

# Life without borders

**'WE DON'T GIVE EACH OTHER BIRTHDAY PRESENTS, WE GIVE EACH OTHER ADVENTURES'**

BY LINDA HAGEN MILLER

**"Y**ou're going where? For how long?" is the incredulous response when people learn that Barb and Brian Gundersen are headed for an 18-month stint in Siberia.

Friends and family are used to the Gundersens' world travels and their zest for out-of-the-ordinary experiences, but spending over a year in one of the world's most inhospitable places takes nearly everyone by surprise.

Wenatchee has been the couple's home and travel base since 1995 when they moved here from Anaheim, California. As a CPA, Brian worked for Blue Bird, Inc. as an accountant and retired five years ago. Barb was a full-time mom, raising seven children, who now have families of their own, giving the Gundersens' 22 grandchildren.

While most retirees spend their well-earned leisure years swinging a golf club or tooling around the states in an RV, the Gundersens would rather plunge

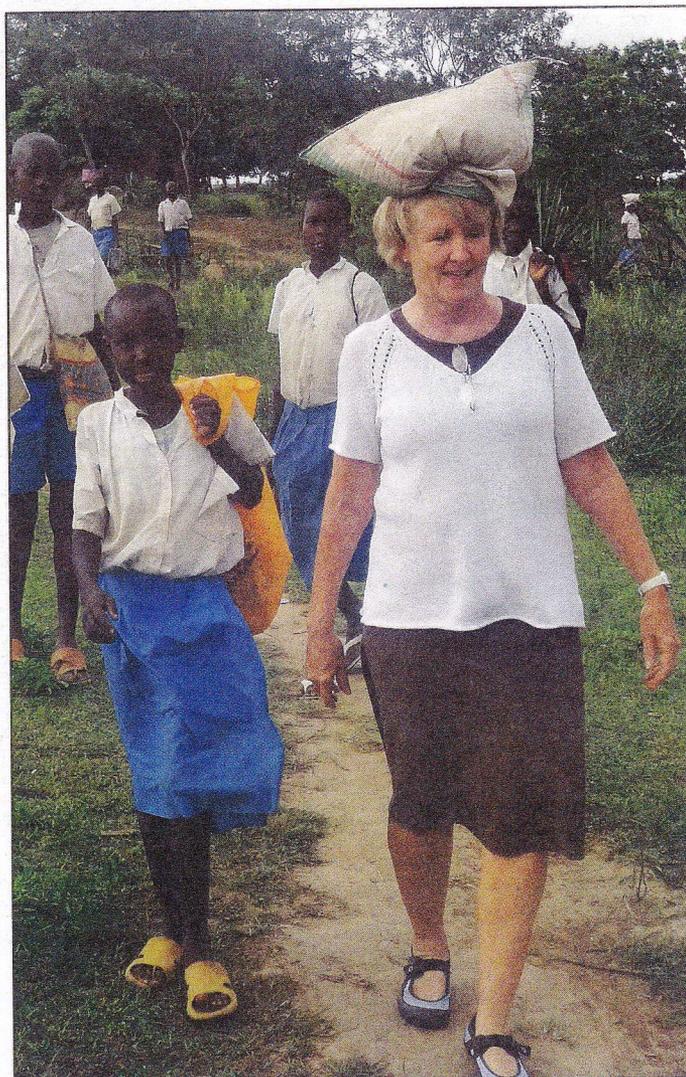
outside their mental, physical and social comfort zone. Siberia promises to challenge them on all levels.

In many ways, Barb and Brian, both 65, have been in training for this adventure their entire lives. They've lost track of how many countries they've been to, but a map in their basement is studded with pins that span the globe from the Middle East to the South Pacific to Africa and Europe. In order to obtain Russian visas, they had to list the countries they'd been to in the last 10 years. They came up with an astonishing 21 nations.

"We don't give each other birthday presents," Brian said with a smile, "we give each other adventures."

Brian first experienced life in another culture as a 19-year-old Mormon missionary in Germany. He learned German, navigated the rigid society, made friends and fulfilled his mission for the church.

Over the years, the two traveled frequently with their children and also made it a habit to



Barb Gundersen amuses school kids in a small village in Kenya by carrying a bundle on her head. Photos by Pat Stimpson

visit their kids as they finished up schooling or their own Latter Day Saint's missions in Fiji, Bra-

zil, Germany, Ireland, Portugal, Norway and Denmark.

Barb's first volunteer travel ex-



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**“It’s hard, but it’s fun... at our age, to learn a new language. It just shows you are never too old for something new.”**

perience was in 2007 on a dental mission to Western Samoa with their son, Wenatchee dentist Tyler Gundersen. She loved the mellow, cheerful Samoans and the opportunity to give back.

“I also learned how little I need to take with me on a trip like this,” she said.

“My luggage didn’t arrive with us and since there’s only one flight a week, I borrowed some scrubs, bought a lava lava (a wrap-around fabric) and a couple of t-shirts, wore flip flops the whole time. It made everything much simpler.”

Last year Brian and Barb took their first volunteer trip together. Their son Tyler introduced them to Partnering for Progress (P4P), a Spokane-based organization that sends medical/education teams to a remote clinic in Kopanga, a small village in the southwest corner of Kenya.

The Kopanga clinic treats an average of 900 to 1,000 people per month who are pregnant or suffer from malaria, diarrhea, malnutrition and HIV/AIDS.

When Barb and Brian arrived with the team of 15 people, they found a bare bones clinic without running water or electricity.

Word had spread that the medical team was coming, and hundreds of people showed up at the clinic every day, some walking as much as 20 miles one way.

Brian worked with Sospeter, the clinic administrator, on accounting practices, inventory control and setting up a book-keeping program on the clinic’s



Brian Gundersen found his volunteer assignment in Kenya was a little undefined, which gave him time to find work on his own, such as sweeping up.

single laptop computer.

“My job wasn’t well defined initially,” Brian said, “but as the week progressed and Sospeter was so busy with running the clinic, I realized there wasn’t near enough time to get everything done.”

According to P4P’s organizers, there is never enough time to

finish the work in Kopanga, but Brian accomplished much more than they expected.

Barb’s ability to go with the flow served her well as she taught health and hygiene to groups of patients waiting to be seen by the medical staff.

“I followed the script but realized pretty quickly that I’d have to modify it,” Barb said. “I told them to be sure to dry bath towels outside so the sun can kill the germs, then I realized they don’t have bath towels. Limit your soda pop sounds pretty silly to people who only drink one or two a year.

“Don’t draw drinking or cooking water from a dirty pond, I’d say. Then I saw their only water source. Everything happens there — animals drink from it, mothers wash their babies, they do laundry and draw drinking water from the same muddy pond.”

As the Gundersen’s prepare for their next big adventure, they’re

studying Russian, which both say is very difficult.

“There are 33 characters in the alphabet, and many sounds that don’t exist in our language,” Brian said.

“It’s hard, but it’s fun,” Barb insisted, “at our age, to learn a new language. It just shows you are never too old for something new.”

They’ll live in an apartment in Novosibirsk, the capital of Siberia and Russia’s third largest city, population of 1.4 million. In winter, the sun shines four hours a day and temperatures can plunge to 30 degrees below zero.

They will work with young people from 18 to 30, teaching how the LDS church functions and helping them understand how they can facilitate church operations.

“Sure we’re a little scared, but we’re really excited,” they both say.

“We have been given so much” Barb said with a wave of her hand that seems to encompass their family, their hillside home and their community.

“I believe our purpose for being here is to help those who don’t have as much as we do. Not just in terms of material things, but also to help others find their purpose in life.”

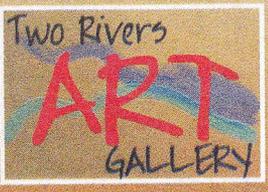
*Linda Hagen Miller is a freelance writer whose personal motto is “Life is short, pack light.” She’s been traveling and writing about her experiences in national and regional magazines for over 20 years.*



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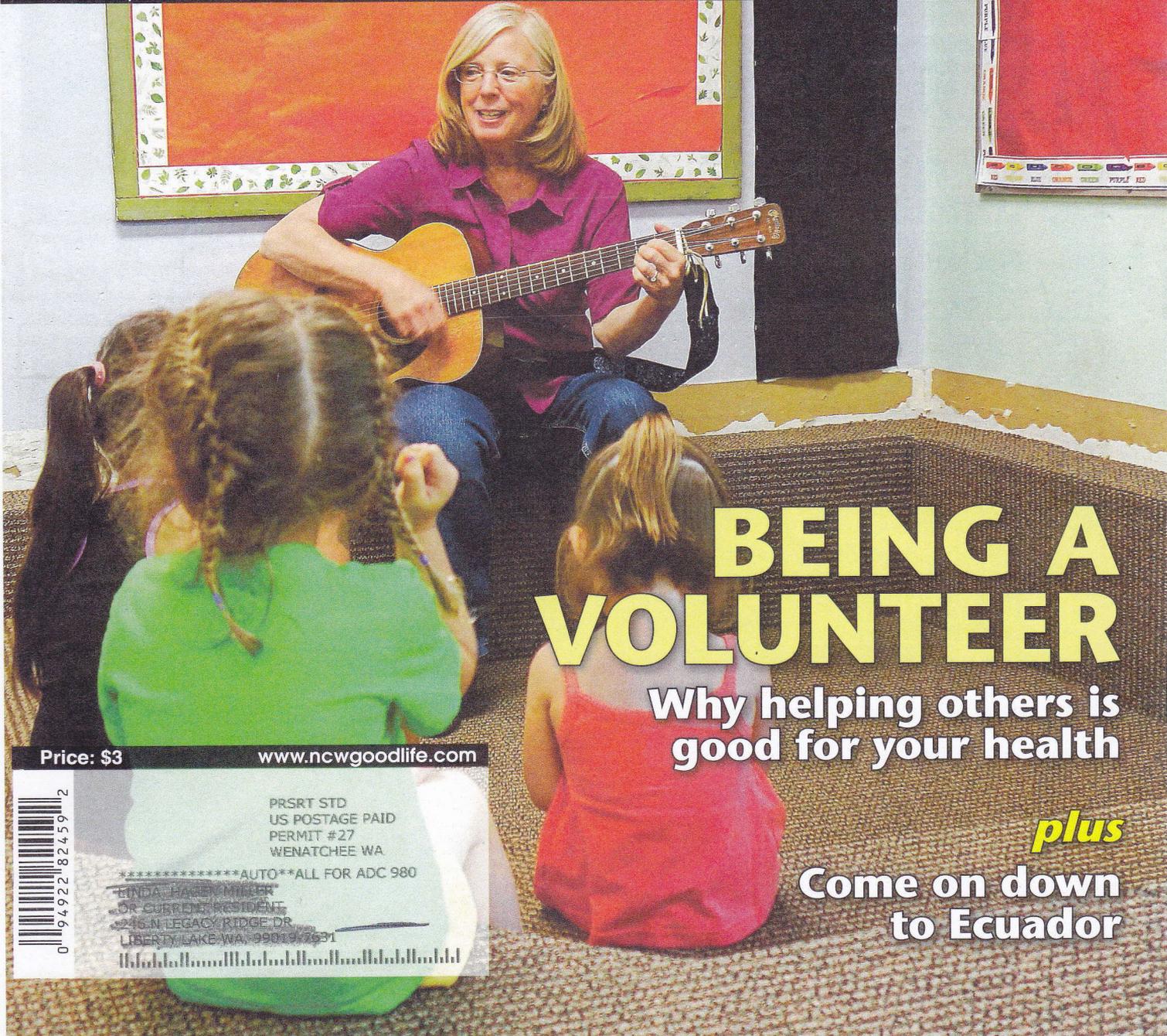
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