

## **Sonya's Search for What's Next**

By Melissa Cechota, for *Columns Magazine* 2008

Sonya Reaves, '07, grasped the thin envelope from her mailbox and read from its one lonely page. By the time she got to the end, her plans for the future had been placed in a state of upheaval. Boston College had turned down her application to its international social work master's degree program. Despite having served in Honduras for a year, she was denied acceptance into the master's program based on a lack of international service experience.

*What's next?* Sonya wondered. With only two months left before she was to graduate from Southern, she didn't have long to figure things out. Fortunately, she had developed the habit of relying on God.

"Sonya's adventurous," says Sonya's former roommate, Andrea Keele, '06. "She steps out in faith when God is telling her to do something."

Rather than wallowing in self-pity, Sonya immediately sought opportunities for service. She knew student missionaries who had served in Bèrè, Chad, and was aware of the bush village's need for social work development. When an opportunity arose for her to work as a social worker at Bèrè Adventist Hospital, Sonya felt God was calling her there.

But as she started making plans, Sonya received a message from the North American Division's office of volunteer ministries saying she wouldn't be allowed to go because Chad had been issued a travel warning due to rebel activity in the country's capital.

What's next? She wondered but continued moving forward in faith, appealing the decision. While awaiting a response from the division, she wrote in her blog, "I don't mind waiting because in the end God knows the plans He has for me. But really, it is hard to just sit here and wait for my future. I'm going to be a doctor because I have had to work with a lot of patience." (Ironically, her play on words would hold more truth than she ever expected as her social work duties would involve temporarily assisting in the hospital's operating room only a few months later.)

In the meantime, James Appel, '96, doctor at the Bèrè hospital in Chad, also contacted the North American Division. He reported that despite the rebel activity near the capital, missionaries were safe in Bèrè, and that another student missionary had already been approved for Chad. He said there was no reason for Sonya to be denied acceptance.

Sonya then made contact with a woman in the office of volunteer ministries, who told Sonya that the person who issues the final approval for student missionaries would be out of the

office, but that she would personally take care of Sonya's case. It was ultimately her decision that gave Sonya the go-ahead for Chad.

"I felt that this is what was supposed to happen," Sonya says, "it was all just waiting on God for His timing."

### **Arriving in Africa**

In August, Sonya arrived in the vast and richly populated continent of Africa for a year-long term as a social work student missionary.

Upon arrival, she was introduced to her new seven-member *famille* (family) and shown her new home, a cozy hut settled beside a guava tree. Sonya admits to being terrified at first; she was tired, scared, and alone in a new country. And with one look at the hole in the ground for a toilet, she wondered, *How am I going to survive this?* There was also a language barrier stifling communication between herself and her French-speaking *famille*.

She quickly learned that laughing, smiling, shaking hands, and using body language were the best ways of communicating when language is a barrier. "Actions do speak louder than words," she comments, "as does a gentle touch, a smile, and walking an extra mile for someone."

Despite the language barriers and the drastic difference in lifestyle, Sonya has come to appreciate the culture. "I have fallen in love," she says, "with the simplicity of living in my mud hut, using the hole in the ground, and washing out of a bowl for my shower."

Sonya occasionally has "what's next?" moments, especially because the work of a social worker in Bèrè sometimes appears non-existent. The challenge of sharing Jesus with her *famille* weighs heavily on her, but because of her willingness to try new things and her commitment to following God's will, she perseveres.

Through Sonya's actions as a social worker, which *do* speak volumes to the natives, she has helped develop several programs in Bèrè, including a program focused on awareness and treatment of tuberculosis (one of the largest killers in Chad), an HIV/AIDS program, and a program for pregnant mothers and their newborn children.

Saving lives has become a vital interest to Sonya, both physically and spiritually. Rampant illness and death are a part of life in Bèrè. In addition to having suffered from four cases of malaria and one case of Tchadian flu, Sonya has had first-hand accounts of the loss of life. While assisting one of the volunteer surgeons in the operating room a hysterectomy, she held the woman's hand and prayed.

"She is the first person whom I didn't really know that I prayed so hard for," she says. "I pleaded with God." Still, the woman died. Sonya helped cover and prepare the body for the family. She

admits to being very affected by this death; she doesn't blame God, but her "what's next?" moment was that of a contemplation of growing closer to Him in order for her prayers to be heard even louder.

### **From What's Next to What's Now**

Sonya and Southern student missionary Elizabeth Randall have discussed the idea that maybe God didn't call them to Bèrè to do something incredible. "Maybe He has called us out to the wilderness to develop an intimate relationship with Him," Elizabeth says. "As Sonya puts it, this is her retreat with God."

This is the sort of retreat where the guava tree produces its last juicy fruit of the season, but the mango tree nearby begins to bloom as a sign that there's never a dead end.

As she looks out into the grassy plain each day, she considers what's next with an assurance of God's plans for her future. The open field, so often lit at night only by God's stars, is a symbol of not only her faith but of her fascination with the hospitality there. Until she travels home to America, Sonya is taking in the light she finds in every moment with her *famille* in Bèrè.

"I don't know how to explain it," she writes in her blog, "but it is just the most amazing feeling in the world. We just sit...together and exist. I know it sounds funny, but that's what we do. Sometimes I just lay there and look up at all the millions of stars and smile; I can't believe I get to be here with these amazing people."

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