Each of us have written our personal stories about the path that has led us to joining HopeChest’s mission. We advocate on behalf of the marginalized and impoverished of this world by seeking partners who want to participate in the transformation of these impoverished communities.

**THESE ARE OUR STORIES.**

WE WANT TO KNOW HOW YOUR STORY IS LEADING YOU TO TEAM UP AGAINST POVERTY.
HOW MINISTERING IN ETHIOPIA’S RED LIGHT DISTRICT LED ME TO WORK AT CHILDREN’S HOPECHEST

I was a pastor for 15 years.

The last church I worked at (The River, Kalamazoo MI) partnered with Children’s HopeChest in Uganda. The relationship built between Oditel CarePoint and The River transformed lives. It quickly became one of the most powerful discipleship tools we had. It also transformed the way we did local ministry.

The River is an inner-city church, and I had oversight of our local outreach programs. I thought the best way to care for the poor and needy was to throw bus tokens out of the window and set up a food pantry. It was about the fifth time I was sexually propositioned for a bus token that I realized this probably isn’t the best strategy. No relationship was being created and we became Kalamazoo’s bus token dispensary.

Watching HopeChest in-country leaders create development plans and be accountable and responsible for their own development was a wonderful light bulb moment for me 10 years ago. The River’s resources were simply a catalyst for that development. The real secret sauce was in the relationships. I took the HopeChest Community-to-Community model and applied it to a local under-resourced middle school (Maple Street Magnet School).

“Instead of going to the school and telling the administration we want to help and we will do an annual backpack drive and raise money for food, we built a team that went to the leadership and asked, “What is your vision for success and how could we help them accomplish that?”

To this day the partnership with Maple Street is going strong. A couple years ago our team went to meet with all of the teachers and administrators to talk about the upcoming year—the team was met with a standing ovation. Transformation was happening in both communities.
Over the years, HopeChest leaders asked if I would lead Vision Trips and work for them part-time. I had a remarkable passion in this area and was happy to try and make it work. On one of my Vision Trips to Ethiopia, our team went to minister to prostitutes in the red light district. I’ll never forget one of the girls who was about 13 years old. I told her, “God loves you.” Girls in the red light district rarely look you in the eye. However, this girl lifted up her chin and looked me straight in the eye and said, “If God loves me, why would I be here?” This broke me to my core. I have two daughters and I know that if either of them were in this type of situation I would scratch through a wall to protect them. Then the Lord whispered, “And who is scratching through a wall to protect this child of mine?” My life would never be the same.

It wasn’t long after that encounter that HopeChest leaders, Tom Davis and Bob Mudd, invited me to work full-time at HopeChest. This was a difficult decision. I love the local Church, I love the people, and colleagues I worked with at The River. But again, God spoke. This time through scripture. I always saw my role as a pastor was to introduce people to God. When people encounter God, their lives are never the same. I stumbled onto a verse that made it crystal clear that HopeChest was my next calling. Jeremiah 22:16, God says, “If you want to know me, defend the cause of the poor and needy.”

Now and for the past nine years, I get up every morning filled with new opportunities to invite people in businesses, churches, and schools to know God through defending the cause of the poor and needy.

I guess you could say, I’m still pastoring, it just looks really different now.
In December of 2010, I had to evacuate a large city in the middle of riot. As we drove toward a border country, we evaded bullets, machetes, barricades of flaming tires, and burning trash. Our car got trapped in the middle of a rusted metal bridge with mobs of people coming from behind and in front of us. The crowds were too big to drive through. Bottom line — people were angry and we were in danger.

I called my wife to update her on the situation and then tried to calm the other passengers in the car. I prayed for a miracle.

All of the sudden, as the mob swarmed our vehicle, a voice shouted in the local language, “Stop! I know these people!” A familiar face pressed against the glass of the driver side window. It was the brother of a local staff member who had also become a very good friend. He jumped on top of our Landcruiser and parted the mob in front of us and led us to a safe spot to rest for the night.

I learned many important lessons that night, but three in particular have guided my work internationally and ultimately led me to a career with Children’s HopeChest.

Lesson 1: BUILD AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIPS.

If I hadn’t had a real friendship with that local staff member, the story of that day could have turned out very differently.

Affinity, association, bearing, connection, kinship, linkage are all synonyms for relationship. Relationship binds and connects people—but it takes work!
It’s a two-way street filled with listening, learning, trusting and loving. Without relationship the work crumbles.

Children’s HopeChest’s mission thrives only in relationship with others. This organization is committed to building genuine friendships within our teams and with partners, donors and, most importantly, the children we serve. This ministry connects people and communities all around the world because we know that in order for it to be successful, the work must be done together.

**Lesson 2: DO NO HARM.**

The riot that took place that night was actually caused by well intentioned humanitarian aid efforts. A different group had established a long-term relief camp that provided basic necessities to people that had lost everything in a devastating earthquake. Unfortunately, this camp had built their staff’s latrines next to a river that was a primary water source for multiple villages, as well as large portion of the capital city. Eventually seepage occurred and a deadly strain of cholera spread down the river. The disease reached epidemic levels, sickening nearly 800,000 people and killing nearly 9,000. People living in that area were afraid and mad, which is what incited the rioting.

I’ve seen many projects that were initiated with the best intentions but ultimately hurt the people we were trying to help. If not planned with a “do no harm” mentality, projects and programs can stiffen local ingenuity, create dependency, and even damage both small markets and large-scale economies.

This is another key value that drew me to HopeChest. They go above and beyond to include local staff, partners, and beneficiaries in plans and decisions that impact them and their wider communities. We don’t opt for the quickest or cheapest solution. We bring the right people together to develop the right solution.

**Lesson 3: GOD WILL COME THROUGH.**

Isaiah 41:10 says, “So do not fear for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

I’ve always loved that verse, but never fully understood its truth until that night. He showed himself to me and that group through my friend’s brother. His presence there wasn’t by chance. It was by God’s plan.

HopeChest believes that God fulfills his promise and will provide. We love the children we serve—but we know God loves them even more! It is not by us, but through us he is doing miraculous things in the lives of children across the globe. The world can be tough and unpredictable. But we know if we stay in God’s will, He will work and remove obstacles we never thought possible.
I used to be tremendously burdened by the weight of injustices plaguing our global world: oppressive governments, sex trafficking, child labor, civil wars, endless refugees, racial divides, and the list continues. Now I find myself pondering how these realities may be exacerbated during global pandemics. Somehow, I believe this is all a part of God’s story, but I also know we are a people called to truly be “all in this together.”

**Prevention is a hard sell most of the time.** We may be convinced to hunker down in our homes on quarantine for a period of time in order to prevent disease from spreading. But when the impact isn’t real and raw and in our faces each day, the novelty wears off and we become restless and weary. We can share magnificent stories of people escaping death from unseen viruses and rescuing girls from dens of slavery. **It is more difficult to share the stories with you that did not happen because of quality prevention.**

I am a social worker, desiring social progress and a greater abundance of grace in our world. **I became interested and invested in HopeChest as an adoptive parent.** I am sold out to Christ’s work through HopeChest because I believe in a greater solution. I have seen how community partnerships living “all in this together” have changed lives and prevented trauma. I have also seen how, without preventative community support, individuals can experience deep pain. I have four boys, some biological and some adopted (both domestic and international). I am not known for being proper or fancy, maybe a little feisty.

“While there is a magnificent story about how our family came to adopt a young boy from Ethiopia, my journey to HopeChest is one story among many, of where this young boy has delivered me.”
I have learned some lessons along the path of this adventure we call parenthood that have stretched me and taught me lessons I didn’t know I needed to learn. I am forever changed and grateful for the places he has taken my heart.

Seven years ago I got a call from our adoption agency asking for help exploring ways to engage adoptive families in their child’s birth country. They had been overwhelmed with calls about how to stay connected and to offer support after seeing realities firsthand. My friend Sue and I pored over dozens of organizations where we might help facilitate some engagement for families. Ultimately, we chose HopeChest because of the values for dignity, healthy engagement through development, and the belief that the best way to care for an orphan or any vulnerable person is to have a healthy community that can wrap around them.

My son had experienced every kind of loss imaginable before we met him in Ethiopia, creating trauma that is deeply rooted. Now I realize I inadvertently added to that trauma by taking him away from the only things he had left: the sights, the sounds, the tastes, smells, and touches of his culture. This inventive, creative and endearing little stinker has an amazing capacity to love, learn, and grow. He himself is an asset to the world. He is an asset to my own life, and I am certain his creativity and inventiveness would have been an asset to his country as well.
Today there is a little girl living in Ethiopia named Hiwot whom our family supports through our community partnership at HopeChest. **As these partnerships empower dignified futures in the developing world, I have seen first-hand transformation in communities that are otherwise ripe for injustices.** Hiwot was left vulnerable and alone, then adopted into her neighborhood family when she was young. Her community was healthy enough to continue to care for her during hard times, and I can tangibly see a story of prevention — preventing trafficking, abandonment, starvation, abuse, street work, and other harsh vulnerabilities that turn into additional trauma.

With a HopeChest partnership in Hiwot’s community, the local leaders of her community and country had risen up, created, and implemented a healthy plan of development that grew to a point where they could care for their vulnerable people. While my son’s community intended him no harm, there simply were not enough resources to care for him. They were forced to make a decision to love him by sending him away, but Hiwot’s community had the opportunity to love her and care for her. They could give her both, and that is dignity.

“**Dignity**” is why I still work with HopeChest as a licensed social worker. I get to teach others a healthy way to engage in relationships that create empowerment over dependency. I get to **invite others into partnerships that offer hope and healing over despair and vulnerability.** I get to engage in community planning and empower locals to utilize their own assets for success. I get to see others connect, grow and develop as an individual and as a part of a community. It is preventative justice, and HopeChest partnerships facilitate my deep desire to not just face global pandemic as “all in this together” but for us to live with hearts that are ALL IN, as we are in this together.
For the last 14 years, my profession has centered around education and the educational event industry. I’ve worn many, many hats, including sales agent, consultant, and director of operations. Every day was a lesson in leadership, and it’s been an adventure to connect with people across the U.S. and from all walks of life.

My passion, however, is centered elsewhere—a whole different story—and one that has taken its time to unfold.

At 13 years old, I became what’s considered a double orphan.

My sister and I were born and raised in Los Angeles, California. My father—a graduate of Cornell University and professor at Pepperdine—immigrated to the U.S. from Ethiopia in the early 70s on a highly coveted educational scholarship. My mother followed shortly after. She graduated high school in New York and reunited with my father in California—she also became a graduate of UCLA and, together, they launched a successful CPA firm.

Of my parents, I would say they were brilliant and loving and fierce advocates. Without ever having stepped foot in my family’s home country, my sister and I were raised in the culture. I learned and spoke and read the languages. The stories and history and music were home. My parents would not have had it any other way—and to this day, I am grateful.

The loss of my parents brought my world crashing down around me. The only life I knew had ended, and I was faced with beginning again. All before finishing my eighth grade school year.

The values my parents instilled within me raised me along the way.
My father cared deeply for the Ethiopian community and the church as a whole. I watched him form the first Ethiopian Orthodox church in the City of Angels. I watched him bring people from different sides together and create community where it did not exist. It mattered to him, and it matters to me. After moving to West Michigan, I spearheaded foundational efforts that focused on providing aid to the most vulnerable. Alongside others, we founded the creation of a fistula hospital in rural Ethiopia. I led fundraisers, held events, and raised awareness for the least and the lost—the orphans of the world.

Still, something was amiss. I knew there was more.

My wife and I have been deeply involved in the missional outreach work of our church for quite some time. Our commitment to global development began with Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Multiple trips, year after year, and endless to-do lists eventually became a lesson learned. (When Helping Hurts, anyone?)

**Passion meets purpose: the point of intersection.**

My first introduction to Children’s HopeChest was in 2014. My wife and I were asked to attend a meeting between our church missions board and Children’s HopeChest. The decision was unanimous—this was the way we wanted to serve. The right and just way. The only way, really. I immediately connected with HopeChest’s ideology and holistic approach to community outreach and impact. I was fully on board. It’s been seven years, and my wife and I continue to serve as leads in our Community-to-Community church partnership with the Ukro CarePoint in Ethiopia.

“I traveled the proverbial road back home to a country and nation I’ve known all my life yet had never met before. For the first time in my life, I stepped off a plane and into the land of my own ancestry.”
“Then, in the fall of 2018, I traveled the proverbial road back home to a country and nation I've known all my life yet had never met before. For the first time in my life, I stepped off a plane and into the land of my own ancestry.”

In its entirety, the experience itself is one I don't think I will ever be able to fully convey. What I can share are the moments and memories that helped to reshape my innermost core. Asking kids questions in their native tongue, “With God on your side, what do you want to be when you grow up?”

From their responses, I can say with certainty that I met future lawyers and doctors and leaders—determined game-changers—that will help change the world. I saw parents, empowered, and thriving, in fact. Business plans and proposals, endeavors and dreams. I witnessed, firsthand, the power of partnership.

I'd finally found my passion with purpose.

That's why, when the opportunity came to join the team at Children's HopeChest, I did so without hesitation. Because this is it—this is the good stuff—the stuff that still matters. Equipping people, right where they are, because they are worthy and wholly loved.

To elevate and amplify the voice of the vulnerable, this I consider my mission and privilege.