

reload love

BRINGING HEALING TO THE CHILDREN OF WAR

Story by Christmas Beeler
Photos courtesy of Reload Love

With machine guns firing furiously overhead in Mosul, Iraq, 6-year-old Demoa crouched against her dead mother, trembling under the black veil of her mother's hijab. All around her were dozens of men, women, and children mercilessly slaughtered by the Daesh—ISIS. Hiding behind a bombed-out wall, she had sat frozen in fear amidst the corpses for two days. She watched, weak and wary, as a new group of soldiers came into view. She realized they were fighting the bad men. Demoa's survival instincts ignited, and she bravely pulled up the edge of the hijab, allowing the strangers to see her face. Her dark brown eyes were wide with fright, but no words would come. *I'm here*, she thought. *Help me!* She lowered the veil and lifted it again, a desperate game of peek-a-boo, trying to draw their attention.

She was spotted by David Eubank, a missionary and former U.S. Army Special Forces and Ranger officer. Shocked when he saw the tiny survivor, David knew God had given him a special mission. He prayed for direction, then spent the rest of the morning begging the U.S. military to drop smoke and the Iraqi army to loan him a tank. By afternoon, a massive, desert-colored tank rolled within 20 yards of her. Keenly aware of the ISIS snipers aiming at the open street between him and Demoa, David thought of his wife and three children. Jesus' words echoed in his mind: *"Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends"* (John 15:13). As his two comrades opened up covering fire, David bolted across the rubble.

Suddenly, Demoa saw the air fill with thick grey smoke, and then a man's strong arms grabbed her as angry bullets exploded around them. She didn't scream or make a

sound as David sprinted behind the tank. She squeezed her eyes shut and buried her face in his neck, trying to block out the chaos. Eventually, as he carried her weakened body to a shelter away from the front lines, the sounds of gunfire faded. For days, she could not speak—not even to the kind people who gave her a bath, fresh clothes, and food. David's wife Karen helped care for the little girl. A month later, the city was declared free of ISIS.

Seven months later, in January 2018, Demoa and her rescuer were reunited. Her grandmother and her aunt met David and his wife Karen. The petite grandmother hugged David, thanking him for giving her a reason to live in the wake of her daughter's death. David is the Christian founder of the humanitarian group Free Burma Rangers (FBR). FBR is one of several partners with the organization Reload Love, founded by Lenya Heitzig of Calvary Church Albuquerque, NM, where her husband Skip is senior pastor. Reload Love ministers to children victimized by terror. With Lenya's encouragement and Reload Love's financial support, Dave and his team traveled to the Middle East and spent more than three years helping to rescue victims of ISIS.

The Unthinkable

Reload Love started with a prayer six years ago. In August 2013, Lenya Heitzig watched in horror as a news report showed pictures of children allegedly gassed by the Syrian government. Using outlawed toxins, the attacks killed nearly 1,500 civilians—including at least 420 children. "It broke my heart seeing the children choking and gagging, people spraying them down. I thought of how I would feel as their mother. I would wonder, *Doesn't the world care? Aren't they watching?*" She asked God how she could help.

A few days later, as she prayed again, an idea came to her to make jewelry out of spent bullet casings and use the proceeds to help children stricken by terror. When she asked family friend Franklin Graham for advice on where to help, he suggested Burma—a country traumatized by over 70 years of civil war, where the Burmese army continues to victimize thousands of displaced tribespeople living in poverty.

"God connected us to people who actually run to the bullets, who rescue tribes and children brutalized by terror," she said of David Eubank and his Free Burma Rangers. Lenya and her small team traveled with David to Burma and saw firsthand how FBR was bringing the Gospel, medical help, and armed protection to victimized tribes. Reload Love became a partner of FBR. Little did she know that a deadly terrorist group named ISIS would fall upon Syria the following year, and that Reload Love would fund David and his gritty team on rescue missions in the Middle East.



Top right: David Eubank, a missionary and former U.S. Army Special Forces and Ranger officer, rescues Demoa, an ISIS survivor.

Bottom right: Internally displaced people (IDPs) in West Mosul flee from ISIS gunfire as the renewed Iraqi Coalition liberates the city.



Top left: Lori Schweighardt, a Reload Love volunteer, shares a special moment with a refugee in Jordan.



Left: Lenya Heitzig, founder of Reload Love, colors with children who have been victimized by terror.

Top right: Children enjoy group activities with Reload Love volunteers.

Bottom right: A child relishes playing on the swing set at a Reload Love playground in Kurdistan.



“When I asked God to use me to help children impacted by terror, I didn’t know I was asking to go to Iraq,” Lenya said wryly. “I’ve always felt more like Malibu Barbie than G.I. Jane. But God had an amazing, sovereign plan—a plan that still brings tears to my eyes, for all that He has done through Reload Love to help these precious people. It’s all His work.” Lenya’s vision is to share God’s love with children traumatized by terror, and to introduce them to Jesus Christ. “At every playground we build, we have a banner in their native language that says, *‘Let the little children come to Me [Jesus]’*” (Matthew 19:14b).

Mercy in Mafraq

Lenya’s team prayed to find more partners who were already sharing God’s love and truth with those oppressed by terror. Then they met Pastor Nour in Jordan. His base, the Christian Missionary Alliance church in Mafraq—on the Jordan-Syrian border—had been helping refugees

from the Syrian civil war since August 2011. In two years, he saw the need catapult from “about 40 families to more than 6,000,” he recounted. ISIS’ bloody warfare was like gasoline on a fire, sending thousands more. Today, nearly 160,000 Syrian refugees live in Mafraq. In addition to food, Pastor Nour’s group provides mattresses, blankets, and small cooking stoves to each family. Word spread of the Christians helping Muslim refugees. “The only place they feel comfortable coming and asking for help is the church,” explained Pastor Nour. He, his small staff, and a corps of ever-changing volunteers visit refugees in their homes and invite the children to school. Hundreds of Muslim children have come to the church to attend the free school and hear Bible stories. Many have come to trust in Jesus Christ. Pastor Nour told Lenya, “We are respected because they know we help people. ... The main goal is to be able to connect with the people around us and share the Word of God.”

Pastor Skip of Calvary Church sees long-term benefits in partnering with local pastors and missionaries. “In the name of God, ISIS has hurt, tortured, abused, and raped these people—and some walk away thinking that is what God is like. So when they see in us Christians the true face of God—that we are not here to take from you but to give to you—to get their hearts around a God in heaven like that, it’s very powerful. Through these safe places, we are able to give them hope, and then it’s followed up by missionaries and church leaders who live and work in that area and can go back and give them the Gospel.”

One of Reload Love’s early projects was to build a playground at Pastor Nour’s Christian school. In December 2015, Lenya traveled to Mafraq. A group of Syrian women, recently escaped from ISIS, begged her to stay and eat with them. They removed their veils, held on to her arms, and told her their stories. One woman shared about her two

elementary-aged sons. In their Syrian village, the boys had been holding hands and crossing the street when an ISIS sniper shot one dead. His brother had suffered severely from post-traumatic stress and nightmares. “My son had not spoken since the shooting,” his mother said with tears.



But seven months after attending the Christian school and hearing stories of Jesus, he began to speak again and has come to a place of healing. Pastor Nour later thanked Lenya's team for "spending time with the women, listening. I was happy because the women opened up and told their stories. They were traumatized." By sharing in their pain, he said, the team had brought them comfort.

Weep with Those Who Weep

Lenya and her team sought to bring the presence and compassion of Christ to the Yazidis—a peaceful, ancient sect targeted by ISIS for being non-Islamic. In August 2014, ISIS attacked Mount Sinjar, killing or kidnapping an estimated 10,000 Yazidis in a matter of days. Lenya traveled to Grace Community Center, a place of healing and renewal that Reload Love has helped fund outside Khanke Camp in Dohuk, Iraq. It offers a variety of classes and discreet counseling for traumatized victims. She was first drawn to young Aram's wide smile on the Reload Love playground. Through multiple escapes, he had survived the Sinjar massacre which had killed his family; he had been taken in by another family at the camp. Aram told the team that he loved going to second grade and learning English and mathematics, adding, "It's safe here."



Jolene Baca, a development manager at Reload Love who accompanied Lenya to Iraq, described the resilience among the refugees: "So many of them have lost family members; they are really all in pieces. So they take in these orphans; they create new family groups." She added, "Sometimes Westerners think that these refugees are illiterate, simple people. But many are highly educated. They had careers and lives and homes; just like us, they want the best for their children. They were teachers, doctors, pharmacists, and lawyers who had everything stripped away. They are trying to recover and make a living again, to rebuild a future for their children."

In another part of Khanke Camp, Lenya met a group of indignant, grieving Yazidi women. They asked her why no one cared about what was happening to them. One woman tearfully asked, "Did you know that ISIS took a group of our girls, put them in a cage, paraded them down the streets of Mosul, and burned them alive?" Lenya's heart sank as she nodded *Yes*. The women shoved their phones

toward Lenya to see the horrific video; she watched in respect, sharing their tears. Lenya recalled, "They needed me to see it. So I watched. I looked. And I didn't turn away." She reflected, "I think they finally felt heard. They finally felt seen."

Playgrounds on Battlefields

With a focus on helping children, Reload Love has built 38 playgrounds for children victimized by war in places hit hard by terrorism—including Syria, Burma, Iraq, and Uganda. Jennifer Santiago, director of Reload Love, has accompanied Lenya on all of her scouting trips. Jennifer cited Psalm 10:17-18, ESV:

O LORD, you hear the desire of the afflicted; you will strengthen their heart; you will incline your ear to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed, so that man who is of the earth may strike terror no more.

Jennifer added, "We believe that God hears these children and their hearts' cry for peace, safety, and security. He is caring for the fatherless, comforting them—even in ways that seem small to us." After the devastation of war, Jennifer explained, "A playground ignites children in a whole other way: It makes them feel safe, calm. It allows them to have some normalcy in their lives, to just be children without having to look over their

shoulder to see if there is a sniper coming for them. We've also seen, in their culture, that it's an invitation for the moms to come and have community. These playgrounds have become a vehicle for redemption and restoration for the children and their families." Kelly Besedik, marketing manager at Reload Love, recalled visiting their playgrounds in Uganda. "The pastor there told us that the kids are often depressed and hopeless, but the playground and the Bible story clubs are such a blessing for the kids because they play and sing and laugh."

Walking by Faith

Lenya knows people have been praying for her as she has journeyed to dangerous war zones, crossed paths with fearless missionaries on the ground, and watched war orphans laughing on playgrounds that once were only a vision. In her book, she writes, "When I have a vision like



that—to turn bullet casings into bracelets—I stop and commit that plan to Him. I take steps forward, trusting that God will open and close doors on the path. ... The onus to bring it to pass is on God. ... My responsibility is to keep moving."

For we walk by faith, not by sight. 2 CORINTHIANS 5:7

Describing this journey of faith, Lenya said, "Everything I needed, He has provided. God has met every challenge. I think if Christians would pray more often for the priorities that Jesus has, they'd see their prayers answered. The Bible says, ***Pure and undefiled religion ... is this: to visit orphans and widows*** (James 1:27a). Going from a vision to reality has been a journey of faith. She added, "I don't want to be ahead of the Lord, but I also don't want to be behind Him. Each step of the way, I ask, *God, would you do this?* And then He does it. The challenge is always staying in a faith mode, and then we see Him meet that faith." The congregation at Calvary Church of Albuquerque has generously supported the Reload Love ministry—as have countless other believers in the U.S.

Partnering in His Name

In addition to building playgrounds for children, Reload Love has also provided funding for medical care, relief supplies, shoes, furniture for orphanages, various medical treatments, vehicles, emergency field hospitals, Gospel kits for children, kinder-care buildings, and tuition for refugee schooling. Director Jennifer Santiago explained, "Lenya's vision has been to find the needs that meet our cause and figure out how we can provide resources or

raise awareness. When we meet someone who is helping children of terror in the name of Jesus, we want to be able to support them with resources so they don't have to leave the field or shut their doors."

Looking ahead, Lenya and Skip hope that one day Reload Love can help build churches in Iraq, Thailand, and Burma—that the children they are teaching about Jesus today will learn a new way of living and share His hope with others. "What if we could see the next generation of Christians raised up in Iraq?" In her book, she writes, "I hope that every single person we encounter sees the mercy of God, the love of God ... one small step in reversing the cycle of violence. I hope every child who plays on our playground becomes part of a generation who learns forgiveness, love, mercy, and peace at an early age."

Pastor Skip added, "Some may accuse us of not simply doing humanitarian work but also wanting to preach the Gospel. And that's exactly right. We want people who are in a vulnerable situation and looking for hope to find it in Jesus Christ. We want to see lives changed: So that from a playground, they are going to hear about Jesus, who loves them and gave Himself for the sins of the world." 🙏

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Left: Skip Heitzig (left), senior pastor of Calvary Church of Albuquerque, NM, confers with men who've ministered to IDPs during years of conflict.

Right: Lenya (in green shirt) is swept up into the work for refugee children in Myanmar.