

"Helping kids has helped us heal," says John Moritz (with Libby). Inset: The children they lost—Kristen, 7, Joshua, 8, Daniel, 5, in 1988.

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An Unbearable Loss, A New Hope

After their three children died in a car crash, John and Libby Moritz found solace—and renewal—by helping orphans **BY JOANNE FOWLER**

Libby Moritz pulled into her neighbor's driveway as she had so many times before, waiting for her three children—Joshua, 11, Kristen, 9, and Daniel, 8—to come tumbling out of a car. Normally the carpool dropped the kids off by 3 p.m., but this snowy afternoon of Jan. 9, 1992, brought nothing but eerie quiet. For two hours Libby waited, seized with dread. Then, just as she was about to contact the police, her

husband, John, arrived with a look of horror she'd never seen in their 13 years of marriage. "He said, 'Libby, all our three children are dead,'" she recalls. "They've been killed in a car accident."

In the months that followed that incomprehensible loss, the couple stumbled numbly through their lives—and at times felt like dying. "I told God you have to be strong for me so I can take another breath, get dressed and move," says Libby, a homemaker from

Sheffield, Mass. Desperate for some connection to her kids, she found an odd kind of solace—wandering into children's stores and buying up toys. Before long she'd filled an entire room with Barbies and teddy bears. For reasons she and John still can't explain, they brought the toys with them on a Christmas trip to Grenada. Once there, they decided to hand them out to local children who were handicapped or had been abused. The joy on the kids' faces

Photographs by ERIKA LARSEN

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allowed the Moritzes, however briefly, to forget their tremendous loss. A year later, they had a similar experience while visiting an orphanage in Ghana. And so John and Libby began to form a vision for their future: As parents without children they would ease the pain of children without parents.

"For these kids, their lives are about suffering," says the soft-spoken John, 51. "We want them to know we suffered too—but you can still have hope."

Using seed money from their children's insurance settlement, the Moritzes established the nonprofit Hearts of the Father Outreach (www.heartsofthefather.org) in 1994. Since then, they've distributed over \$2 million—much of which comes from the couple's swimming pool business—to help more than 1,000 orphans in seven developing countries. In an average year, the couple spend \$50,000 on school and living expenses for hundreds of children and on travel costs for their trips abroad maintaining the orphanages or distributing 10,000 Christmas presents. "They've been a very big help," says Dr. Gladys Ashitey, deputy minister of health in Ghana, where one-quarter of the children are malnourished. "They've been coming here for years, sending money for everything. They are selfless people."

Of course, they never expected their lives would unfold this way. The high school sweethearts started building a family when John was still a senior at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. Libby embraced her role as mom, shuttling Joshua to football practice, Kristen to horseback lessons and Daniel to swimming class, while John tended to his pool business. Losing everything they loved in one terrible stroke tested their strong religious faith and left them questioning their existence. "We knew our kids were in heaven," says Libby, 50. "But why were we still here?"

Over time, the couple's new mission restored meaning to their broken lives. They built their first orphanage from scratch in Ghana in 1999—John still



"They get to be like your own," John says of children like those at this orphanage in Ghana (left) built by the Moritzes' charity, Hearts of the Father Outreach. Above: The Moritzes with daughter Lily.

wife. "Their parents can't take care of them and the kids are hungry."

The love John and Libby extend has come back to them in a very personal way. They adopted a baby girl from China, Lily Joy, now 11, who often tags along with her parents on their trips abroad. "I closed off a place in my heart and wouldn't let anybody enter," says Libby. "But Lily brought me as a mom to a place where I could love again. She turned our sorrow into joy." ●

Thanks to Dawn Massini from Sheffield, Mass., for nominating the Moritzes as PEOPLE heroes. Send suggestions to HEROESAMONGUS@PEOPLEMAG.COM.

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