

Adventist

*Journey*  
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FOR NORTH AMERICA



**Adventist**  
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# Adventist Journey

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### My Journey

Our town has 2,300 people in it, and we're called a "hub village" to 19 smaller villages. There's extreme poverty. But the children are amazing. I can give some hope to these children, even the ones I meet for a brief moment. Whether for five minutes or 18 years, God allows us to plant a tiny seed of hope within their hearts. Visit [vimeo.com/nadadventist/ajshonievens](https://vimeo.com/nadadventist/ajshonievens) for more of Evans' story.

**SHONI EVANS,**  
*Nome, Alaska, family service social worker  
for the Nome Community Center*



Cover Photo by Mylon Medley

**Dear Reader:** The publication in your hands represents the collaborative efforts of the North American Division and *Adventist World* magazine, which follows *Adventist Journey* (after page 16). Please enjoy both magazines!

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#### ADVENTIST JOURNEY

Editor **Kimberly Luste Maran**

Senior Editorial Assistant **Georgia Damsteeg**

Art Direction & Design **Types & Symbols**

Consultants **G. Earl Knight, Mark Johnson, Dave Weigley, Maurice Valentine, Gary Thurber, John Freedman, Ricardo Graham, Ron C. Smith, Larry Moore**

Executive Editor, *Adventist World* **Bill Knott**

# Fostering

# HOPE

## in Alaska's Native American Communities

A social worker nurtures children from isolated, impoverished villages who need safety, stability, and compassion.

BY MYLON MEDLEY

**U**nderstand you want to be a foster mom,” said a woman who’d knocked on the Evans family’s front door in a small community in Alaska.

“I . . . maybe,” replied Shoni Evans nervously.

“Well, these two babies need a foster mom,” the woman said insistently.

Evans had seen these native babies before with their foster mom at the local Adventist church she attended. But during this reintroduction the woman holding them brought them into the Evans home and laid them on their couch along with medical equipment.

“They had been stepped on and had punctured lungs. They were not in good shape,” said Evans.

The woman left to send a health-

care provider to teach Evans how to care for the babies’ tremendous needs. Later that evening Evans’ husband returned home from work.

“I left and there were two [babies]. I come back, there’s four. What did you do?” asked Shoni’s husband.

“Aren’t they precious? We’re going to be foster parents,” Evans replied.

This was not what the newlyweds had planned on, considering they were fresh out of Southern Adventist University with two small babies and mounting bills. They’d recently moved from the Collegedale, Tennessee, area to Bethel, Alaska, where Michael was given the opportunity to be a pilot for Grant Aviation, a regional airline that operates in the state. Because of conflicts with work scheduling and Sabbath observance, Michael took a job with Bering Air, which was based in Nome, a town in western Alaska right below the Arctic Circle.

Nearly two decades ago the couple joined the small Adventist community that nurtured them and welcomed them in various ways, including the unexpected visit with the doubly unexpected gift.

### A Statewide Crisis

In recent years Alaska’s rate of children in foster care has remained more than double the rate of the lower United States, according to a 2018 publication by Alaska Children’s Trust.<sup>1</sup> In 2016 alone, 2,810 children were in the Alaskan foster care system. Further, while Alaska Native American children make up about 20 percent of all children in the state, they accounted for about 60 percent of all children in foster care from 2006 through 2013, according to a 2014 study conducted by the Institute of Social and Economic Research<sup>2</sup> of the University of Alaska—Anchorage.

The numbers have captured the attention of Alaska’s leaders who consider it a “crisis.” This served as the foundation for the signing of the Alaska Tribal Child Welfare Compact<sup>3</sup> Between Certain Alaska Native Tribes and Tribal Organizations and the State of Alaska on December 15, 2017. Many of the 229 federally recognized Alaska Native American tribes committed to supporting the state’s Office of Children’s Services and other agencies with the goal of preserving native family structures and creating more healthy environments for children to flourish.

Socioeconomic ills broadly affect Alaska Native American communities that are scattered throughout the state—some are as far north as the Arctic Circle, others can be found among the Aleutian Islands of Alaska, an archipelago scattered westward in the Pacific Ocean

“We have a town of 2,300 people. We’re beyond the road system . . . In some of our villages, it’s like a third world country.”

and stretching toward the International Date Line. The disparities relate to education attainment, poverty, and household income, according to a 2017 report by the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium.<sup>4</sup> The disparities are particularly felt among Alaskan Native Americans under the age of 20, who make up a third of the native population. Of the 10,000 children living in the state’s high-poverty areas, 9,000 are Alaska Native American.<sup>5</sup>

Because of the isolated nature of the villages, there are geographically based systems called “hubs” that provide access to a variety of resources and services, including



Above: The Evans’ six children (four biological and two adopted) pose during the holiday season. Right: Shoni and Michael Evans. Provided by Shoni Evans



hospitals, grocery stores, and airports. Nome, where Evans lives, is a hub for Alaska's Norton Sound region.

"We have a town of 2,300 people. We're beyond the road system, we have to fly everywhere. As a hub, our town serves 19 smaller villages. These villages can be anywhere from 25 people to our largest one of 750," said Evans. "There's extreme poverty in the villages. Some don't have infrastructure for water and sewer. In some of our villages, it's like a Third World country."

Evans is a family service social worker for a children's home that is part of the Nome Community Center. The home serves as an emergency shelter for up to 10 children at a time. The center, equipped with staff of 16, can take children as young as infants all the way to 18-year-olds. She has nurtured more than 300 children during her nearly 20 years of working with the home. Under their care the children go to school and engage in a wide variety of activities from dog-mushing to swimming in the ocean.

"We usually get called from state social workers. The children staying in our home can come from any one of

those 19 villages. We can get called anytime, day or night," said Evans. "We bring them into the home. We feed them. It's always one of the first things . . . we give them lots of hugs and assurance that they're in a safe place now. We love them. We hold them. We pray with them. We sing to them. They learn about Jesus through our staff. We want them to have a happy life."

Most of the children stay between three and six months. Allowances are made for longer stays if a healthy, permanent home is not located quickly. Evans and her staff aim to place children in their own villages, if possible.

"The children are amazing. They're resilient, but there's such a drug and alcohol problem out there. There's a hopelessness," said Evans. "The children struggle because they have nowhere to go. They see that their future is the drug and alcohol [abuse] that they see while growing up in their villages."

### Planting Seeds

Evans cherishes every interaction with every child she comes into contact with through her work. She believes lasting impacts are born in those moments.

"I can give some hope to these children—even those I meet for a brief moment. God allows me to have some in my arms for five minutes, while we've been able to have others for 18 years. It doesn't matter how long we have them. God allows us to plant a tiny seed of hope within their hearts."

Evans' deep well of compassion is drawn from her own experiences from childhood and adolescent years.

"I'm adopted by an amazing family, so adoption has always been close to my heart. I want to give these children what my adoptive family gave me," said Evans.

Growing up, she struggled with a learning disorder and had trouble excelling in the classroom. "School never came easy. Friends never came easy," Evans said. "My first year in college I totally failed."

During her second year of college she had a professor who helped her realize that her failures could be used as a blessing for others.

"Shoni, you can do this. I believe in you, and you can help children like you because you have been there. You have felt it. You understand," recounts Evans of her conversation with the professor.

With newfound determination, and the assistance from the same professor who would also edit her papers and help her study for tests, Evans was able to complete college. From that initial conversation, she knew she wanted to dedicate her life to helping children.

### Meet Haley

A shining example of Evans' commitment to helping Alaskan Native American children is through the adoption of her youngest daughter Haley.

Evans knew Haley before Haley came into the world. She had worked with Haley's biological mother and developed a friendly



## CAMPS IN THE ALASKA BUSH

**A**rctic Mission Adventure (AMA) is a ministry of the Alaska Conference that serves Alaska Native American communities. In the final quarter of 2019 AMA raised \$137,000 as part of a fundraising match challenge offered by Adventist Community Services.

"It's all God," said Tandi Perkins, AMA director of development and awareness. "We received \$91,000 from all over the nation in December alone."

The funds will be used to create and sustain summer day or overnight camps for Native American children who live in "bush country"—isolated, rural villages throughout the vast state that are beyond the road system (reachable by plane and boat) and have limited access to resources beyond their communities. They will operate in Selawik and Utqiagvik, the northernmost cities of the United States.

The Alaska Conference has operated Camp Polaris since the 1950s, however, the cost of transporting Native American children from their remote villages to the camp is \$1,400 per child. AMA's camps will give more Native American children greater access to a fun, safe environment at no cost.

"These camps will give kids the chance to get out their unhealthy home environments where they sometimes have to take care of drunk relatives. They get to feel relief and be kids," said Perkins.

The camps will also serve as a place of food security in the summer months when many children don't have access to three meals a day.

"Anything we do revolves around food. We help them get full physically so they can have the opportunity to get full spiritually."

Smaller, pilot versions of the day camps provided an opportunity for children to do crafts, go fishing, and engage in spiritual activities. The camps have even yielded baptisms. Many children return to their villages eager to share Christ's love to their family and friends.

Visit [arcticmissionadventure.org](http://arcticmissionadventure.org) to learn more.

"The children struggle because they have nowhere to go. They see that their future is the drug and alcohol [abuse]. . . . God allows us to plant a tiny seed of hope within their hearts."

relationship with her. When Haley was born 10 weeks premature, Evans' husband served as a medevac pilot to get the mother and Haley to Anchorage for medical care. Haley was two pounds eight ounces at birth and had drug addictions because of her mother's drug use. She spent five weeks in the neonatal intensive-care unit (NICU).

Evans planned to adopt Haley, and had arranged for her mother to still have a place in her life.

"She was an amazing young woman, I grew to love her," said Evans of Haley's mom. "She had a lot of struggles with drugs and alcohol. She had talked to us and had consented to go to rehab."

Evans said the young woman had her family's full support and thanked God for the enthusiasm directed toward recovery. But shortly after calling Evans to share her desire to go through rehab in an effort to have Haley fully back in her life again, Haley's biological mother committed suicide.

"It was very hard," said Evans. "After her mom passed away, her grandfather would



Haley, the Evans' adopted daughter, poses with her dog team. One of Haley's hobbies is mushing. Photo provided by Shoni Evans

“You’re not losing a niece, you’re gaining a sister.”

come see Haley about every afternoon. He loved her. He’d sit in my big rocking chair and rock her. It was absolutely a beautiful thing. But he wasn’t healthy enough to take care of her.”

Haley’s grandfather passed away when she was 3 months old. He was the last family member who would have been able to take her.

**Miracle Child**

Haley had severe medical issues that stemmed from complications surrounding her birth. She was born with a hole in her heart and needed a heart and lung machine until she was 9 months old. She also had twisted bowels, and impaired vision and hearing on her right side. She needed to be medevaced three times in her first year of life because her heart had stopped beating or she had had difficulty breathing.



At the NEST homeless shelter in Nome, Alaska, one of the places Shoni Evans helps out, residents eat a meal together. Photo provided by Shoni Evans

Evans was adamant that Haley remain connected with her extended family, who loved her but were unable to take care of her. Haley’s aunt—her biological mother’s sister—was the person who approached Evans about officially adopting Haley.

“I wrapped my arms around her and said, ‘Eva, you’re not losing a niece, you’re gaining a sister.’ We have always raised Haley that way,” said Evans.

Haley is now 10 years old. Most of her health issues miraculously resolved themselves over the years, which has stunned her health-care providers. She’s in the fifth grade and is homeschooled by Evans, and assists her mom at work by playing with the babies living in the children’s home. Haley also takes every chance she can to mush with her team of dogs.

Haley is blessed to be part of two loving families—her biological family and her adoptive family,

which is made up of Shoni, her husband, Michael, their four biological children, and two adopted children, including Haley.

“God healed her for a purpose,” said Evans. “I don’t know what that’s going to be, but it’s going to be a lot of fun to sit back and see why Haley is who Haley is.”

<sup>1</sup>Alaska Children’s Trust, “Alaska Family and Community,” static1.squarespace.com/static/586370cec534a5dbddeb846/t/5c68661f085229f287660e67/1550345794451/KIDSCOUNT-Family-Community-Report.pdf, accessed Jan. 30, 2020.

<sup>2</sup>Diwakar Vadapalli, Virgene Hanna, and Jessica Passini, “Trends in Age, Gender, and Ethnicity Among Children in Foster Care in Alaska,” iseralaska.org/static/legacy\_publication\_links/2014\_12-TrendsInAgeGenderAndEthnicityAmongFosterChildrenInAlaska.pdf, accessed Jan. 30, 2020.

<sup>3</sup>Alaska Tribal Child Welfare Compact Between Certain Alaska Native Tribes and Tribal Organizations and the State of Alaska, “Dec. 15, 2017, static1.squarespace.com/static/586370cec534a5dbddeb846/t/5c68661f085229f287660e67/1550345794451/KIDSCOUNT-Family-Community-Report.pdf, accessed Jan. 30, 2020.

<sup>4</sup>Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium Epidemiology Center, “Alaska Native Health Status Report,” Second Edition. August 2017, anthctoday.org/epicenter/publications/HealthStatusReport/AN\_HealthStatusReport\_FINAL2017.pdf, accessed Jan. 30, 2020.

<sup>5</sup>Alaska Children’s Trust, “Alaska Family and Community,” static1.squarespace.com/static/586370cec534a5dbddeb846/t/5c68661f085229f287660e67/1550345794451/KIDSCOUNT-Family-Community-Report.pdf, accessed Jan. 30, 2020.

*Mylon Medley is an assistant director of communication for the North American Division.*



Shoni and four of her children enjoy the July 4th holiday. Photo provided by Shoni Evans

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# NAD NEWS BRIEFS



## NORTH AMERICAN DIVISION HOSTS SECOND ANNUAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM PRAYER BREAKFAST

**M**ore than 100 people from diverse faith traditions attended the second annual Religious Freedom Prayer Breakfast, hosted by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America (NAD). The event, held on January 16, 2020, recognized Religious Freedom Day in the United States, and included prayer for elected officials, the community, the nation, for peace and places of worship, and for unity of spirit. Adventist, Jewish, Muslim, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and nondenominational Christian representatives offered the various

petitions. Several NAD leaders participated through prayer and music. Greetings from the governor's office were shared by Boyd Rutherford, lieutenant governor of Maryland. Jonathan L. Weaver, senior pastor of the Greater Mount Nebo African Methodist Episcopal Church and social justice advocate, delivered remarks during the breakfast. This commemorative day dates back to 1786, but, said Orlan Johnson, director of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty for the NAD, "Religious freedom faces ongoing challenges in current public policy debates."

← Orlan Johnson, director of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty for the NAD, addresses community members and church leaders from different faith traditions as they gather for the division's second annual Religious Freedom Prayer Breakfast. *Pieter Damsteegt*

During the welcome Johnson invited those gathered to take time to contemplate the religious freedom we enjoy, while recognizing that "preserving or obtaining this freedom for future generations should be a concern of all citizens and all government at all levels."

Rutherford, during his remarks, talked about recent assaults on places of worship across the country. "We should all be willing to stand up for those who are subject to attacks, even if their views on religion are a little different from yours or mine. An attack on someone's religious beliefs is an attack on all of us."

NAD vice presidents Bonita J. Shields and Tony Anobile each offered prayer. Shields prayed for religious freedom, while Anobile closed the event with prayer for unity of spirit.

"I pray that we will not think in terms of liberal or conservative, left wing or right wing, but that as one body we will focus on what is central and not what is peripheral. . . . Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:3 that we should endeavor to 'keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.' We ask for that unity today," Anobile prayed.

—*Kimberly Luste Maran, NAD Office of Communication*



↑ This early Hebrew text of Genesis 26:19—35:18 was written by hand on parchment. *Terry Henson*

## Southern Adventist University Showcases Rare Bible Collection

**A** Southern Adventist University exhibit dedicated to the Bible that contains more than 80 books and works of art is displayed in its Lynn H. Wood Archaeological Museum. The exhibit includes a leaf from the first Bible ever printed in North America, and a Breeches Bible that was brought over on the Mayflower.

In the free exhibit, "From Script to Scripture: The History of the Bible," visitors can explore the innovations of the alphabet, the printing press, and modern technology that has made it the best-selling book of all time. In addition, the collection will include art that played an important role in illustrating biblical themes.

The exhibit will feature original historical Bibles, such as the "Olivétan" (a 1535 pre-Reformation French Bible), the Gutenberg Bible, and a complete 1611 King James Version Bible. Visitors can read an original printing of Martin Luther's 95 theses, which sparked the Protestant Reformation, and also stand in front of a replica of the doors of the Wittenberg gate, upon which Luther nailed his theses.

For more information about the museum, visit [southern.edu/archaeology](http://southern.edu/archaeology).

—*Southern Adventist University/NAD Office of Communication*

## Special Needs Kids Share Their Talents at Nativity Program

**T**wenty-nine children with special needs were the stars of the second annual Christmas nativity talent show in Auburn, Washington, in December 2019—all because of one boy with a vision.

Elias Barahona from Tacoma, Washington, had a long-time dream of being Joseph, but no one ever chose the boy with Down's syndrome to play this role. Not until the faith community came together with five weeks of planning to produce the first special-needs Christmas talent program in 2018.

Since then, participant, donor, and audience interest keeps growing for providing a stage for special needs children to shine for Jesus.

"I love how our community is embracing this program," says Nitza Salazar, Washington Conference children's ministries director. "Not only our churches, but our community. This is unique. This is something new. Everyone is excited about this program. They aren't seeing it anywhere else."

Salazar explains why this program is particularly meaningful: "Parents don't see their kids up on stage often. Some of the parents told me this is the first time they saw their kids on stage. We have all kinds of needs represented, and it is so beautiful to give them a place where they can shine."

The production isn't heavy on lights or sound so kids won't feel uncomfortable. There isn't a lot of stimulation. A quiet room is available for overwhelming moments. The storyline narration, read by retired teacher Harold Richards, is simple and short.

Different talents, by cast members ranging from 7 months to age 31 and averaging about age 12, include playing an instrument, saying a Bible verse, singing, acting or sharing sign language—with varying levels of stage fright. Siblings, friends, parents, or caregivers are often right alongside the performers.

—*Heidi Baumgartner, Washington Conference communication director*

↓ Elias Barahona's dream of playing Joseph (second from right) in a Christmas Nativity was fulfilled in 2018 where he was surrounded by new friends who also had special needs. *Heidi Baumgartner*





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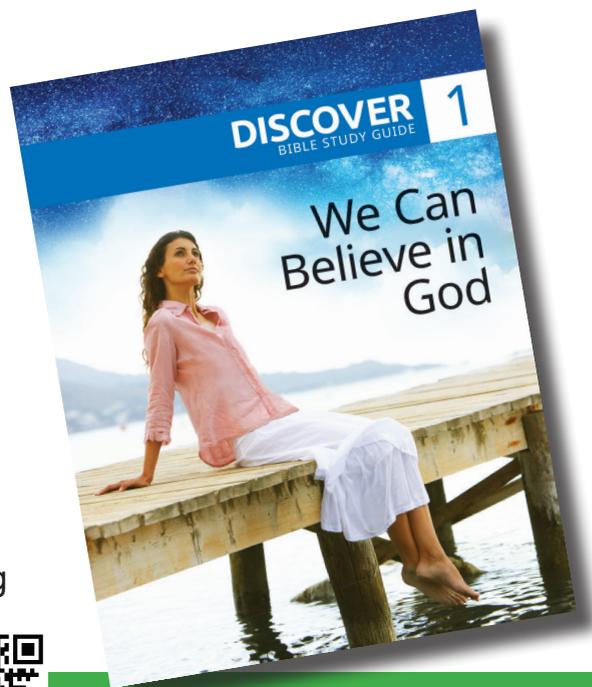
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BY SHAWN BOONSTRA

# Life Worth Living

Sooner or later we all realize that we will not be the only person on this planet who *doesn't* die. That moment came early for me—as young as 8—and it was driven home with blunt force in my early 20s, when my friend Simon was suddenly killed in a horrible head-on collision. His remains were too devastated to permit an open casket. Simon's traumatized parents opted for cremation—an unusual choice for Catholics.

The sudden and permanent absence of a friend was palpable; it was hard to comprehend that he was simply *gone*. For years after his death I thought I saw him everywhere, but each sighting proved to be nothing but an uncanny *doppelgänger*.

**Struggle**

Our hearts struggle to accept the reality of death. Existence is such a persuasive experience that we simply cannot conceive of a world in which we no longer exist. As a small child I used to spend more time than a youngster probably should trying to imagine a universe *without* me: how is it possible that prior to 1969 I did not exist at *all*?

Perhaps our struggle to conceive of non-existence is one of the reasons the pagan idea of a disembodied afterlife has been so incredibly persistent over millennia. Sin has created a situation in which we think of ourselves as all-important, even self-existent: how could anything else exist if *we* don't?

Enter the One who *is* self-existent, the Creator who chose to take on human form and experience this broken world with us. The One who *is* life lays His life down for us (John 1:4; 10:17). Even though He is the source of all things, and the means by which all things continue to exist (Col. 1:17), He determined to empty Himself to the point of death. He "made Himself of no reputation" and "humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross" (Phil. 2:7, 8).

Witness Christ in Gethsemane, faced with the sheer reality of death. He weeps. He struggles. He *begs* for the cup to be taken away. Contrast that with the pagan philosopher Socrates,\* who told his students to quit weeping for him on the eve of his execu-

tion and welcome death as a joyful path to a higher existence. Which one do you suppose—Jesus or Socrates—knew the horrible truth about death?

If the story ended there, with Jesus in a grave, we might be tempted to descend into despondency.

**Life in Christ**

What is the point of *living* if I'm just going to die? Why continue learning, experiencing, and loving if my whole being will simply disappear forever into the dirt? By continuing to embrace life, what, exactly, am I investing in—and *why*?

That question eventually visits everyone. And the way we choose to continue living will be profoundly shaped by awareness of that fast-draining hourglass marking the moments before we finish.

When I first realized I was going to die, I was on the first floor of life. I now find myself on the sixth (I am 50) and well aware that I have already used up most of my time. But in Christ I have peace that life is still worth *living*—fully. I know that "after my skin is destroyed . . . in my flesh I shall see God" (Job 19:26). I see that Christ's empty grave releases "those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (Heb. 2:15).

I am truly free. Until He returns, I will go on investing in life—and in Christ's kingdom. It is time well spent, and it is good to know that many long years after my death friends will suddenly think they see me in a crowd . . . and it *will be true*.

Maranatha.

\* As Oscar Cullmann famously did in 1965.

In Christ, I have peace that life is still worth *living*—fully.

Shawn Boonstra is speaker/director for the Voice of Prophecy.

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