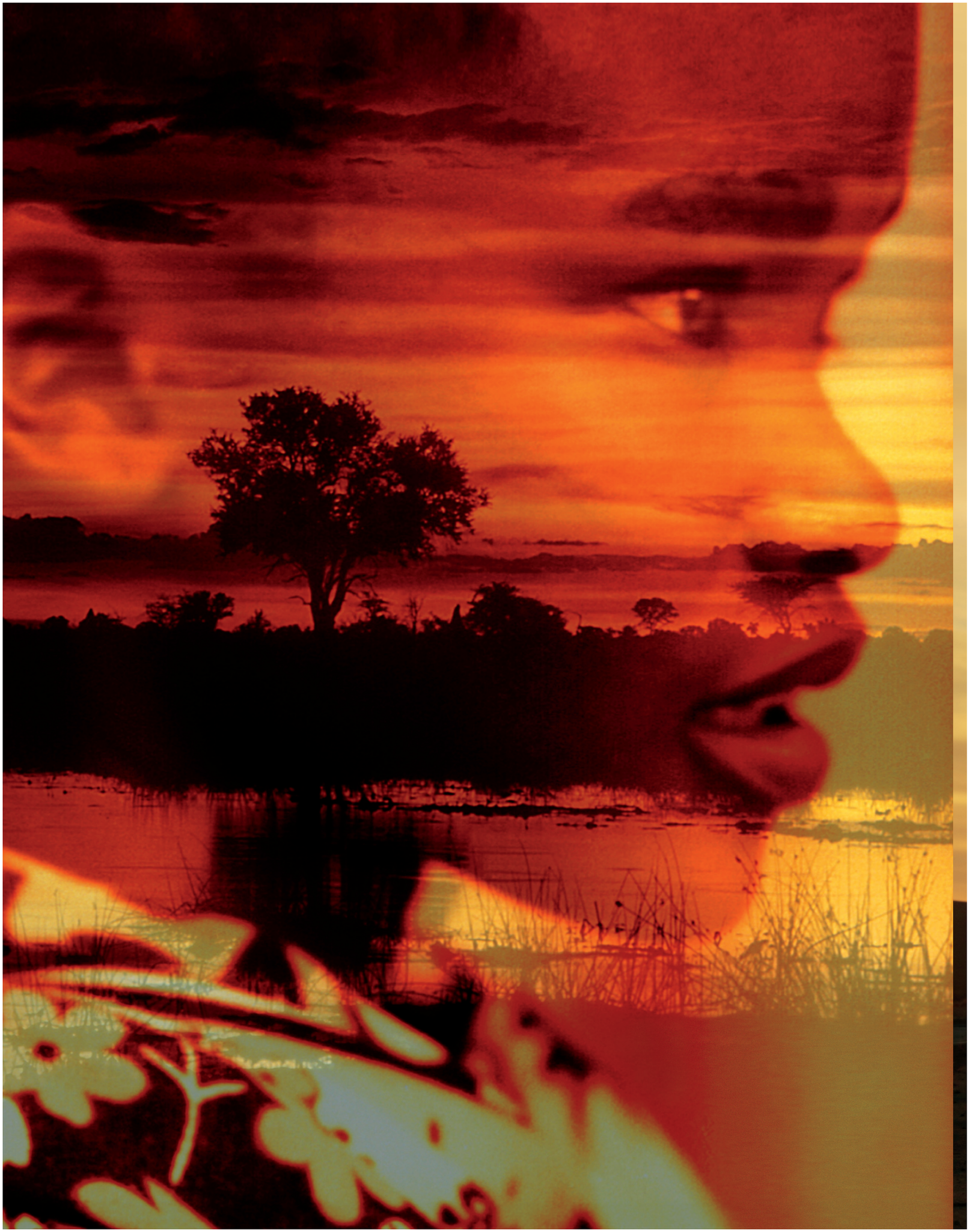

Marq_Mag_Fall_2010_2_Features_Final.indd 28 10/4/10 11:44 PM

Dr. Eric Boos, Grad '96, had been waiting to hear from an old teacher when the tattered postcard showed up with the unexpected postmark of Tanzania. Eric had to get out a map to locate the Eastern African nation.

His teacher had written simply two lines:

"We're here. Why aren't you?"

PROJECT TANZANIA

BY NICOLE SWEENEY ETTER

Marq_Mag_Fall_2010_2_Features_Final.indd 29 10/4/10 11:44 PM

"Count me in," Eric wrote back.

And so started a commitment that has taken him and his wife, Dr. Karene Boos, PT '95, and their children to Tanzania countless times during the past 15 years. Their efforts helped create a $25 million Catholic college, a primary school, a metal fabrication shop for manufacturing equipment for children with disabilities and several women's co-ops. They support two orphanages, an AIDS clinic and a physical therapy clinic, transforming the quality of life for hundreds of Tanzanians.

In January, Karene will bring three Marquette grads to assist at the PT clinic; Eric is working with another Marquette alumnus to create a nationwide Catholic radio network and write the country's telecommunications law.

They are maverick missionaries, paying their own way, begging for benefactors, working without the official backing of the church or any other nonprofit organization.

It hasn't been easy. They taught themselves Swahili. They drained their savings accounts again and again. Karene battled malaria 10 times; Eric had it four times, and once it nearly killed him.

"It's been a labor of love for 15 years," Eric says. "It's been lots of struggles, lots of frequent flier miles, lots of times when Karene and I would sit down and say, 'Maybe we should just be done with this.'"

But then another project captures their imagination, and they find themselves back in Tanzania. "I don't want to be a passive Christian," Karene says. "I want to do something. Some people say, 'Bloom where you're planted. There are tons of things you can do in your own little community.' But that's not our charism."

Faith is their bedrock. Eric spent 11 years studying to be a priest before leaving to study philosophy at Marquette. Karene, who was moved to tears by services at Church of the Gesu, converted to Catholicism during college. They both felt a call to Catholic social justice that was nurtured at Marquette.

They moved to Tanzania four days after their wedding in 1995. They settled in Morogoro, at the base of the Uluguru Mountains, to help develop the Salvatorian Institute, a college for Catholic seminarians.

When they arrived, the college had just three classrooms and 68 students. Eric began writing the curriculum, while Karene taught English and other classes and served as the local physical therapist. They started an intercollegiate sports program (helped by a generous donation of equipment from Mike Deane, then head coach of the Marquette men's basketball team), a student publication, the student government and a library that soon encompassed 80,000 volumes. The couple left Tanzania after a year, when Eric's student loans came due. But they were hooked.

When Eric and Karene first saw Mgolole Orphanage, only two nuns were serving 40 kids. "The conditions were abysmal," Eric says. "It was an old building that had been abandoned by the government so it was in a bad state of disrepair. God bless the sisters, because they were doing the best they could, but those kids were languishing."

Eric and Karene persuaded colleagues at the Salvatorian Institute to "adopt" the orphanage, then went to work raising funds for improvements. They bought chickens and pigs and put in a garden. But they knew a new water system was key. They tapped the technical expertise of Brother Albin Laga, S.D.S., a Marquette alum who worked at the institute. Brother Albin installed a bathtub, shower and solar panels. When they turned on the showers for the first time, the African nuns cried.

"For the first time, the orphanage had complete running water," Eric says. "Imagine your regular work day with 40 orphans, and half of them at any time have parasites, amoeba, dysentery. The main chore every day was just keeping up with the laundry, the sheets, the diapers, the clothes." Less laundry meant more time for other things; better water meant improved health and quality of life.

"What we build is not going to last forever, but the spirit with which we build it will," Brother Albin said at the time. "We are here to spread hope…and hope can have no object other than life in God."

Working with the orphanage, it was difficult to ignore the plight of children with disabilities. Polio is commonplace in Tanzania. "If they're

Marq_Mag_Fall_2010_2_Features_Final.indd 30 10/4/10 11:44 PM

handicapped and don't die in infancy, their life is really despondent," Eric says. "They'll end up dragging themselves down the street and begging."

With a grant from Braun, a company that makes wheelchair lifts, and welding equipment from a shuttered bicycle factory, an idea took shape: They could build equipment for children with disabilities.

Karene sketched some rough designs. They found a Salvatorian priest, Father Gabriel Kamienski, who could weld. Soon, Father Gabriel had apprentices, and a metal fabrication shop was born. It is one of the only shops in Tanzania producing handicap equipment.

And Karene and Eric will never forget how the small children giggled with delight as they raced each other down the hallway. For the first time in their lives, they were able to walk on their own.

In 1999, Rev. Wojciech Kowalski, academic dean of the Salvatorian Institute, asked Eric and Karene to earn law degrees so that they could help start a law school in Tanzania. They juggled full-time jobs and full-time course work at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, often seeing each other only to hand off a child at the law school steps. At the same time, Eric stayed involved with the Salvatorian Institute, developing its 10-year plan and writing the curriculum for law, business, nursing, journalism and education.

The family moved back to Tanzania when Eric won a Fulbright Scholarship in 2003. He wrote a comprehensive history of land tenure issues in Tanzania and now mediates disputes over property and water rights in Tanzania.

The Boos family lives on a 40-acre farm outside Elkhart Lake, Wis. With the help of their four children, ages 5 to 12, they raise sheep, pigs, grain crops and 17 varieties of produce that they sell at the local farmers' market. The profits are poured back into their projects in Tanzania. Eric teaches philosophy at the University of Wisconsin–Fond du Lac, and Karene works as a physical therapist.

They'd love to live in Tanzania, but there's no way to make a living. So they do what they can.

"Part of what we feel as Christians is we have to be countercultural," Eric says. "We're going to keep one foot on that continent and one foot on this continent, and we're going to learn to live through moderation."

Tanzania has had a lasting impact on their children. One Christmas, the family delivered goody bags to the Mgolole orphans. Once back in Wisconsin, the kids decided it wasn't fair that they should get presents when the orphans have nothing. Now it's a family tradition to price out what they would've wanted for Christmas and then send that money to Tanzania.

Brother Albin says the Boos family is a living example of Christ's teachings: *Whatever you did to one of the least of these my brethren, you did to me.* "The work they do breaks racial, cultural and country barriers," Brother Albin says. "Taking care, playing and educating the children (of Tanzania) raises the awareness of each other's dignity — dignity of those who are being helped and of those who are helping."

Frequently, the funds they need just appear. For example, the initial estimates for the orphanage's new water system was $5,680 — money they didn't have. "Buy all the supplies you need. We'll find the money," Eric told Brother Albin. The same day, an old friend, Rev. Scott Kramer, C.P.P.S., wrote to say that students at his parish's grade school had collected $5,600. "Do you think you could use that over there?" he asked. The next day, he wrote again to say his eighth graders had raised an additional $80. They had the money they needed.

Eric and Karene have thought about going after a big grant from an organization like Oprah's Angel Network but then decided it's better this way. "When we have to work this hard to make things happen, it draws other people in," Eric explains. "If we just got a $10 million grant, we wouldn't have people exercising the same level of commitment."

Not far from the orphanage, Capuchin nuns run a PT clinic for young girls suffering from polio. Helping the PT clinic has become Karene's latest passion. In January, she's bringing the clinic equipment and the expertise of a few friends: Catherine Kennedy, PT '95; Lisa Hribar Gramer, PT '95; and Mindy Huemmer, Nurs '04.

Meanwhile, Eric is working with Brother Albin to integrate Tanzania's Catholic radio stations.

"Radio is still the primary form of communication in the country," Eric explains. "People might not have much, but somebody in the village has a transistor radio, and the whole village will gather around it at night." That could be a godsend for sharing important medical information and other news, he said.

They don't know what's next. Their call to Tanzania continues to evolve. Says Karene, "We've always been connected to it, it's never left our life, but it's always morphing." ❍

Learn more | How did a Polish religious brother with no college degree end up turning heads in Marquette's master's program in computer science — and then put that knowledge to work in Tanzania? Go to marquette.edu/magazine to learn more about Brother Albin and to see a photo slideshow.

Pictured above: Scenes from the Boos family's Tanzania photo album. Karene and Eric are pictured in the third and fourth photos, respectively.

Marq_Mag_Fall_2010_2_Features_Final.indd 31 10/4/10 11:44 PM