

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY TIM SCHIRMAN

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From tears ... hope!

In my 25 years of videography, I have conducted numerous interviews with people who get emotional as they share their heart. But this time it's just too much. My "news videographer heart" crumbles, and I stop the camera.

What is left of my objectivity is destroyed when 16-year-old Kelsey Wade looks at me and says, "I'm sorry I can't stop crying. I'm trying to tell you what you want to hear — that it is all good and things are great here. But it is just so hard."

This story is about some wonderfully "real" missionaries giving their lives to Croatia — and why Kelsey, a missionary kid, is crying.

But first, the beginning ...

Airport arrival

I have never met missionary Christopher Wade, so as I walk out of customs I look around and play “guess the missionary.” A distinguished gentleman looks like a potential candidate, but he ignores me. None of the signs held up are for me. The only person left is a guy with a shaved head. He’s wearing a bright red jersey and looks like he’s on his way to a soccer riot.

He is the missionary!

Car conversation

Driving to the Wades’ city of ministry — Osijek, Croatia — Christopher fills me in on his family’s first years of ministry. I am curious, since it is unusual for me to do a story on missionaries during their first term.

A missionary family’s first few years are foundational as they learn a language, build relationships with the national church, and look for gaps in ministry that God wants them to fill. Most of the exciting missions stories come in later years as ministry matures and bears fruit.

As Christopher tells me their story, I see that he and his wife, Renee, have come at a time

to come and learn the language and build some relationships.”

But God quickly burdened the Wades with the heavy needs of Croatia’s lost youth.

“We realized God was saying, ‘Look, learn the language. Make a relationship with the church. That’s great.’ But He also opened our eyes to what’s going on with the kids.” Christopher gets emotional as he continues. “When you walk through Osijek, you see young people who are just wild. They’re not getting guidance.”

The Wades responded to the compelling need by holding a series of creative youth outreaches. Soon they found themselves with a core group of relationships from which to build a youth evangelism center. But digging a foundation in hard soil is, well, hard.

“I just get up every day saying, ‘Lord, I don’t know what I’m doing,’” Christopher tells me. “I can’t speak the language. I have no idea how to start or run a youth center. What am I going to do?” I realized early on that all I can do is just be faithful every day.”

Being faithful when you are over your head has to be one of the hardest things in our Christian walk. Nevertheless, I have witnessed over and



(From left) Jeremy, Renee, Noah, Simon, Isaac, Kelsey, Micah and Christopher Wade

when God seems to be accelerating the work. They hit the ground running, and in just over two years a brand-new youth outreach is in full swing, complete with a recently constructed ministry center.

Not our plans, but God’s

“We did not come to Croatia to start a youth center,” Christopher tells me. “Our goal was

over again that miracles happen when human strength is not adequate for the task.

Christopher confirms this when he tells me, “We look back over the past two years and realize God really is in this thing. We have great relationships with people at the police department. We have great relationships with people at the store and the market and in the neighborhood. These people aren’t Christians, but they know what we’re doing.”

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Workday at the ministry center

Simon Wade, Christopher and Renee's 19-year-old son, is hanging on for dear life as a Croatian teen pushes him in a wheelbarrow around the grounds of the youth ministry center. Looking around, I see a group of kids putting the finishing touches on the site. My dad would have called these kids ruffians, and they are. But they are surprisingly well-behaved ruffians.

I grab my camera and head inside. I've been around some tough young people, and I can tell right away these kids are used to running wild. But as I watch them carrying off trash from the construction site and digging holes to plant trees

kids who are working yet again. Clearly, they are here because of the love and respect they receive from the Wade family.

The coolest MKs ever!

The Wades' children — Simon (19), Kelsey (16), Jeremy (15), Isaac (13), Micah (11) and Noah (7) — take me to their favorite pizza place. This is my first opportunity to get to know these MKs, and we form an instant bond. Being a missionary kid myself, I am predisposed to think that all MKs are special, but these kids would stand out in any crowd. They are charming, outgoing and passionate about ministry.



on the property, I am amazed by how much respect they show the Wades and their six children.

Christopher tells me the story behind the workdays. "The kids knew we were building a youth center for them, and so we got to thinking — since the center is for them, they ought to come and do some work," he recalls. The Wades announced a workday, and 17 Croatian youth showed up.

"They worked hard," Christopher tells me. "We had them doing different things — digging, moving wood and junk, collecting garbage — hard work. Our last workday was supposed to be on a Tuesday, but on Wednesday our doorbell rang and there were all the kids again. They continued working the next four days and really took a lot of pride in what they were doing. We were shocked. We couldn't believe they continued to show up and work so hard."

As Christopher shares, I look around at the

While we eat, we talk about all kinds of things. I get a sense that their commitment to ministry in Croatia has a human side. This is not easy work. They have experienced persecution and loneliness. They have struggled and questioned, but they have done the work of ministry despite hard times and disappointments.

The party

The room is dark, the stage lights are flashing and the worship music is loud — all ingredients of a youth service. The crowd is not quite standing room only, but full enough to be surprising for any Croatian youth meeting.

It is Saturday night and the youth center is having an outreach. Kelsey, Jeremy, Isaac, Micah, Simon and Noah each have a role to play, and they are doing it enthusiastically.

There are games and fun, then ministry and

prayer time. I am amazed to see how engaged these Croatian kids are, especially since they have no church background. The foundation for lasting work is being laid, and real spiritual fruit is being harvested.

Lighting the way

I really don't like risking my life and well-being, but sometimes it just happens.

At midnight, Christopher and I walk to the pitch-black riverfront. All around us, young people are drinking and partying. No police are present, no control of any kind. With my video camera I can barely make out a teenage girl with a large bottle of alcohol stumbling from group to group and passing out drinks. This is spiritual darkness, but normal life for most Croatian youth.



When we reach the middle of the scene, I ask Christopher if he is ready and hit the on switch of my camera light. I know from experience things will get interesting really fast, and they do. Kids scatter, yell at us and then get curious.

Within minutes Christopher manages to calm a few teens and they talk to him. I watch in amazement as he launches a conversation about God and creates an opportunity for ministry in the most godless spot in the city.

Light penetrating darkness gets a reaction every time!

Interviewing Kelsey

While my time in Croatia was unforgettable, my conversation with Kelsey made the greatest

impact on me personally. As soon as she begins crying, our interview stops. "I'm so sorry, Kelsey," I tell her, regretting the pressure I have unintentionally put on her. "I never want you to feel like you can't be real as an MK." With the camera off, I share some personal things from my own life growing up as an MK in Haiti.

As I try to encourage her and listen more closely to what she is saying, I am shocked to realize that she is not crying because of the difficulty of ministry in Croatia. Though she is one of the hardest working MKs I have ever met, she's crying because she feels she has not done enough! Some Croatian teens whom Kelsey now calls friends have not yet given their hearts to Christ. Kelsey sheds tears from a heart that is broken for the lost.

Later, Renee shares story after story of min-

istry opportunities each of her kids have had, such as witnessing to large groups of adults at a party, personal evangelism and even praying for the sick. Each child has made an impact for the gospel in Croatia. And each member of the Wade family prays for more — more of God and more fruit from the harvest.

Christopher sums up the theme of the Wade family. "We feel inadequate. We get scared and think, *Is this going to work?* And then great things happen. We believe the Lord is saying, 'Just keep going. Just keep doing what you do, and I'll keep doing what I do.'" **tpe**

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E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.