

ON A MISSION

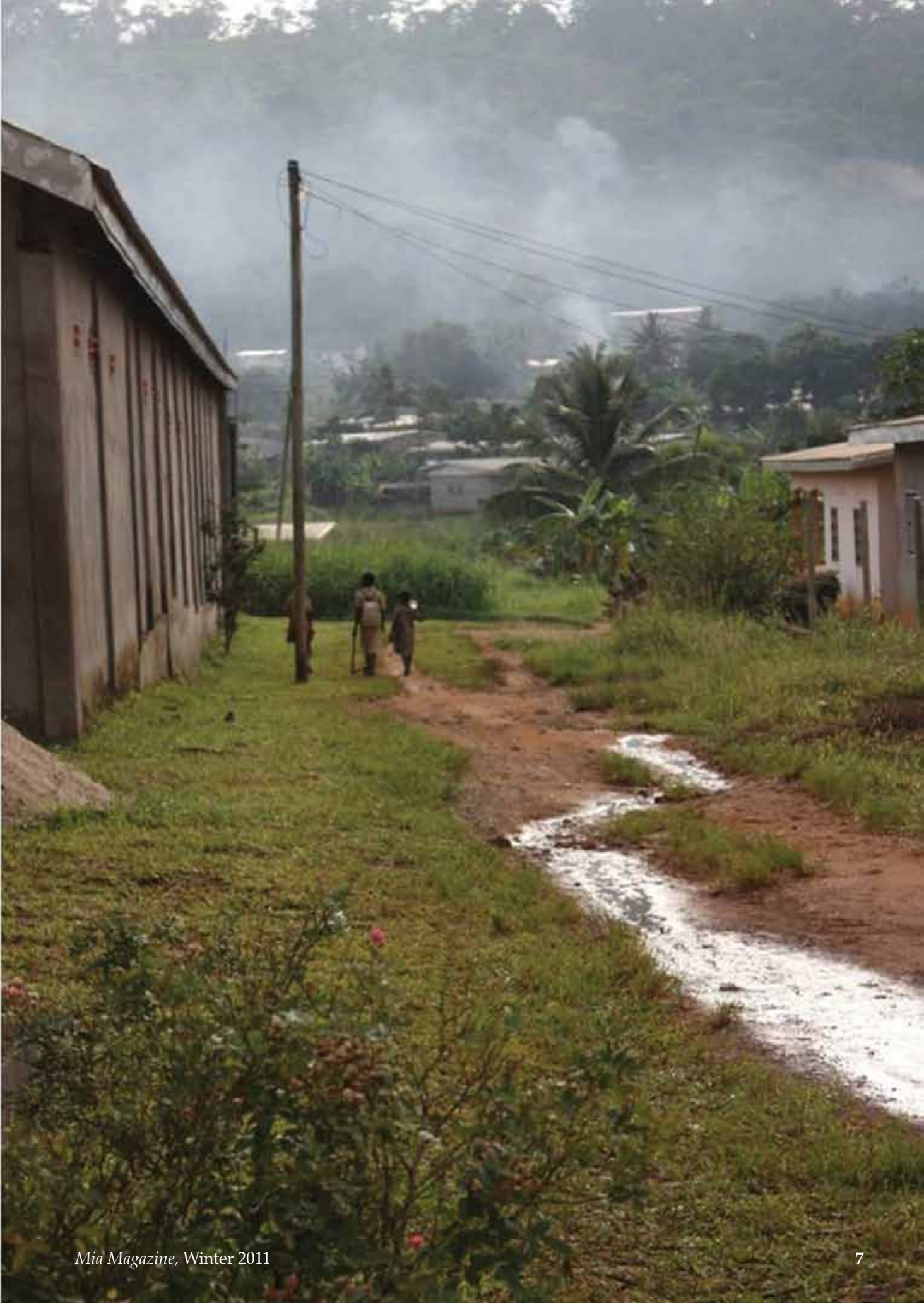


It is the month following my 36th birthday. I am in the village of Eseka in Cameroon, West Africa, standing in the community center made of cement and a corrugated metal roof, drenched in sweat. My clothes are glued to my body, my ankles are swollen to twice their normal size, and I am developing heat rash. I haven't had a shower in two days because there is no power in the village and the generator at the hotel is barely able to give us light, let alone enough juice to get the water pumped from the well all the way to the shower head. The toilets do not have seats.

The hotel room is sparse. There is a bed, a desk and a decrepit wooden chair. A tiny air conditioning unit is attached to the wall near the ceiling, but turning it on when relying on generator power is forbidden. On those occasions when there is electricity, the ancient AC groans and rattles with such volume I am afraid it will die right then and there. I teeter on top of the chair to stare at the unit, hazel eye to power button, accepting that I am weak and spoiled, but begging it to work anyway. Even for just five minutes. Pretty please?

Before arriving in Eseka, my idea of roughing it had been the Holiday Inn. At home I preferred to start my day with a Starbucks French vanilla non-fat two-Splenda no-foam latte. I really believed I was not a high maintenance person. I just thought I liked high maintenance drinks. I was wrong.

The community center is command central for our team of twelve church members from Texas. We swoop in on a Monday and set up a vision clinic in a couple of hours. Five thousand pairs of glasses, three laptops, one auto-refractor, and two eye charts are unloaded and organized. An office is set up in a storage closet where the eye doctor in our group will make diagnoses.



We garner curious stares from the locals and those who have walked for days to come to the clinic. Not only are we there to provide eyeglasses, but we have also brought malaria nets for distribution. Handing out the nets is our first order of business each day. The criteria seem simple enough. Those who are most vulnerable to malaria get a net: pregnant women, parents of small children, and the elderly.

A ten-dollar net can protect a family of four from an involuntary game of mosquito roulette. I am not prepared for the onslaught of people lining up for les moustiquaires or the fact that we simply don't have enough. How does one decide, of the hundreds of women and babies in line, who gets a net and who does not? Eight hundred families get malaria nets and a chance. I get a whole new perspective on four-dollar cups of coffee.

We work twelve to fourteen hours each day, finishing up by flashlight when the generator fails. Back at the hotel, I collapse in my bed, my body too exhausted to do anything but swat away the flies. My mind, on the other hand, is in hyper-drive until the Ambien forces it to close up shop.

On Day Four of the clinic I say to a distinguished older woman wearing a gold dress, "Avec moi, s'ils-vous plait" ("With me, please").

My French stinks. I escort Madame Gold Dress to a seat outside the doctor's office. Ten minutes later the verdict comes: she is impossibly nearsighted. With the help of an interpreter, we learn that she has lived her entire sixty-something years unable to see anything that isn't right in front of her face.

I take the paper the doctor has marked with four inventory numbers and go in search of the perfect pair of glasses for our new friend. Madame struggles to get the glasses over her ears, but her effort is worth it. Our effort is worth it.

Standing about eight feet away from her, I wave. Beaming, she waves back. No translation needed: she can see. I jump up and down; overcome with such excitement, I surprise even myself. In that moment, I forget the sweat, I forget the heat, and I forget the toilets without seats. I forget about Starbucks and my aching back and the bugs crawling all over the walls.

I zero in on Madame Gold Dress who can reflect on the blurry life she knew before, and for the first time, see clearly what lies ahead. She can appreciate the smallest of details and live unencumbered by distortion. And, with Madame's smile nudging me, so can I. *Mia* *Photos submitted.*



