

## Saving Haiti's children

Newnan resident Shelby McNeil uses her new book to bring brighter futures for Haitian orphans

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When a 7.0 magnitude earthquake rocked the island nation of Haiti Jan. 12, 2010, between 220,000 – 300,000 people lost their lives in an instant. Thousands more were hurt, including young children who suddenly became orphans.

Shelby McNeil, now 21, was familiar with helping out poverty-stricken third-world countries, especially in South America.

From a young age, McNeil, along with her parents Patrick and Julie McNeil of Rockmart, had a heart for mission work. The trio traveled the world to help those in need, especially children.

"I went on my first trip to Peru and was hooked on missionary work after that," McNeil said.

But the Newnan resident was not prepared for what she saw after her plane landed in Port-Au-Prince, Haiti, in 2015. McNeil and her parents were on a medical mission trip in Titanyen.

It was clear the country was still in crisis five years after the earthquake, McNeil remembered.

"As we were being driven to the missionary compound, we passed a dirt field that was used as a mass graveyard to bury those who died in the earthquake," she said. "There were 'tent cities' everywhere. People still didn't have homes and were selling their goods on the side of the road.

"Our translator told us Haiti still looks like the earthquake just happened," McNeil added. "The country still needs help ... there's been little progress to rebuild at all."

While working on a compound in Titanyen, the family met Robenson Pierre and his wife Kelly, who lost funding for their orphanage after the earthquake.

The couple told the McNeils they were not sure where most of the children ended up, but they knew two children had passed away.

Despite their anguish, Robenson Pierre told Patrick McNeil he still felt called to open a new orphanage in the town of Cabaret, but he had no funding and no investors.

McNeil said the Pierre's story lit a spark in their family's heart.

It's a story McNeil shares in greater detail in her first book, "Go With Grace."

The book delves into the partnership with the Pierre family, and the then-newly formed nonprofit organization Grace Children's Home, which is also the name of the Haitian orphanage the group eventually opened in 2016.

That spring, 12 orphans between the ages of 2 and 12 years old had a new place to call home in Cabaret.

The new orphanage was both a blessing and a challenge, McNeil wrote.

"We started in a tiny building in 2016 and had little to no money. We thought it would be impossible to keep the orphanage open," she said. "But every time we had to pay a bill, the money would suddenly show up.

"That's how we know that God's in this with us," McNeil added. "We know the orphanage and nonprofit organization will continue to move forward – and that's encouraging."

In addition to working at The Newnan Times-Herald as a customer service representative, McNeil is active in Grace Church Home organization and in the orphanage. She travels to the area at least twice a year and shares her experiences with the children in her book – the good and the bad.

"We provide everything for



COURTESY OF SHELBY MCNEIL

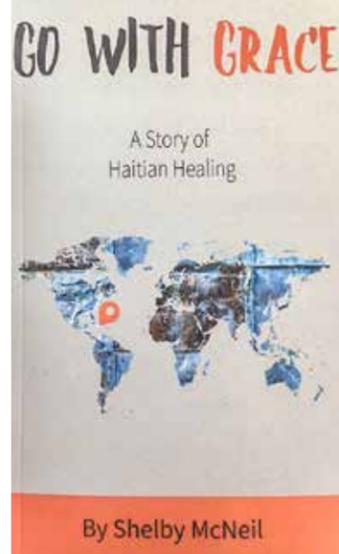
Missionary Shelby McNeil reads the French version of the Dr. Seuss book "One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish" to children outside an orphanage in Cabaret, Haiti.

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COURTESY OF SHELBY MCNEIL

Shelby McNeil's mom Julie smiles while holding some of the children during a Christmas photo. Patrick and Julie McNeil, visit the Grace Children's Home in Haiti at least three times a year. Haitian administrators remain on site year-round.



COURTESY OF SHELBY MCNEIL

"Go With Grace" tells the full story behind the start of the Grace Children's Home orphanage and nonprofit organization. The book was written by Shelby McNeil, 21, who helps run the group with her parents. McNeil also is a customer service representative with The Newnan Times-Herald.

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