believe."

When they meet on that call, they pray together, for each other and for missionaries carrying out their work, as well as any prayer requests from the group. They also laugh and joke about their times together at the compound.

In those moments, Grace Rothenberger, formerly the missionary Grace Miller, is addressed as she was in Liberia.

"I'm Ma Miller. To this day on the phone, they will call me that."



Andrea Rich