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Week 35: Christmas Shoes and Smiles

Randy Robison and Sheila Walsh

Peter Mutabazi

RANDY: Welcome to *LIFE Today*. I'm Randy Robison. Sheila Walsh is with me.

SHEILA: Hey!

RANDY: We're glad that you are here. If you've been watching *Life Today* for long, you see that we love to work all around the world, and we especially like to bless children. Over the years, we have seen some great stories of children that come from dire situations to have a wonderful life.

Well, today's guest was not a part of any of *LIFE's* outreaches but was one of those children that we often see who came from just abject poverty. His story is such a beautiful God story of hope! We're excited that you're here. Peter, great to have you on *Life Today*.

PETER: Thanks Randy and thanks for having me here. It is a joy to be here.

RANDY: So take us back. You were born in Uganda in a very poor, desperate situation. Tell us a little bit about where you came from.

PETER: So I was born in Uganda to the poor of the poorest. It's hard to explain to Americans sometimes what poverty is but think about you're a mom who can't feed your child for days to come. Think as a kid you never had water, that you had to walk miles and miles just to get clean water. Think about you didn't have extra clothes to wear. That was me, I grew up among the poor of the poorest. So I grew up in a place where no one ever told me to be hopeful. As I said it is hard when a mom can't give you a meal, how

does she tell you you'll make it? I grew up in a place where schooling wasn't available for us. How do they tell you to dream when they can't send you to school? And that really was my life. That all I knew was real poverty, and hopelessness is all I saw every morning, before I went to bed, and when I woke up. It was an everyday thing. So that was my background.

SHEILA: I mean this is a great book! I read it cover to cover. Amazing, amazing story. One of the things I found heartbreaking is how cruel your father was with you. What are your memories of your early life with your father?

PETER: Well, hard memories, you know. Hard to sometimes go back. But I think for me, the hard part was that the one person that should protect you was the worst person in your life. For me, poverty was one side, but I also had a mean dad. If poverty didn't take me, I was worried that my dad would take my own life. I think as a kid of four or five, to watch the abuse towards me and also towards my mom. I never had one kind word from my dad for as long as I can remember. No Peter, hey, you're a good kid! Oh Peter, good work! I think all I had was, "You'll never amount to anything. I wish you were never born. You'll never be anything in my life."

So you grow up hearing that, it makes you not just miserable but also hopeless in some way. He is someone who should encourage me and show me the future but at the same time, he is my worst enemy. So the physical abuse and the verbal abuse were really difficult, especially towards me and towards my mom as well. So that's the earliest that I can remember. My childhood was miserable. That we would never eat in front of my dad. We had to eat before he came, before -- if he came before a meal, that meal went through the window. So it was just miserable in every shape that you can think and that became my day-to-day life.

RANDY: How old were you when you were on the streets and trying to help people with their groceries and things like that just to get a bite to eat? How old was that?

PETER: I was ten.

RANDY: Okay. I'm just reading through your book as well. You're ten years old and you're having to kind of con your way, sometimes, to try and get some food. And that's when a man came into your life that actually saw you.

PETER: Correct.

RANDY: Asks your name -- tell us a little bit about that time because it was a real transformational time for you.

PETER: Right. At the age of four, I began to realize, yes, poverty and mean dad. At the age of ten, I thought, rather than letting my dad take my own life I'm going to just run away and let someone else do it. But also, I think I didn't want to give him the joy of abusing me in some way. I'd never been 20 miles away from my village and I just got on the bus, and I went 500 kilometers.

SHEILA: And you're ten years old. You're just a wee boy.

PETER: Absolutely. I ended up in Kampala. It is not like I was looking for hope. I think for me if life was to end, I'd rather be somewhere else by someone else that I didn't know. Finally, I made it to Kampala. As soon as I got there, I knew I had one choice and that one choice was to be a street kid. You know as street kids, life was miserable. I think we're treated more like stray animals. We ate in the garbage. I smelt like one. I was a thief every day.

So life was just miserable in every way, shape, and form. That all I heard was, "You are garbage." But I believed it because I lived in it. I scavenged like dogs, like anyone else, so I believed that. So in some way, I was just hopeless as a kid. And as kids, we would always help. It was easy to steal while you were helping. So if someone buys -- I carry them, take them from one end to the other, and then pick up one. And then the other, the

other street kid will do the same. At the end of the day, we would have enough food to eat.

So this day, I saw one gentleman who was wearing khakis and glasses. I said, "That's my target." So as soon as I walked towards him, I wanted to help.

He said, "Hey! What's your name?"

I mean that rattled me, so I stopped. I said, "Why would you want to know my name?"

I'd lived on the streets for four and a half years and no one had ever addressed me or asked me my name.

And this gentleman says, "What's your name?"

I was like, "My name is Peter." And before I could take the food, he gave me something to eat and he left. I saw him the next week, he did the same. In the fourth week, I kind of knew. He comes every Monday between five and seven, so I've got my meal!

So he fed me for one year and a half, and finally one day he said, "Hey, Peter! Would you love to go to school?"

I said, "Wait? Me? Of course no!"

To you all who are listening, especially Americans, to say to a street kid would you like to go to school is like me telling you two, would you like to go to the moon? Like people are going to the moon, would you like to go? It is impossible. It is a far-fetched dream as well.

So that's how I felt when he said, "Would you love to go to school?" I was like, "Me?" But I think with the kindness he'd shown me for a year and a half, I began to believe him.

I began to say, this man, if he can feed me, maybe he wants to send me to school.

But I also think he saw the best in me at my lowest. That he saw a kid that is loved by God, he saw a kid that had potential. I think he said, "I want to invest in this kid." And truly, that's really what changed my life. That was why I was like, okay, I'm going to go to school because he believes in me. And that truly changed my life forever.

RANDY: I didn't get to this part in the book, whatever happened to him?

PETER: Well, he is still my family. Everyone knows him as my dad because not only did he send me to school but after a few months he said, "Hey, would you like to be part of our family?"

So for the first time, I began to see a family. I think my first day in the house they were all sitting around the table. For me, I said, "I'm going to sit by the exit door." Because I was looking for an exit. I was waiting for something bad to happen because that's what I saw in my family.

But I saw how he loved his family. How they prayed and how they sat around the table. And the cool thing he said, he said, "Peter, here is a seat for you." I think for the first time I felt, oh, I can sit by the table? And truly that changed my life. Since then, they've been family to me to this day.

SHEILA: This thing that is amazing to me about your story, Peter is that sometimes when somebody has been rescued from a hard situation, they then move on and want to forget about that. You have not done that. Your life is now about -- I mean about other people. How many children have you fostered?

PETER: Twenty-four.

SHEILA: Twenty-four! And you adopted --

PETER: One, and I'm in the process of adopting three more.

SHEILA: Oh, my gosh! When did faith become real for you? And was it the slow kindness of this man that helped you to believe that God saw you?

PETER: Absolutely. I think the way he was kind to me, he never shared with me the gospel but he lived it. He was kind to me. He never called me the other names everyone called me. He invited me into a place nobody invited me. He saw the best in me when nobody saw that in me, even myself, I didn't see potential but yet he could see it. So I think his kindness is what made me -- I want to be like this man! But at the same time, I got to know that he loves the Lord and I think that began a change for me.

But I didn't become a Christian right away. I think the anger and hatred towards my dad I was like, this Christian thing I don't like it because it is telling me to forgive my dad, and I think I'm not ready to forgive my dad. Now I was 18-19, I wanted to go home and break my dad's leg and say, "Dad, my time to pay back." I think in my head that's what I wanted.

But one day, I think he showed me the life of Joseph. He said, "Peter, remember when Joseph saw his brothers? Remember when the brothers said, 'Oh, he's going to kill us.' But what did he say? He said, 'What you meant for evil, God used for good to save lives.'" I think that changed my life to really want to be a Christian.

Also, I think I had moved on and done well in life that I didn't want my dad's anger and what I felt in some way to ruin my future; that I needed to know Christ my Lord and Savior, and as someone who could take that away from me so I can focus on what I can be as a dad.

So when I came to the United States, I struggled. For the first time, in the U.S. I struggled with my faith. I think for me seeing how much food was thrown away and knowing that

I'd grown up in a place where I could never have a meal a day. And I began to ask myself, does God love us the same way? I think with time, I realized that I was blessed as well, that I was fortunate. Luke 12:48: To whom much is given much is required. That he had given me a family I didn't have. He'd given me a place to be that I didn't have. He had taken me to school. Not only did I go to school at the university in Uganda, but I had also gone to school in England and that's how I had come to the United States.

So for me, I felt man, I have so much to give! And that's when I decided that I wanted to be a foster dad. Because he'd done that for me and I wanted to do the same for others, especially kids who come from a place of hardship. I was one of those kids, yet he saw the best in me, that it was my time to also see the kids in the best way possible. And bless them.

SHEILA: I went on to your website because your book is called *Now I'm Known*. I went onto your website, and I saw this cool thing where you have this little stuffed animal called *Simba* modeled after one of your dogs. So I did this thing where you get to pay like \$50 or something, and then I will get one Simba and one will be given to a foster child. What's special about that toy?

PETER: Well, this is what's special about this toy. When this man took me in, he used words of affirmation to help me overcome my abuse. I never felt I was special but yet he would say, "Peter, you are special." I never felt like I belonged, he would say, "Peter, you belong." I never felt I was a gift or chosen but he would use those words of affirmation that truly helped me in some way remove the scale of abuse, remove the scale of shame. Now I began to see myself like you know what? If he says I'm special maybe I'm special. Then I began to do well in school. I think as soon as I did well, I thought, if one day I ever become a parent, I'm also going to use words of affirmation to encourage my kids.

So as soon as I became a foster dad, I wrote three things, three little pieces of paper on the steering wheel with both -- so when I'm driving, I can always remember to tell my kid, "You're special! You're kind. You belong!" Also in my closet, because sometimes I

want to give up. But to go back and say, Peter, you can do this because you belong, because you're chosen to be this dad. And so I needed something to help me. And once we got the dogs, well, I thought, wait a minute, sometimes my kids don't want to talk to dad. When they're angry they want to go to their rooms and hide but they always take their dog. But what if I write the words of affirmation on a piece of a bandana and then naturally, their dogs will always have them. And it worked!

[Laughter]

SHEILA: So great! I can't wait.

PETER: So when people would come and visit, they'd say, "Man, we love that! Well, we thought though, wait a minute, what if we created, we duplicated our dog Simba and write those words of affirmation? Because I saw how they were helping my kids so now we can give them to kids in the hospital, and also kids in foster care. So that's the idea of truly, in some way, a little glimpse of hope for others that need it the most. When you feel unwanted and have this little teddy Bear that says, "You are chosen; you are a gift to us" I think it is a way to encourage others that they are special. That's why we have that Simba.

SHEILA: I love it!

RANDY: Yeah! We're kind of jumping through highlights of your life and it is unfair because you have to read the book. We're going to tell you how you can get the book in just a minute. But I have a couple of questions for you, Peter. First of all, what do you say to the children that you run across that you may see a little bit of yourself in just in the sense that they don't know their own value? They don't see any future for them. What are the words that you say to them to convey what God wants them to hear?

PETER: I think writing the book was the best way for me to -- my kids love to read. I could not tell them the details of my life, so I thought, writing a book that someone made

me known, that someone saw the best in me. He saw a kid that was troubled. But he never saw that. He saw a kid with potential. So for me, I wanted my kids to read through the book and see if Dad can come from this far and overcome this, I can do it as well. And I wanted to be honest about my life.

When my kids steal something, I'm like yeah, I was a thief. I can be honest about that. But I said, "Well because someone came into my life and helped me, I would have gone to jail. That would have taken away the opportunity I could be, I stopped. And I know you can do it as well. I can help you as a dad that you overcome that because I want you to be the best you can be. Rather than focus on the behavior, look to where they can be by being honest about my journey as well.

RANDY: I love it. The second question I have is for anyone who may be in the position that James that you know, the guy, the man you call your dad now, was in. Which was we have children whether they're right in front of us, in our community, or maybe halfway around the world that we can impact with those acts of kindness, with those words of affirmation. I think sometimes we don't understand how powerful that is. What do you say to those people that reach out to help that child that seems to have no hope?

PETER: Absolutely. I think we all want to help. But we think of, maybe the house. I don't have the house. Or until I have this much money... we'll never earn what we need. But I think also I found out kids aren't looking for the best home you can find. Our kids didn't care if we were struggling, out looking for the best shoe, they were looking for someone to come alongside and say, if it is hard today, and for you to say, it is going to be okay.

We can take a little piece, that's why we created the -- in the book. Sometimes just a little -- might help that family or that kid feeling I am unworthy. I'm not part of God's special people -- that we can do it. And I know we are not all called to be foster parents, but I think we can help one another.

I love the African saying, "It takes a village to raise a child." It truly takes a village. As a parent, I have people who take me for coffee and that's all I need to overcome or to be there for my kids. I've got two teenagers, some of my friends come and take them to play video games and that's all they want. My little girl, sometimes someone comes and takes her to -- and take her in a place where she feels she is loved. It is not that we all can do one thing, but I think a little along the way we do something small we get to impact the child.

SHEILA: That's something that we care about a lot. In fact, do you know that Peter was 16 before he got his first pair of shoes? And he is not alone. There are so many children around the world who have never worn a pair of shoes. But we can change that. So we're going to tell you how to get a hold of Peter's book because it is great! Also, go and get the plushy toy because it is amazing!

But first of all, we'd like you to watch this because you and I can be part of this community that changes the world in Jesus' name. Watch this.

On the mission field

Announcer: All around the world children face severe problems like starvation, filthy drinking water, and sexual predation. But where heartache abounds, so do opportunities to put God's love into action.

Recently you may have helped us seize these opportunities by providing a child with a daily bowl of food, rescuing an at-risk girl from human traffickers or drilling a clean water well for a needy village.

This coming Christmas, we have an opportunity to bless many of these same children with a special gift that they will cherish and that will protect their very lives.

BETTY: This is Berta, and we want to be able to get her children some shoes. It's not just a matter of giving them something for their feet, it's very important, but the main thing is they get diseases walking around here barefoot and their little old feet just get tortured.

TAMMY: I guess you don't really think about if she's walking around without a pair of shoes how it affects her feet. If her foot gets cut and she is stepping even in contaminated water, how that could affect her feet -- infect her feet.

SHEILA: This really is a gift of life as much as anything else. So let's try these, buddy. Let's see how they go. This so reminds me of like Christmas morning in our house. They're like showing each other their shoes. They're excited! Because they look so cool. Something as simple as a pair of shoes can really change a child's life.

ANNOUNCER: Help make this Christmas one these children will never forget. Help us provide Christmas Shoes and Smiles.

SHEILA: Because of your gift, we're able to put shoes on her feet. Now she'll be able to run around and be safe!

[Laughter]

End of video

In the studio

SHEILA: Peter, what difference did it make in your life when you got a pair of shoes?

PETER: When I got a pair of shoes! First of all, there were places I was afraid to go. There were places I felt I was last because I didn't have a pair of shoes. You know, you go to school and everyone wears shoes and you don't have shoes, you don't feel you belong. But yet, a small gesture, a small thing like a shoe on how we give someone dignity but also the pride to feel they belong. So it is not just a shoe, it is more than that.

That gives a little kid to think beyond a shoe but how far they can go, and who can feel they're a part of it.

SHEILA: And maybe you're thinking, well, isn't it a little early to be talking about Christmas? But we do that very specifically each year because we want to get in all the help that we need to be able. Because our commitment for this Christmas is to provide 150,000 pairs of shoes to children who have never had a pair of shoes in their life. As Peter said, dignity, hope, a sense that you belong. And in so many of the places that Randy and I have been it is a health issue too. Your feet are cut and you pick up disease and it ruins everything.

It's not a lot we're asking, but can you imagine how great this Christmas would be if suddenly, it wasn't about what we got, it's about we have already received the greatest gift of all who is Jesus and because of that, we can now give to other children the gift that might even save their lives. We can do this!

RANDY: And I'm going to hold this up because over the last 15 years you, the viewers, the supporters of *LIFE Outreach International* have given away over two and a half million pairs of shoes just like that. That's two and a half million children who have gotten, many of them for the first time, a pair of shoes that they own. Like you said, there is a health component to this that will protect them from certain things. But as Peter said, there is also a dignity component to this.

And the other part is you in reaching out and saying, you know, it may be a huge thing to you, may seem like a small thing to us but this is a gift, and we give it in the name of Jesus Christ. And we put smiles on their faces just with the shoes. And of course, with the corrective surgeries, we give many children the ability to smile; children who have not been able to do many of the things that children need to like nurse or eat properly or breathe properly.

So we're changing children's lives with your support through some wonderful, wonderful

things. And this Christmas is just a special one. So we invite you in. On the surgeries, just to give you an idea, they're an average of \$500 apiece. Many of you can provide a surgery, or two or three or four, and I would ask you to just consider doing that today. The shoes themselves are very economical, \$36 will provide ten pairs of shoes. That's ten children that will get shoes for a gift of \$36. Maybe you can give \$72 and that will provide 20 pairs of shoes for 20 children. Whatever you can do. I ask you to consider it. Let's make this Christmas very special for some children around the world. We've done it in the past and we can do it again this year with your support. So go online or go to the phones right now. Make the best gift you can and let's give away more shoes and more smiles.

Begin video clip

ANNOUNCER: Poverty is a killer and because of it, children needlessly suffer, not only from a lack of food and clean water but also from a lack of things we often take for granted like a simple pair of shoes. Far too many children living in extreme poverty have never owned a new pair of shoes. And while that may seem minor in light of all their needs, walking with bare feet puts them at risk of life-threatening infections and diseases that could lead to crippling consequences -- and even death.

By responding today, you will help secure and make ready 150,000 pairs of Christmas shoes to be shipped and delivered to children around the world just in time for the holidays. Your gift of \$36 will help provide ten pairs of shoes. A gift of \$72 will help provide 20 pairs. And a gift of \$180 will help provide 50 pairs of Christmas shoes for children in need.

As a thank you for your gift of support, be sure to request this beautiful crafted red crystal shoe ornament, a treasure to display each Christmas. With your gift of \$100 or more, you may request this keepsake boxed set featuring four of *LIFE's* crystal Christmas shoe ornaments.

Finally, please consider a gift of \$1,000 or more, to help provide over 275 pairs of shoes, or two children with corrective cleft lip or palate surgeries. And you may request a beautiful bronze sculpture, "Let the Children Come!" Please call, write, or make your gift online today.

End of video

In the studio

RANDY: I hope you are going on online or going to the phone right now and making the best gift you can. And we can give away, hit our goal on the shoes and the smiles. Now, Peter, you've got some shoes, they're a little more expensive than these. Show us your shoes.

PETER: Yes! So as you say, it is amazing what a shoe will change a child. I never had a pair of shoes until I was 16 years old, and my first pair of shoes was Converse. And I can remember it because it helped me to go to school. I had lost all of my toes, all my nails because I had to walk miles and miles without a shoe. And sometimes, if you have a toe and it is bleeding that means you can't get water for your family, that means you cannot go to school. So it is amazing how a simple shoe will change a life. For me, this was my first pair of shoes, and they changed my life forever. I felt like I could go to school and feel like I'm part of it.

So what are you doing? I can tell you and I can promise you, you *are* changing lives. So this Christmas, give those kids smiles like I had. I cried for a few days because I had never had a pair of shoes. And man, to be able to walk in that school feeling it's going to be okay because I was wearing a pair of shoes is amazing. So what you're doing, you're going to change lives for sure.

SHEILA: Fantastic! And for any gift at all, please request your copy of Peter's book,

Now I am Known. Thank you so much for sharing your story. It was powerful!

PETER: Well, thank you! That's why I'm writing my book so you can see a little bit more details of what my life was as a child and how I overcame all that to be who I am, especially as a foster dad.

SHEILA: And he is about to foster two more children! So pray for Peter! We love you. Thanks so much for being with us and we'll see you next time on *Life Today*!