

Buck, Jackson, and J. D. in Masai robes in Kisii, Kenya



their Russian peers. "We played games, like Ping-Pong and gymnastics, where you don't have to talk," Buck says. "The other kids became my friends." The boys' father, J. D. Lewis, 53, had a more poignant encounter, with a teenager whose parents had died of alcoholism. J. D., who lost his own mother to alcohol abuse and his father to suicide when he


was a child, told him, "You can't give up. You have to overcome your circumstances and go on to do great things." When it was time to leave at the end of the month, "I sobbed," J. D. says.

The Question That Started It All

The Lewis family's journey began with a single question. One day in the fall of 2010, Jackson asked his dad, "Why aren't we doing more to make a difference?" Taken aback, J. D. suggested they volunteer locally. But as he pondered his son's query that night, he recalls, "I thought, 'Let's do 12 in 12—12 projects, 12 countries, 12 months.'"

An acting coach and single dad who adopted both boys at birth, J. D. was a strong believer in exposing his children to other cultures, but he knew that taking a yearlong trip would require special expertise. Among the people he consulted was Esther Benjamin of the Peace Corps, who suggested safe destinations and worthy organizations. Next, he had to figure out the trip's cost—and

➔ *continued on page 15*

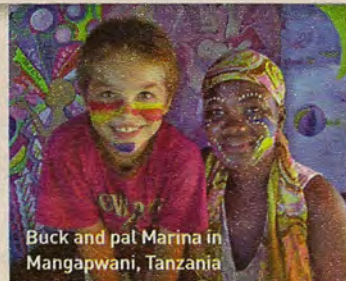
AMERICAN  STORIES

One Family, Six Continents, Twelve Good Deeds

From a Beijing orphanage to an elementary school in Rwanda, the Lewis family of Charlotte, N.C., is on a trip that's out of this world BY ANDREA COOPER



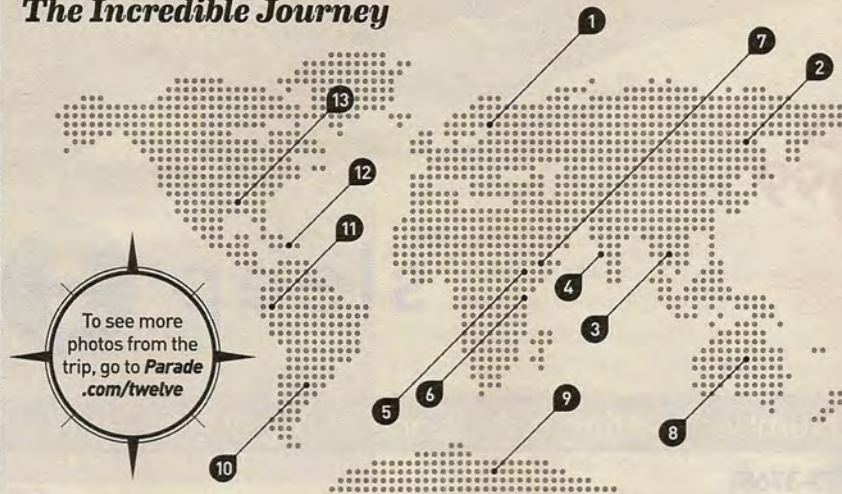
The brothers at a school in Sattahip, Thailand



Buck and pal Marina in Mangapwani, Tanzania

Jackson Lewis, 14, stood before the steel door of Transit, an organization for homeless youth in St. Petersburg, Russia, anxiously wondering what awaited him on the other side. Would he and his brother, Buck, 9, be able to communicate with the kids? Would it be frightening? This was the first stop on their family's quest to volunteer in a different country every month for a year—and they had no idea what to expect. But within minutes of entering the building, the boys were wrestling and laughing with

The Incredible Journey



To see more photos from the trip, go to Parade.com/twelve

1. July 2011 Russia
2. August China
3. September Thailand
4. October India
5. November Rwanda
6. December Tanzania
7. January 2012 Kenya
8. February Australia
9. March Antarctica
10. April Argentina
11. May Peru
12. June Haiti
13. July U.S. (Miss.)

12 Good Deeds
from page 12

how to pay for it. He calculated a \$100-per-day budget for food, lodging, and other necessities, plus \$25,000 for transportation. J. D. used his savings and took out a loan. Friends organized fundraisers, and through the family's website, TwelveinTwelve.org, strangers contributed as well. "People who'd been out of work for two years were sending us \$10," J. D. marvels.

Kids Helping Kids

Since leaving Russia, the Lewis family has worked with children with Down syndrome in Thailand, taught English to Tibetan refugees in India, spent Thanksgiving in Rwanda, and worked with kids in Kenya who have HIV. The family volunteers three weeks a month (the other week is for travel), and four hours a day are devoted to home-schooling. Both boys keep journals, and Jackson and J. D. also blog. They all sample the local food, though in China they passed on the snake-on-a-stick. (Buck did say yes to a donkey burger—it

tasted, he reports, like a "funky hamburger.")

Lifetime Memories

The boys can say "thank you" in Russian, Chinese, Thai, Hindi, Rwandan, and Swahili,

and Jackson has grown four inches since they left. Each has his favorite moments. For Jackson, it was playing with toddlers at the New Hope Foundation orphanage outside Beijing. Buck loved the

"My kids will never forget what they've seen and done on this trip."

—J. D. Lewis

Buddhist monastery in India, where he joined in the ceremonies and received a Tibetan Buddhist name, Losang Buck. One of J. D.'s favorite memories is of teaching English in Tanzania, where all his students were Muslim. "We talked about different religious beliefs, and the mutual respect was powerful." This month, the Lewises are accompanying the Royal Flying Doctor Service in Australia, bringing medical care and supplies to indigenous people in the outback. After that, they'll head to Antarctica, Argentina, Peru, and Haiti.

The family plans to return to the U.S. in July for their last project: using photography and film to document needs closer to home, in Durant, Miss., where J. D. has a sister. While excited to catch up with family and friends, they will be sad to see their journey end. "We really do feel like we are making a difference," J. D. says. "In the past, we've gone on vacations, and it's nice. We come back with photos and memories that fade over time. But with this trip, my kids will never forget what they've seen and done." ■