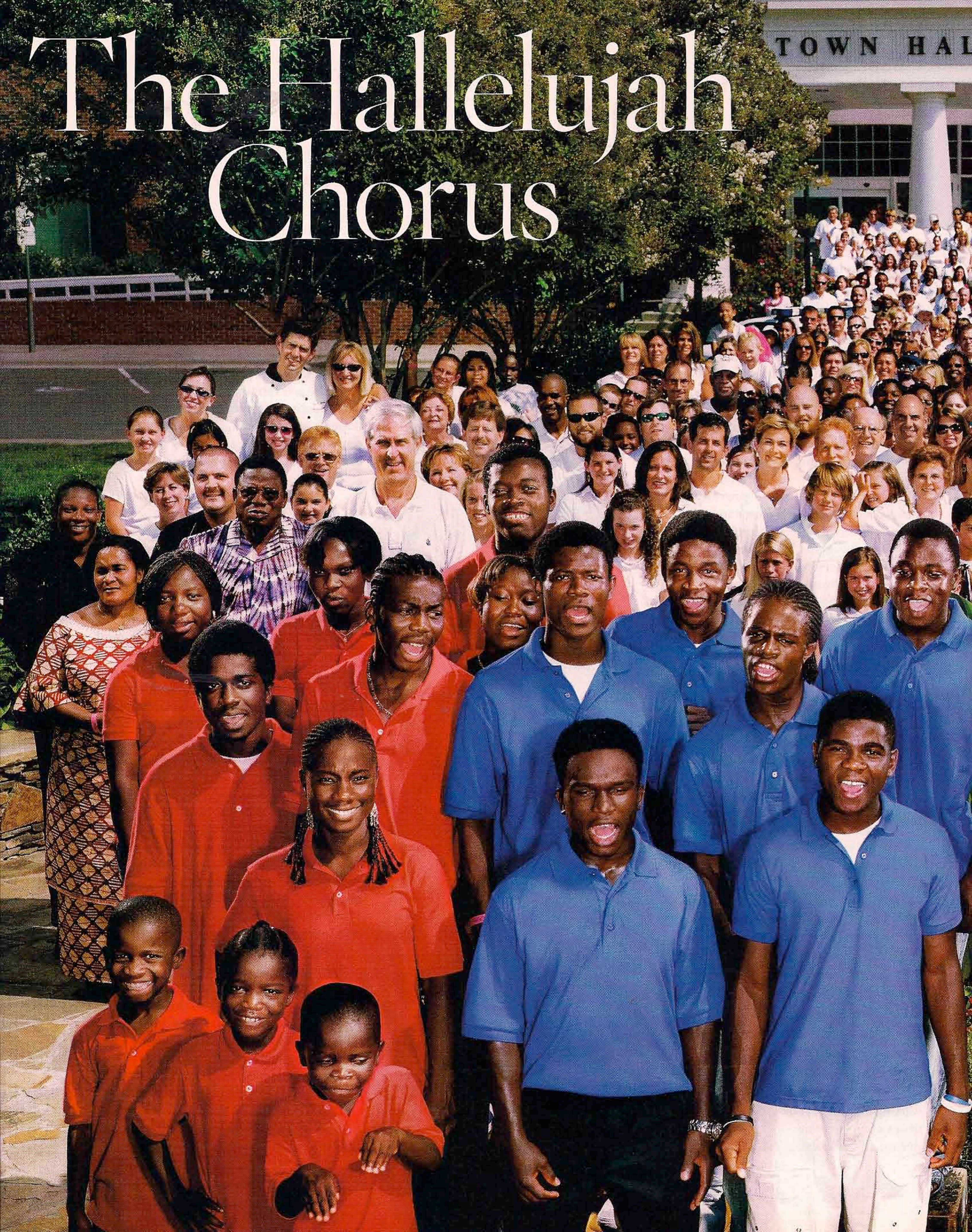


The Hallelujah Chorus



On paper, these boys from war-ravaged Liberia weren't the world's most adoptable orphans. But if you heard them sing (like angels, everyone said), or knew that their orphanage back home lay in ruins, or felt the mysterious tug that drew each boy to his proper family, you'd know why every last one of them found a home. **AIMEE LEE BALL** reports. ▶

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NEAL SLAVIN



Upon learning that she'd be meeting a dozen boys from Liberia at her church near Charlotte, North Carolina, Lysa TerKeurst consulted a world map—she vaguely thought that Liberia was in South America. The boys, ages 11 to 16, all had parents who had died or disappeared in the brutal civil war ravaging their country. While living in an orphanage outside the capital city of Monrovia, they were chosen for an a cappella choir that would tour the United States, raising money to send home. But in the summer of 2003, while the boys were visiting the Charlotte area, their orphanage was attacked twice, first by rebel forces and then by militia loyal to the warlord-turned-president Charles Taylor. The property was ransacked, caregivers were severely beaten, and several hundred children fled into the jungle, the teenagers carrying toddlers on their backs. The visas of the choirboys in the States were about to expire, and now they were homeless.

Lysa, a 37-year-old motivational speaker, was going to hear the choir with her then 8-year-old's Brownie troop. She decided to take all three of her daughters, imagining no more than a new cultural experience. "It was an ordinary day," she says. "Nothing led me to believe that life was about to be seriously interrupted." But listening to the honeyed voices of the young travelers, she was overwhelmed with a sudden thought: Two of those boys were meant to be hers. She literally put her fingers in her ears to drown out what she assumed was a divine message she didn't want to hear. At the postconcert reception, two boys named Mark and Jackson separated from the crowd, wrapped their arms around her, and called her mom. Fourteen-year-old Mark

had a scar on his cheek from the hot poker of a rebel soldier; 15-year-old Jackson had hepatitis B, probably from contamination of a leg wound. Still not knowing exactly what had hit her, Lysa walked up to the choir director and said, "Not that I'm interested at all, but if someone wanted to adopt, how would she do it?" Back in her car, she called her husband, Art, from her cell phone. "I said something like 'Do we need milk and what would you think of adopting two teenage boys from Liberia?' He said, 'Get home now.'"

The idea of adoption was crazy, she understood—not even in the realm of possibility—but she made him promise to hear the boys sing. And "crazy" became a calling for both of them. If the TerKeursts weren't the sort of people who trusted in the power of friendship, the story would end here. But once they'd determined that they could not let any of these orphans return to the danger and poverty of their homeland, the couple knew they had to get their friends involved. They arranged a cook-out in their backyard to introduce the choir.

Sitting on the deck of the TerKeurst home listening to the children sing, Genia Rogers started sobbing uncontrollably. "It was their graciousness and joy," says Genia, a 42-year-old nutritional consultant. "Despite what they'd witnessed, these were not broken boys; they were whole and courageous. Some of my reaction came from my own experience: I'd been

WE ARE FAMILY

The newly expanded TerKeurst clan at home in Waxhaw, North Carolina.

Clockwise from top left: Lysa TerKeurst with son Mark, 17; daughter Ashley, 11; husband Art; son Jackson, 18, with dog Champ; daughters Brooke, 7, and Hope, 12, with puppy Chelsea.





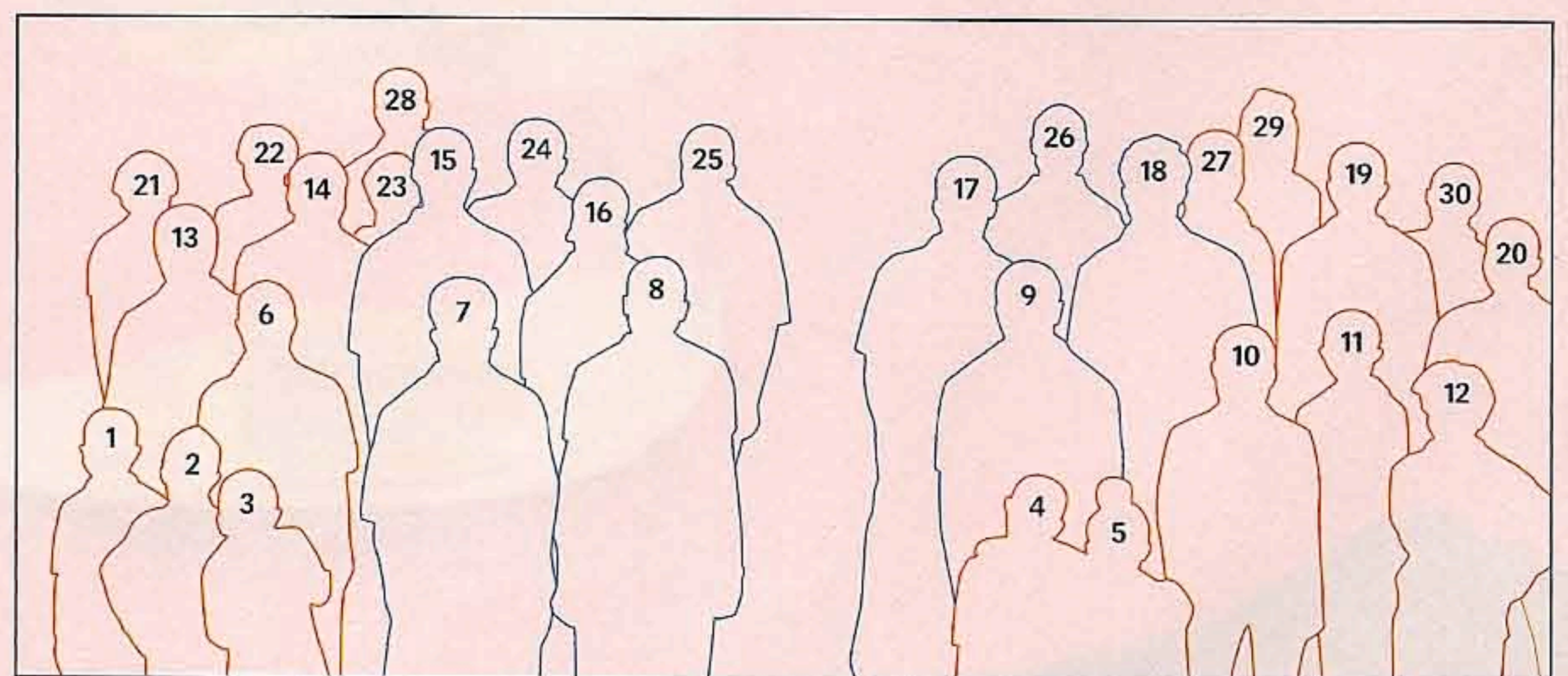
OH, BROTHERS
 From left: Genia Rogers with son Robert, 15; daughter Anna, 7; husband Rob; and son Hunter, 13.

fighting a pretty significant illness and had started healing. I'd been thinking about redemption and restoration, and I had 12 examples right in front of me. Something shifted in the world—the word *adventure* kept coming to my mind.”

Genia and her husband, Rob, were immediately drawn to a lanky, smiling boy named Robert. After two miscarriages, the Rogers already had what Genia calls “a huge heart for adoption, the process and the opportunity”—their son and daughter had been adopted as newborns. Bringing a teenager into their lives would raise a multitude of issues, not least of which was rearranging the family birth order that psychologists say is so significant to childhood development: Twelve-year-old Robert would displace their 10-year-old son as firstborn. “And he’s a kid who doesn’t transition well,” says Genia. “But when we talked to him, he said, ‘There’s good change and there’s bad change, and this is a good change.’ Robert was in our house three weeks later. It was meant to be: His birthday is the same as the due date for one of my lost pregnancies.”

Having the Rogers family validate their adoption plan gave the TerKeursts confidence to proceed, especially in light of the apprehension that the rest of their circle seemed to share. “I thought all my friends would go ‘hip hip hooray’ and start planning

my teenage boys’ baby shower,” says Lysa. “But they were all saying, ‘It’s not safe.’ ‘Have you thought about the security of your girls?’ I started thinking, *I love these boys, but they could stand over my bed with a hatchet one* [CONTINUED ON PAGE 353]



TALK OF THE TOWN *Opening pages*: In blue, ten of the 12 original members of the Liberian choir sing alongside their brothers and sisters in red. **First Row**: 1. Melvin Covert 2. Kolu Apodaca 3. James Gale 4. Davis Osepchuk 5. Jada Osepchuk. **Second Row**: 6. Dora Peed 7. George Brewer 8. Sam Peed 9. David Alexander 10. Patience Apodaca 11. Justice Haywood 12. Angel Nemiloy. **Third Row**: 13. Isaiah Haywood 14. Joe Alexander 15. Abraham Haywood 16. Seeboe Alexander 17. Robert Rogers 18. Nyan Cianciosa 19. John Haywood 20. James Alexander. **Fourth Row**: 21. Teta Alexander 22. Mala Brewer 23. Tina Wilkie 24. Jackson TerKeurst 25. Mark TerKeurst 26. Barcon Jackson 27. Eric Haywood. **Fifth Row**: 28. Roosevelt Haywood 29. Mercy Alexander 30. Zinnah Apodaca. Produced by Jen Pugliese, Rockit New York.

weren't bunk; they were the truth, and if I let them, they could set me free. If many things are insoluble, it is not my job to solve them. If I don't have to worry about solving them, I really don't have to worry about them at all. And if I don't have to worry about them, I can stop blaming other people for having done them. I can start to accept that other people will do what they do. Leon James calls this the attitude of latitude, and it seems worth trying, if only as an experimental lark.

Cohen had one more thing to say by way of consolation—though in this case he seemed to be consoling himself. His own biggest peeve is inconsiderate cell phone use. He calls it, only half-jokingly, the end of civilization and confesses that he once went at it so intensely with a woman who took a call in a theater that other patrons wound up having to shush *him*. And yet it isn't the end of civilization, and all isn't necessarily lost—if only because, as they always have, manners will continue to evolve. “Cell phones are a new technology,” he says. “And what's regarded as acceptable conduct is still in flux. Which means there's hope. We might still win that one.”

So you fight the good-cop fight. You go to the store manager or other authority. When possible, you join a group that's working toward systemic change. And maybe for good measure, you balance every instance of manners policing with an act of guerrilla kindness. ●

night. We decided to invite the boys to sing at our church. It was never on our radar that anybody else would be interested in adopting—we did it so that the congregation would have a vision for welcoming our sons. That night the friends who'd had such huge concerns all signed up to be parents of Liberian boys.”

Becky Peed was one of those friends who'd reacted with rolling eyes at the idea of adopting teenage war orphans. “I was curious and a little excited about meeting them because of Lysa,” says the 41-year-old former flight attendant, “and I went to hear them with an open mind, but I wasn't going to find a son.” After the church concert, Peed and her husband, David, had three young children lobbying for an older brother (she reminded them that they weren't talking about a new puppy) but didn't really make a one-on-one connection until a few days later, at a soccer game, when one of the

choirboys, a 14-year-old named Sam, sought them out. “He said he felt like he needed to talk,” says Peed. “Of course the boys were courting parents—they knew the desperation of their situation. If I were in the same situation, I'd be trying to do that, too. And when we went out to the movies, that's when we saw his sense of humor. He has a contagious laugh and an innocence about him. I knew he was the kind of child who would fit into our home.” What she didn't know until Sam joined their family was that children at the Liberian orphanage were often assigned a “mission brother” or “mission sister” so they would feel less alone.

“I called my husband and said, ‘Do we need milk and what would you think of adopting two teenage boys from Liberia?’ He said, ‘Get home now.’”

Within months, the Peeds had sent for Sam's 14-year-old mission sister, Dora. “We had room and we had love,” says Peed. “How could we say no?”

Debbie Alexander was at church the same night as the Peeds. A 48-year-old empty-nester with two sons in college, she was planning on going back to school herself. But as the music took its hold on her, she felt “like a moth drawn to flame.” By the following evening, she knew that she and her husband, David, had to adopt two of the boys, David and Seeboe, both 13, because one might be lonely in a house with no other children. “I'm living my psychology major,” says Alexander. The boys did not speak much about the atrocities they'd witnessed, but they did say that they'd come to America without having a chance to say goodbye to brothers and sisters at the orphanage—the choirboys weren't even told where they were going when they were driven to the Monrovia airport, to protect them from anyone who might try to take their place on the plane. The Alexanders

kept thinking about those siblings left behind. And about a year after David and Seeboe arrived, four more children joined the Alexander family: Seeboe's 14-year-old mission brother, Joe, and David's three biological siblings: 8-year-old James, 12-year-old Teta, and 15-year-old Mercy.

Every one of the original 12 choirboys found homes. The adopting families say, with a consistent and almost mystical refrain, that it just sort of became clear who belonged where. And their presence in the community drew so much attention to the plight of Liberian children that the African Christians Fellowship International (ACFI), the ministry running the rebuilt orphanage, received inquiries about more adoptions. Donna Osepchuk, a 46-year-old former special education teacher, had four children of her own, but she'd always thought of adopting, and once she saw a photo of a toddler named Prince in an ACFI pamphlet, her husband, John, joined a missionary trip to Liberia. He called his wife with good news and a kicker: “You're going to love Prince. And there's a Princess.” He left almost everything in his possession at the orphanage, from the money in his wallet to the clothes in his suitcase, and put into place a plan to bring home the 4-year-old twins, renamed Davis and Jada.

There are now 15 families with 35 Liberian children in the Charlotte area, and their friendships have sustained them. There have been shared financial issues: In order for the adoptions to go through, the families banded together to hire a lawyer and acquire the heartbreaking death certificates of the children's biological parents. (There was little variety—the words “gunshot wound,” “beating,” and “drowning” were most common.) There have been shared emotional issues, including the subtle or not-so-subtle racism of extended family members. (One grandmother, presented with the idea of a black teenage grandson, declared, “I don't know how I'll begin to tell people about this.”) And there have been shared practical matters, like caring for black skin and hair unfamiliar to these white mothers. Donna Osepchuk was quite proud of the braids she made for Jada until she happened to meet an African-American teacher in the hall of the little girl's school, and the woman offered, “You know, I could help you with her hair.”

English is spoken in Liberia, which was founded by freed American slaves in the early 19th century, but the dialect can be difficult to understand—the adopted children have been learning to speak “American,” and some have been home-schooled ▶

to facilitate their assimilation. One night at dinner, Jada stopped eating because her teeth hurt, and her parents realized that she'd been trying to gnaw on the chicken bones. (Often there was just one meal a day at the orphanage: rice with chicken cooked so long that the bones were soft enough to eat.) And since chores and behavior in Liberia were quite different for girls than boys, says Donna Osepchuk, "Jada didn't know how to hold a pen, but she could fold laundry like nobody's business."

Much of Liberia was without electricity or running water, and the new Americans had to learn how things like elevators, washing machines, and refrigerators worked—they'd help unload groceries from the car without realizing which items were to be kept cold. Many of the children arrived with only the clothes on their back; their parents were surprised that they didn't always show gratitude for the new possessions that came with life in America. "They imagined we had money trees in our backyards," says Genia Rogers. "Robert literally thought it didn't rain here and was shocked that there are poor people." The parents were counseled that they might sometimes see a "war face" on their child. "It's hard for them to express feelings; for so long there was no one to tell," explains Debbie Alexander. "Talking about feelings was a luxury that couldn't be indulged, so the children would withdraw. The big adjustment has been a matter of trust and learning how to live with structure."

Some cultural differences are more amusing than worrisome. Donna Osepchuk weathered stares in the supermarket when her kids chanted the songs of civil war from their homeland. The TerKeursts' two new sons were horrified at the idea of a pet dog or cat—all four-legged creatures were considered livestock, certainly not deserving of a name, let alone a place in the home. Thirteen-year-old George, who became the son of Judy and Keith Brewer, had the notion that real men are not supposed to smile. And his 12-year-old sister Mala resisted affectionate gestures, informing her new parents, "Hugs and kisses aren't used to me." Mala believes that math is evil and learning is for boys. "These children have to be taught just to ask, 'How was your day?'" says Judy. But when a child has had to walk over dead bodies, as Mala did leaving Monrovia, a longer learning curve is understandable.

The lives of the adopting parents have changed in both prosaic and profound

ways. "We pulled all our children out of private school, knowing that it would be a challenge to pay three tuitions and that it might be an intimidating place for Robert to start his formal education," says Genia Rogers. "We moved to the country, where I never would have ventured in my former life, so that we could be in a lower property

"Our adopted children came never knowing what it was like to feel full or be able to sleep in a bed without pulling the covers over your head to keep the rats from biting."

tax zone, near the children's new charter school and also closer to the other families that adopted the boys. Our friend base changed considerably. And I went back to work, knowing that we had a tighter time frame to prepare financially for college." For Debbie Alexander, the logistics of a large family are dramatically different. "We live by schedules and car pools," she says. "We have a schedule for laundry, kitchen cleaning, a sheet that's signed by the children and myself when allowances are given. I am not an overly organized person, but I've had to become one just to survive." Debbie has a new and deeply felt appreciation for what she previously took for granted. "Our children came never knowing what it was like to feel full or be able to sleep in a bed without pulling the covers over your head to keep the rats from biting. The word *struggle* has taken on a very different meaning."

"It's been a stretching experience," Lysa TerKeurst confirms. "And it's not like I sat around before and thought, *I have a lot of white space in my life*. My schedule is fuller, and our budget is tighter." But the more powerful outcome of the adoptions is what she calls a new sweetness for her family. "It's one thing to tell my kids we should have a heart to help the poor, but it's completely different to see it lived out in our home

every single day. We recognize that our little peace, our comfortable home, our beautiful car is not what the world is like. In one sense, it breaks my heart because I know the people behind those random faces now. My boys could be in that world news report—my boys that I tuck into bed every night could be in those statistics. It gives me joy to know that I didn't walk away, that I am living my life well and making a difference and doing my part."

Genia Rogers often reminds herself that the experience was a near miss. "This is a story of courageous friendship," she says, "of people saying, 'It doesn't make sense on paper, but we should do it.' All the blessings of my life have come from stepping over a precipice when I could have what-if'd myself out of a decision."

The Liberian boys are now so fully assimilated into their American lives that it seems as if family photos from the time before they arrived are missing something. In fact, the assimilation is so complete that these families have come close to achieving something fairly uncommon in our culture: color blindness. The children themselves often forget that they aren't related by birth. Recently, Seeboe Alexander was describing his urgent desire to grow taller. "Kids generally are tall if their parents are tall," explained his mother, to which Seeboe replied, "But Dad is tall..." ●

All of us at O thank the townspeople of Matthews, North Carolina, where the Rogers family lives, who gave time, resources, good food, and drink in support of this story. For more information about the ACFI and how you can help, go to acfinet.org.

OPRAH TALKS TO...

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 323

with—McDreamy or Finn [the young, single veterinarian played by Chris O'Donnell]?

SHONDA: I definitely have a preference. Your head tells you Finn, and your heart says McDreamy.

OPRAH: *Then she should definitely be with McDreamy—though he was wrong for cheating.*

SHONDA: They're all wrong. That's the point. No one gets to be the saint. [Meredith chose McDreamy as *O* went to press.]

OPRAH: *Where were you when the idea for Meredith popped into your head?*

SHONDA: In my pajamas at home, which is where I spent a lot of time writing. My daughter was still fairly small, so she was hanging out in a basket on my office floor. I kept asking myself, *What kind of woman should the heroine be?* I thought she should be someone who [CONTINUED ON PAGE 356]