



Pensacola-Tallahassee, St. Petersburg and Venice Editions

Naples woman finds call in Ethiopia

'She's our (little) Mother Teresa ... a very special kid'

By Heather Felton, Naples

Marcie Erickson goes by many names. To family and friends, she's Marcie. As a working professional, she was Marcia. To the hundreds of women and children she has "adopted" in Africa through her kind ways and gentle smile, she has still more names, each with a deep meaning to the people whose lives she has touched.

To the Akamba tribe in Kenya, she was first *Mwende*, meaning "beloved." Then it was *Nekesa*, "harvest," by the Luo tribe. There was also *Gecheri*, *Mora* and *Adhambo*, meaning "born at night," and *Atoti*, a slang term for "beautiful girl." In Ethiopia, she is now called *Mama Meheret*, meaning "Mother Mercy." This, she says, is because the people mistake "Marcie" for "Mercy" and can't believe her name doesn't have a deep meaning.

Back home in Naples, a family friend once described Erickson as a "beautiful child of God" and, being in her presence even just a few hours, it is easy to see why.

When first meeting Erickson the most noticeable thing about her — apart from her bright smile and beautiful African-style clothing — is her hair. Plaited in complex patterns of tiny braids, it reaches nearly to her knees.

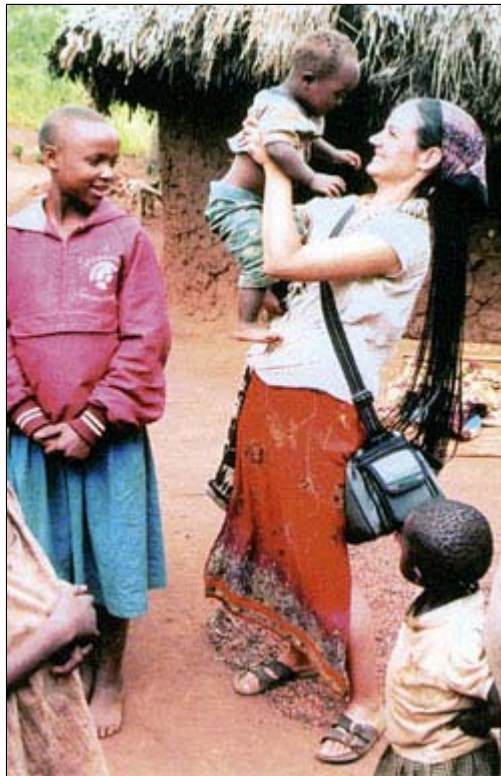
"I've been growing it for 11 years. It used to be here," she said, pointing to her shoulders. She has it rebraided every three months, the braids being practical for easy care in the African missions. Although the people of Ethiopia may grow long hair and wear braids, they get excited about her hair.

"I'll be walking down the road and people will be screaming and falling down because of my hair or they're pulling it," she said, laughing.

The petite 24-year-old glows with excitement, and undoubtedly the Holy Spirit, as she describes her call to missionary work and life in Africa.

Answering the call in the night

A parishioner of St. William Parish, Erickson attended Catholic school in Naples and was involved with youth activities. During her teen years, she attended a pro-life retreat for



While helping a Franciscan priest bring Eucharist to the sick and homebound in a mountain village of Rwanda, Marcie Erickson meets a baby girl about 18 months old. The baby, who appeared to have Down syndrome, was among a group of about 20 children who followed Erickson and the priest throughout the village during their visit.

COURTESY PHOTO

Florida youths and discerned a call from God, but was unsure if that call was to become a religious sister or to pursue college instead.

'I wasn't sure what I wanted to do," she said, so following the retreat, 'I spent an entire night just praying. ... Some people say you can't hear God's voice, but I heard God saying, 'I want you to be a missionary.' For me, it was very direct and was very clear."

Knowing what she should do, Erickson began searching for a way to do it, praying for open doors while researching missionary programs.

When she was 18, she joined a Guatemalan mission group. She was supposed to be there eight months, but due to political problems, was sent home after only a few months.

Erickson was discouraged, but continued her search for a missionary program that would accept her. Most, she discovered, didn't want anyone under 25.

Finally, Erickson discovered a missionary program run by the Salesian Sisters called VIDES, for young women 18-25, for missions in 86 countries. During her interview, she told the sister that she wanted to go to Africa. Soon she was sent to Texas for training.

Finally, in September 2000, she was sent to Ethiopia, although, she said with a laugh, it was 1993 when she arrived because Ethiopia is on a different calendar than the rest of the continent. She spent 10 months in Zway, Ethiopia, in the middle of a five-year famine, teaching English at a school where she also started a girls' choir and worked with a feeding program that served 150 families a day in one town.

Picking a direction

When Erickson returned to the United States in June 2001, she enrolled in college.

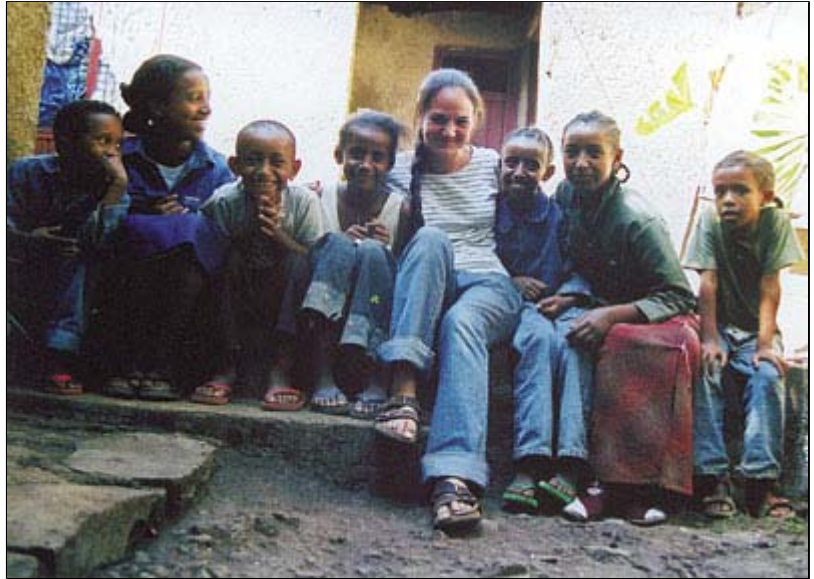
'I had a new appreciation for education, seeing the way they struggled (in Ethiopia) to get their children in school."

First she studied music therapy at Florida State University in Tallahassee, but then transferred to Florida A&M University, also in Tallahassee, to study photography. While she did not earn a degree, she learned enough to begin her own photography business in Naples. She did well, working for more than a year doing weddings and portraits and shooting interiors for architectural magazines, but it wasn't where she wanted to be.

'I've always known I should be in Africa," she said, 'and what am I doing here? I'd been waiting just to go back."

She left Naples in August 2004, first volunteering for five months with Human Life International in Austria at the request of a friend.

However, in January 2005 it was finally time to return to Africa. Erickson had a plan and needed a place to carry



COURTESY PHOTO

Marcie Erickson sits with a group of children from the village of Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. These children will be her students in an English class when Erickson returns to Africa in February.



At this public school located far out in the plains, there are more than 100 people crammed into the tiny mud hut with about the same number standing outside, hoping to get in. The curriculum at these public schools is often so basic, because of limited training for teachers, that subjects as simple as the alphabet may be taught over and over.

COURTESY PHOTO BY MARCIE ERICKSON

it out — she was going to open an American-style foster home, called St. Joseph's Family, for African children who were abandoned or orphaned. The question was where to do it.

'I always had in mind what I wanted to do,' she said. 'I wanted to have a foster home. Not an orphanage, but a foster home where I could care for 10-20 children at most; something that I could handle where I'd be the one caring for the children.'

She started out in Kenya and spent five months there working in different orphanages and schools as she researched the laws. At first, she thought this country would be ideal for her plans, but the laws would not allow her to run a home as she wanted.

'I felt like God was calling me to go back to Ethiopia,' she said, but felt she needed to explore all her options before she made the commitment.

So on her way to Ethiopia, she stopped in other countries.

First she started in Uganda, but the laws were the same as Kenya. Next, she traveled to Rwanda.

'I could have stayed in Rwanda very easily,' she said. 'I fell in love with that country. The people are so kind. Regardless of the situation in the past, the people were very peaceful.'

'The children were so sweet,' she added. 'We would go to visit the sick in their houses and the children would run out of their houses, and they don't know me, but they ran down the street with their arms open to hug me around the legs.'

Next stop was the Congo where she stayed for a week, although, she said, two days were enough.

'It's not a safe place,' she said. 'It was the only place I've ever gone in my life where I wanted to get out.'

Then after passing through Tanzania, she returned to Ethiopia.

'Almost a week after arriving in Ethiopia, I said, 'This is where God wants me to be,'" Erickson said, practically glowing. 'It just so happened that the laws worked out and I can have the home.'

As she began looking for a place to build, Erickson went to work at a home for street children. 'Still all the time, I kept thinking about what God wanted me to do and how I could go about doing it.'

God opens a door

Knowing she would need financial assistance to get her home off the ground, Erickson planned a trip to come home to Naples to see her family, work and raise funds. She was set to come back Nov. 12, which was two weeks away, but still hadn't found a location. She knew that she'd need something more definite if she was going to raise money when she got to Florida.

'I said, 'God I need some open doors. You gave me the willingness to come back to Ethiopia and why would you give me that if you didn't want me here,'" she said. 'I had been trying to find a place for almost a year and I was pretty desperate.'

She was seized with the inspiration to e-mail Metropolitan Archbishop Abune Berhaneyesus Souraphiel, CM, of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Although he was in Rome, the archbishop responded the same day.

This little girl in Ethiopia helps to make coffee for her family.

**COURTESY PHOTO
BY MARCIE
ERICKSON**

He told her he was excited about what she was trying to do and said she would definitely have a place to work and people to work with her. He told her to contact his office and speak with a priest there. She did so right away.

A week later, the archbishop and his staff directed her to the town of Bahir Dar, located at the southern end of T'ana Hayk (Lake Tana) in northwest Ethiopia.

The town, which is a 10-hour drive from the capital city of Addis Ababa, has a Catholic school, although most of the townspeople are Eastern Orthodox. In fact, Erickson said, there are 10 Catholics in town and of those, one is a priest and three are religious sisters.

'The people there were very excited about what I was trying to do and were willing to help,' she said.

Because she is a foreigner and cannot own land, it must be purchased through an organization. To incorporate herself with the government would take three or four years, so the archbishop is willing to help.

'I just want a home like a foster home in the United States where I can take in orphans,' she said, 'but they don't have that system there.'

Because Ethiopian law requires that she be at least 21 years older than the children for whom she is caring, she cannot have children over 3 years old now. Erickson is hoping to start with a sibling group or two, so as not to separate the children.

'They need to have someone whom they're familiar with,' she said. 'I have very strong beliefs about raising children. I've taken care of children since I was 9 years old — other people's children.'

'God will provide'

Erickson's parents, Philip and Rosemary, have been very supportive of her efforts, as have her siblings and other relatives. However, she does meet people who tell her she's crazy for taking on something like this.

'People say, 'What you're doing is so difficult.' And yes it is, like raising a family, but it is more difficult,' she said. 'But I'm not having an orphanage; that's the difference. I'm called to do this. I'm called to have these children in my home.'

Erickson will be in Naples until nearly the end of February, raising funds for her mission. All told, she will need about \$100,000 for building the house, the purchase of a four-wheel-drive vehicle, appliances and furniture, and the cost of living for the next two years for her and the children.

To raise the money, Erickson is speaking to local organizations and soliciting donations, as well as speaking to youth groups and children to raise awareness. She is also producing a music CD where all proceeds will go to the mission and is looking into ways to auction or sell her photographs as an additional means of income.

'I know God will provide, but I'm just praying that it will come through soon,' she said.

She knows her initial needs are high, but once the house is up and running, she'll need much less from her sponsors because the cost of living is so low. In fact, she can feed herself for only a dollar a day.

Cathy Velund-Stucko of St. William Parish first met Erickson at a Youth for Life meeting in the early 1990s when Erickson was in seventh or eighth grade at St. Ann School.

'She has always, always, always loved babies.' Velund-Stucko said. 'She started baby-sitting as soon as she



could and has baby-sat as many as 10 kids at once. She's our (little) Mother Teresa ... a very special kid."

She recounted several trips and experiences she and the Youth for Life group had with Erickson and how she always made a positive impact.

'There is only one Marcie Erickson and we are all blessed to have had her touch our lives," Velund-Stucko concluded. 'She brings God's love through her beautiful ways of loving and caring for all children of the world and we can't forget."

Erickson's hopes are high that she will have at least 10 children within the next two years.

'I think it's just God's will. If it's going to happen, it's going to happen," she said. 'There's always going to be roadblocks. If you're doing God's will, its not going to be easy, but it will eventually go through."

To learn more about Marcie Erickson or the St. Joseph's Family mission, e-mail her at marcieerickson@yahoo.com or write to St. Joseph's Family, Families for Christ, 431 Lagoon Ave., Naples, FL 34108.

[Back to Top](#)