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Mission in Africa calls Katy-area family to a new life

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This year, Christine and Herschel Rothchild of Barker say they will have a rather unusual Christmas.

While many people likely will spend the holiday season acquiring gifts, the Rothchilds will be selling practically everything they own.

They are preparing for a major life-changing journey to Jos, Nigeria, on a three-year mission.

The Rothchilds will work with Serving In Mission, an international ministry that sends missionaries to more than 35 countries in the Americas, Africa, Asia and Australia. They will be stationed at a site known as *Gidan Bege* -- translated as "House of Hope" in the local language -- an urban outreach program geared toward reaching street children.

"We're going to be working with a ministry that goes into the streets three times a week, invites boys for lunch and then teaches them how to read and write," Christine said. "And then, if the boys want to give up their ways on the street, they are given a place to live."

In January, the couple and their two children, Danielle, 5, and Christian, 11, will set out for Union Mills, N.C., for a six-month training program that will include intensive courses on Bible study and cultural awareness.

"We'll be together 24-7," Herschel, 40, said.

The family's journey, however, does not begin next month. It actually began about 18 months ago, when they all attended a family camp in Pine Cove at Crier Creek. During the camp, they spent time horseback riding, skiing and swimming. But they also had time for family worship and for Bible study.

On that weeklong outing, the Rothchilds met a couple that had come home for a visit after having served as missionaries in Nigeria.

"That night they asked us to go visit them in Nigeria," Herschel said.

"My initial reaction was, 'No thank you!' " Christine, 32, said.

At first, the couple said they didn't take the offer very seriously. But that night, Christine said she tossed and turned. She couldn't stop thinking about the offer.

"That night, I said to the Lord, 'I'm willing!' So, it was an overnight process," Christine said. "The next morning, I knew that God was calling us toward that."

Meanwhile, over the next year, the Rothchilds experienced events that they believe came together to bring them to where they are today.

At first, they requested information from the international ministry. They received what they called a "boatload" of paperwork that just sat at the table for months and months.

But because Christine had this nagging feeling that God was nudging them to move forward, she urged her husband to fill out the paperwork.

Furthermore, when they made efforts to contact the ministry's regional director, it turned out that the director already had plans to visit a neighbor who lived only three blocks down from where the Rothchilds live.

"That was just a confirmation that this was what we needed to be doing," Herschel said. "Everything pointed in that direction."

The next step was a three-day seminar in Charlotte, N.C., that would involve a series of interviews and psychological evaluations.

As it turned out, the couple found out they complemented each other perfectly.

"It was neat because we found out that wherever she was weak, I was strong," said Herschel, "and wherever I was weak, she was strong."

They were told that the next step would be to return in July 2003 for three weeks of training that would involve cultural awareness, worship and prayer, as well a courses on how to raise money for the upcoming trip.

"I thought, 'No way!' " said Herschel, who works in real estate and could not see how he could possibly afford not to work for three weeks.

It turned out that one of Herschel's assistants would be coming back to town and could relieve him during that time.

Last October, the couple visited the Nigerian city where they will be working, and on the day of their arrival, the children at Gidan Bege were having a birthday party celebration.

"In Nigeria, a lot of people don't know when they are born, so once or twice a year, they have a big birthday party for the kids," said Christine. "What impressed me was the boys got so excited with gifts that were so humble -- a baseball cap, a soda, and a goody bag with Tootsie Rolls and a couple of trinkets."

The Rothchilds spent the day meeting the children and singing with them.

Christine remembers one adolescent named Peter who told her about abuse at the hands of his parents and stepparents. After being jostled from one parent to another, he ran away and turned to begging and stealing for food.

Then a friend told him about Gidan Bege.

"He said Gidan Bege introduced him to Christ, gave him an education, and now he will have hope and a future," Christine said. "To me, that epitomizes what Gidan Bege is about."

The couple have spent the last several years heavily involved in work at Second Baptist Church, ministering to young children and adolescents.

Christine, for example, leads the music section for children's worship, and her husband teaches Sunday school.

Eric Hill, junior high youth pastor at Second Baptist Church-West Campus, Fry at Interstate 10, has spent the last year working directly with the Rothchilds and is very supportive of their efforts.

"I believe that God specifically has a plan and a purpose for everyone," Hill said. "The unique thing here is that Herschel is a successful man in real estate. So to leave something for something that in the world's eyes is not very profitable, most people would ask, 'Why go to Africa to fulfill your passion? Why not fulfill needs right here in Houston?'"

Hill said that this trip will give the Rothchilds a much more global view. "God wants us to have a world vision. Sometimes when we just stay in the same place, see the same things around us, we get tunnel vision, and we don't see that we can be part of something much bigger, something you can't control."

Meanwhile, family members have had mixed reactions.

"I have mixed feelings," said the Rothchilds' son, Christian. "I don't want to leave my friends, and I have a lot of camps I'd like to go to, and now I can't go. But I'm happy about going to a new school and meeting new friends. It's gonna be like one big vacation."

Carol Smith, Christine's mother, had this to say: "My reaction is very bittersweet. I'm

very supportive of what they're doing, but they have two of my grandchildren, and I won't see them for three years."

Herschel's mother, Bernice Rothchild, said: "I am beyond belief with happiness I have never known, and at the same time there is heartbreak because I'll miss them so much because they'll be so far away."

While in Nigeria, Herschel will supervise the ministry of Gidan Bege and help it to grow. Christine will be in charge of helping teach music to the children. She also hopes to serve as a strong female role model for the children, many of whom have had very little contact with women.

Between now and the time they leave, however, much needs to be done. They must continue to raise funds for their stay, which will cost an estimated \$5,500 per month and \$50,000 in one-time expenses. So far, they have raised all of the one-time expenses and 80 percent of their monthly expenses through donations and fund-raisers.

The Rothchilds are in the process of selling their home and most of their belongings, and they also must buy supplies that they cannot get in Nigeria. These include everyday household items, water filters and lots of sunscreen.

"This is not a normal Christmas," Herschel said. "Christine is not baking like she usually does. Instead of getting stuff, we're trying to get rid of things. When we go shopping, we look at things differently. We ask ourselves, 'Do I really need this? Can I take that to Nigeria with me?' We haven't been spending as much."

Christine said this has been a good life lesson. "It makes you ask, 'What do you really need in life?' "

Those interested in aiding the Rothchilds with their mission may contact the SIM office at 800-521-6449.