

A Note from Pastor Wendy 15

July 11, 2020

We knew when we first signed up to host Rita as our AFS student this last year that she was coming from Gbarnga City, Bong County, Gbarnga, Liberia. In her small city, she lives with her much older sister so that she can attend school. This has meant over her school lifetime she has lived without her father and mother being with her on a regular basis. Her parents would normally come from their farm where they grow rubber trees, and visit with Rita at least once or twice a month. This last year in June before she came to the U.S., her mother passed away. She immediately reached out to me to let me know about her mother's passing. We share several conversations through broken transmissions about how she was doing and I share with her how my mother had passed away a few years earlier and how through prayer and faith, Jesus helped me through the grieving process. From that June day forward, Rita has called me Mom. It was a pleasure having Rita as our daughter in our home this year.

When a student comes into your home, you never know if their personality will blend in with your family or if they will adapt well to the expectations of cleaning their room and doing chores. This is due to the fact that most of the AFS students are not in what they call "Sponsored or YES" program and might have maids or someone who comes in and cleans their homes. YES students receive scholarships to be here. They too are highly intelligent students but would not be able to afford to participate in an exchange programs without these scholarships.

Rita was not a problem in either of these areas. She was just the opposite. It seems like it took us forever to get Rita to stop trying to carry everything for us or try to take over doing all the cleaning. The first time Ashli was coming home for a weekend from college, Rita made sure she had the bathroom cleaned spotlessly out of respect for her older sister. Everything that she did was out of respect for others.

As you have heard before, Rita's lifestyle in Gbarnga is quite different from what we have here in the states. They eat most of their meals outside their homes sitting on a rock or the ground, and they use their hands and common spoons to feed themselves. The family is used to eating from a common bowl or pot without having separate dishes for themselves. She had to learn that we do not eat that way, and that we do not sit at the table with our feet and legs up in the chair. She learned how to set the table to include napkins, and if it is a holiday dinner, how to set the dessert fork and spoon appropriately. Rita also learned that to open a can of black beans, it is better to use the can opener and not a serving spoon or a large sharp knife.

About four weeks ago I was involved with her phone call with her older sister. I was sharing that Rita had learned how to use the microwave, dishwasher, clothes washer and the dryer. Her sister immediately started showing me their well where they draw up their water for washing dishes and clothes. I got shown their washing board and the basin that they wash from. They own a generator that provides electricity when they need lights on in their house or for supplying power for charging their cell phones. They save their money to purchase gasoline to run their generator.

I shared that with you to let you know that as Rita and I discussed her return home, she said that she really did not mind returning to that lifestyle. She said she is going to show them how we ate at the table and used separate plates and spoons. Rita is looking forward to teasing them about not remembering how to use the washboard, except she does not want anyone else to wash her clothes now. She wants to take care of them herself so that they will last longer.

The whole picture is that we can have happiness in our lives no matter what situation we are in. Rita will have some extra money left over when she returns home. I asked her if she would put it into savings. She said, "I don't need money. I will give it to my father and sister." In Matthew 5:3-12 are the beatitudes. Each of them tells how to be blessed, which means more than happiness. They do not promise the experience of earthly pleasure, or earthly property—but the experience of joy and hope. What we found with Rita, she found happiness in everything she did.

When students prepare to leave to return to their home country, they are encouraged to write a note to their host family. Rita left us a few pages with notes and pictures sharing some of her favorite experiences. I would like to share just a few lines of her comments.

"Somehow we kinda believe that home is where you originated or the place of your birth, but home is where you find peace, comfort, security, and most of all love. I was welcomed into your family and home with hospitality, warm arms, and love. It was like I have lived here for years. "At the end of her notes she stated, "Thank you all for being there for me. I love you so much, but God loves you the best."

What a reminder, that no matter what happens in our lives experiences, we can be assured that "God loves us best" and that is where we will find our true happiness. Rita did not care whether she had a dime in her pocket or that she was going to be sleeping on a mattress on the ground in a room without air conditioning. She felt so blessed for the experiences she had while she was here and could keep thanking us for allowing her to be in our home. Rita knows that no matter where you are from or whatever you go through, you can have true happiness because it comes from God.

God's happiness and love is what we must share with each other and the world.
God bless you have a wonderful, Happy weekend!