



A Mixed Bag:

Growing up as an 'MK'

by Kim Plummer Krull

Where are you from? For most of us, that's a simple question. But not so for MKs — missionary kids — as Joel Symmank discovered in conversations with teens living, for the most part, in different countries from the one of their birth.

For these youngsters, home may be both the country where they now reside and the U.S., where most lived before entering the mission field. Some MKs also mention the country where their parents previously served.

"In the mission field, they're an American with different skin, hair, eyes, and language. In the U.S, they're a missionary kid who looks like an American but behaves a little differently," said Symmank, a children's program leader at the Grace Place Lutheran Wellness Ministries retreat for LCMS missionary families serving in Eurasia.

"Not being from one place — or even one country — has a set of both joys and challenges," Symmank said of the MKs.

The younger members from 23 missionary families serving in Eurasia were among those who took part in the retreat last August. It was presented by Grace Place, an LCMS recognized service organization dedicated to church worker health, with the help of a national LWML grant.

The families traveled from mission fields as diverse as the United Kingdom, Germany, Poland, and several predominantly Muslim countries. The program offered a rare opportunity for the families to gather for spiritual renewal and support on the island of Malta, near the rocky shores where the apostle Paul shipwrecked en route to Rome.

Joys and Challenges

On the joy side, Symmank noted a strong family dynamic among the missionaries and their offspring.

"There's a sense that 'my family is where I'm from,'" said Symmank, who headed up the program for youngsters ages 13 to 18. The older teens expressed an appreciation for their multicultural lives. "They're not from anywhere, but in a sense, they're from everywhere," Symmank said.

An MK's re-entry into American culture and education can be difficult; many have been home-schooled or attended international schools "and are really ahead academically," said Dr. John Eckrich, Grace Place founder and CEO. While a missionary kid may be out of step with U.S. cultural norms, "that actually might not be all bad, if you think about our culture."

Partners in Mission

Most of the children are bilingual, if not multilingual. When Joel's wife, Rachel, who led the youth program for ages 5 to 12, asked the youngsters to write in a journal, she was surprised when a boy asked if he could do so in German.

Until then, English was the only language Rachel had heard the MKs use. She discovered they each spoke as many as four more languages, including German, Russian, Italian, Chinese, and Kyrgyz [the language of Kyrgyzstan].

The children also were fluent in their knowledge of the Bible. "They were excited to be in Malta, where Paul had been," said Kathy Ludwig, a Grace Place leader and longtime LWML member from Hickory, North Carolina. "There was not much that even the 5- to 12-year-olds couldn't articulate about the Holy Scriptures. They were so sincere and loved to pray."

The youngsters saw themselves as more than MKs.

"I was struck by the way each indicated that being a missionary wasn't just their parents' thing," Joel said. "These teens consider themselves partners in the work of bringing the Gospel to their mission field."

Many missionaries grow up as missionary children. "It's critically important to include and support these young hearts and voices," Eckrich said. "They get the challenges but also the great opportunities. Not surprisingly, they're attracted to international life and service."

That's one reason Grace Place welcomes children to missionary retreats, including previous gatherings for families serving in Africa and Asia. A 2014 retreat, also made possible with the help of LWML grant support, is in the works for missionaries in Central and South America. **Q**

To learn more about Grace Place professional church worker wellness retreats (including for those serving in the U.S.) and wellness weekends for congregations, visit www.graceplacewellness.org or call 314-842-3077.

