

Born without lower legs, Congolese soccer player finds a home at Blackhawk

By Lauren Kirschman

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CHIPPEWA TWP. -- There was something about the orphan's smile Michelle Hilton just couldn't forget.

Maybe it was how wide and how inviting the expression looked on his face. Maybe it was that he managed to grin even with bandages still wrapped around his legs from surgery.

He deserved an opportunity. That's what the smile said. He deserved a chance.

That smile hasn't gone anywhere in five years. It could be seen as Emmanuel — now Emmanuel Hilton — made his way across the Blackhawk High School parking lot last week with a slight limp. It grew broader as he called out a greeting to coach Bryan Vitali, lingered still as he sat down on a bench to remove his prosthetic legs to join his team at a soccer practice that began 15 minutes before. He prefers to play without them. He moves better that way.

That smile, as bright and unabashed as his personality, was what made Michelle Hilton take pause as she read through a national church newsletter almost five years ago. Back then, Emmanuel was a photograph on a page, an orphan born without lower legs in the Democratic Republic of Congo who just had undergone an operation to help fit him for prosthetics.

Michelle read the entire story, but what kept her coming back were the pictures of the young boy, legs in bandages, beaming at the camera. That boy, the one who could find such joy in hardship, needed some good fortune and a little hope. Michelle and her husband, the Rev. Gary Hilton, decided to give him both.

It took four years to bring him to their home, so long that Michelle and Gary started to wonder if the child in the pictures was meant to be theirs after all. It was enough time for a boy to grow up, to nearly become a man, by the time he got to that parking lot, to Blackhawk, to soccer practice.

And before any of it, before Emmanuel could take the field for the junior varsity team or to carve out a few minutes to humor a youth soccer team by playing goalie, there was a mother's decision, a baby left on a dark road in the middle of the night.

'She just threw me away'

From 1996 to 2003, Congo was ravaged by the First and Second Congo Wars, sometimes known as the African World War. It was the deadliest conflict since World War II and resulted in the deaths of more than 5 million people from a combination of injury, disease and famine.

Fighting continues today in some parts of the country, and, in many cases, children pay the heaviest price. Congo has a population of 68 million, with more than 5 million orphans among them.

Emmanuel was one of those children. His sister, Esther, now 9, was, too.

Emmanuel was abandoned as a newborn. His mother took her first look at him — a child born without lower legs and missing three fingers on his left hand — and decided she couldn't care for him, or she didn't want him, or both. She wrapped him in a blanket, leaving him behind on a dirt road in the cover of darkness.

"She just threw me away," Emmanuel said. "She didn't like me because I was handicapped." Babies left behind during the day are much more likely to be found. At night, it's different. At night, the town sleeps, the darkness masks any obstacles. That's what his mother was counting on. "She thought somebody would come and hit me," Emmanuel said, "and my story would be done."

But his story wasn't done. It was just beginning.

Nobody hit him. Instead, a woman, out for a walk late at night, heard his cries. She lifted him into her arms, quieted him and took him home. When she stopped, she didn't know who the baby was, only that he needed her help. It wasn't until later that she realized the child was her grandson. Emmanuel grew up calling her "mom."

When he was older, his grandmother told him the truth: She was really his grandmother, and his mother had left him behind.

As Emmanuel talked about a past he doesn't remember, he remained on the bench next to the soccer field in the mid-September sunshine, wrapping pads about his knees so that he could

participate in practice. His prosthetics sat beside him, the pants he wore to school pooled at the ankles. Every so often, he reached over to steady them as they tipped. Sometimes they fall over at home and scare the dog, an anecdote that made him laugh as he shared it. Most things do. There was no hesitance to open up about his history. He doesn't carry that weight around, not anymore.

That was his life then, but this is Emmanuel now: Jokingly urging the starting junior varsity goalkeeper to run off the field at halftime of a game, lifting his teammates up in his arms until they all crash onto the grass, laying there until the break is over, the laughter audible from several feet away. He has a family, plenty of food to eat, a comfortable place to sleep. He attends school and plays on a soccer team and argues with Gary about whether they should watch soccer or football on television. There was a time when Emmanuel felt like crying when someone asked his story. He doesn't now.

"When I grew up, I said I will quit crying," he said. "I already grew up. There's no point. There's nothing to do (about it)."

'You can't grasp the meaning of what it's really like'

Music surrounded Christina Cavener and her friend Brittany Burrows when they first walked into the Methodist orphanage Jamaa Letu in 2008. The two were on a mission trip to Congo, and when they arrived, the children played excitedly on pots and pans as a greeting. Emmanuel was among them.

Cavener was immediately drawn to Emmanuel. His joy and exuberance were captivating. But what really grabbed her was his answer at a Bible study, after she and Burrows asked the children for something they wanted from God. All had trouble coming up with an answer; they were just grateful to be together at the orphanage. Emmanuel, though, thought of one thing: He wanted to walk one day.

"That got Brittany and I thinking about what we could do," Cavener said. "The more time we spent with him, the more we fell in love with his strength. He had such a hard life and such a difficult journey, but he was able to be joyous amidst all of that and despite that."

Emmanuel first arrived at the orphanage in 2006 after he had trouble finding a school. Most wouldn't take him or couldn't accommodate him. So, for 12 or 13 years, he just didn't attend. The orphanage gave him the opportunity to learn.

He didn't know it then, but his journey to America started when he met Cavaner and Burrows. They dedicated themselves to helping him, raising funds to get him prosthetics and preparation surgery. A chance encounter with a doctor outside a church led them to a hospital that could handle the surgery. They bought him a specially made bicycle to help him get around.

The women spent about 10 months in the Congo and saw Emmanuel through his surgery before returning to Texas at Grace United Methodist Church near Dallas, where Cavaner began working as a youth minister. While back in the United States, they researched better prosthetic options for Emmanuel, eventually finding an organization that helped them build replacement prosthetics on-site in the Congo when they returned in 2011.

A few months after Cavaner started at Grace UMC, she was asked to write about her time in Congo and Emmanuel for the United Methodist Reporter. The post-operation pictures of Emmanuel appeared with the story, a copy of which still rests on the Hiltons' television stand. It's the reason she and Gary, a broad-shouldered and soft-spoken pastor at Chippewa United Methodist Church, started the process to bring him home.

Cavaner cried when she received the email from Michelle that read she and Gary wanted to adopt Emmanuel. She even admitted to dancing. But she was worried, too. Cavaner had grown attached to Emmanuel, protective even. She wanted to make sure he was going to a good home. More email exchanges with the Hiltons eased her nerves.

The Hiltons adopted Esther first, in 2010. They have two older, biological children, ages 23 and 19, so they call Esther and Emmanuel their second round of kids. It took just six months to bring Esther home. With Emmanuel, it took years. The Congo had closed down adoptions to the United States, so even though it had gone through and Emmanuel had their last name, he couldn't leave the country.

During the long delay, Gary and Michelle started making contingency plans to send Emmanuel money every month for schooling and other needs, knowing that if they couldn't bring him to the United States, he would have no hope. Due to a lack of social and medical programs, he would be forced to live on the streets once he left the orphanage.

Cavener and Burrows, with the help of people across the country associated with Our Family Africa — one of the few organizations dedicated to helping children in Congo — worked to raise awareness and funds for the Hiltons.

And, eventually, the phone rang. Emmanuel was allowed to leave as long as his doctor escorted him. Gary and Michelle had never met him, had never even talked to him, but he would be at their home in 10 days.

“That was horrible,” Cavaner said of the four-year delay. “The worst part for me in that whole waiting process. It was really hard to communicate with Emmanuel because he didn’t have Internet and people in his life change all the time as far as who works at the orphanage. I was thinking he probably thinks that we just forgot about him and we don’t care anymore after telling him he was adopted.”

There are other children, children who have been adopted by families but can’t leave the Congo. Emmanuel was one of the lucky ones, and not just because he was permitted to go to his new home. His sister was either 4 or 6 years old when she was adopted in 2010; nobody knows for sure. Esther weighed 26 pounds.

“Her orphanage was just an awful place,” Gary said. “Emmanuel came from a place that was more rural. He had a better orphanage and things. He was well taken care of. We were kind of used to just having kids that have overcome.”

When Michelle traveled to Congo to bring Esther home, she was stunned by what she saw: The poverty, the amount of people living on the street. Children were starving. She watched too many of them die. After she returned, Michelle struggled with post-traumatic stress.

“You hear about it and you see stuff on TV, but until you see it in person, you really can’t grasp the meaning of what it’s really like,” she said. “Our hearts were kind of open to that even when I saw Emmanuel’s picture. I knew if we have the means to help somebody else, how can we not?”

“You don’t have to be rich. We don’t have a lot of extra money, but we had an extra room and we raised children. We had the means to do it.”

‘Let’s just throw everything at him’

Michelle and Gary are unassuming, as quietly kind as their actions indicate. They can only shake their heads and chuckle at the teenage boy they brought home, who dove head first — literally — into learning how to swim and leads cheers in front of the crowd at Blackhawk football games. Emmanuel is every bit as effervescent as his parents are good-natured yet reserved. He has been since he stepped into their home for the first time.

“He’s old enough that he’s his own person,” Michelle said.

She was one to push Gary to adopt Esther, placing her picture on the nightstand so that the girl’s intense stare greeted him every morning.

They told stories through their laughter — often finishing each other’s sentences — about how Emmanuel managed to sell all of his cookies for a fundraiser in one day (“I have great news!” Emmanuel announced to potential customers. “Cookies, look at these!”), about how he thought high school wrestling — a sport he plans to attempt this winter — was more WWE than Olympics.

At a family dinner soon after he arrived, the Hiltons’ oldest son, Max, tried to take Emmanuel’s plate to the sink. Emmanuel stopped him, walking the plate over himself. “Max, Max, Max,” he said. “God gave me two strong hands to do his work.”

That’s the moment the Hiltons understood. The boy they adopted was just like any other teenager, one who hates to do homework and would rather play video games than clean his room. Despite that, he doesn’t put limitations on himself, so his parents haven’t, either.

“Let’s just throw everything at him,” Gary remembered thinking, “and see where he can go from here.”

Emmanuel went straight toward soccer, which wasn’t surprising. He played in Congo. Not on an official team, but pick-up games with other children in the orphanage. That’s all they did. Emmanuel moved the ball forward by bouncing it from hand to hand, a skill he still showcases during practices and before games.

“I loved soccer,” Emmanuel said. “I grew up with so much soccer. In Africa, nobody knows about football and baseball. They know some, but they don’t have a team. I just grew up with soccer. I watch, every single day, soccer on my TV.”

When Emmanuel started school at Blackhawk and discovered there was an actual team, he wanted to be a part of it. He went to athletic director Jack Fullen and then to Vitali, announcing his intent to play.

“He said he played goalie,” Vitali said. “I’m thinking, ‘How does a kid with no legs play goalie?’ But he’s in there, he’s making saves. ... It was a shock. I had no expectations whatsoever, and he’s just been a pleasure.”

Emmanuel is part of a four-goalie rotation for the junior varsity team. At practice, he takes turns during drills with the varsity goalkeeper. He doesn’t wear his prosthetics, opting to walk on his pad-protected knees, using his arms when he needs extra speed.

He checked into the game with 15 minutes left in the JV team’s win over Hopewell High School. The ball came his way just once, and he used his arms to bound to it, swiping it toward a member of his team with one hand. The rest of the time, he called encouragement to his teammates at the other end of the field. Hardly a moment went by without the sound of Emmanuel’s voice.

When the final buzzer sounded, marking another win for the Cougars, two teammates immediately ran over to him. Emmanuel wrapped his arms around their shoulders and they lifted him up, carrying him off the field to Blackhawk’s bench.

“He’s always in a good mood,” said senior Damien Palaich during a break in practice last week. “Always smiling, always happy. No matter what we do, I’ve never seen him in a bad mood, never seen him yell, never seen him angry. He’s got more will to fight than anyone. He always keeps us fighting, always keeps our heads up.”

‘I feel like I am the same’

When Emmanuel is on the soccer field, he doesn’t see himself as disabled. He knows the other players can’t view him as different, either. That might be the best part. Whether he has legs or not, he can still stop them from scoring.

“I don’t feel like I’m missing legs,” Emmanuel said. “I feel like I am the same.”

“It’s just like amazing that he has the attitude that he does,” Vitali said. “I’d be devastated if that was me. I would probably shut down and quit. He’s just such an inspiration to our team. It’s really cool to

have him a part of the team. It's almost like a rallying cry for these guys. It's just like, look at Emmanuel, look what he brings to the table everyday."

During the 10 days between when the Hiltons found out Emmanuel was coming and his arrival, they hastily prepared. They bought a van, and Gary built an addition to the stairs to help him get to the second floor. It turned out he didn't need any of it. Emmanuel walked up the stairs without his prosthetics. Gary tore down everything the next week.

With Emmanuel, life has been one lesson in adaptability after another. He looks at what everyone else is doing, then he figures out how to do it. It's not like raising a kid from infancy or even childhood, the Hiltons said. It's something new.

That's because Emmanuel came into the Hiltons' home at the same time he's preparing to leave it. "A crash course in how to live," Michelle said.

As for the future, Emmanuel isn't sure what it holds. He's gone through all sorts of goals: Doctor, pastor, teacher, coach. Next week, it might be something completely different. And now, there's nothing holding him back from any of it.

At least, not that he can see.

"He really taught me what it means to truly thankful for life," Cavaner said, "Just to have to walked with him at all in any part of this journey was a blessing. I'm just grateful he can be in a place where he's really loved.

"I'm really grateful that he gets to part of family that loves him. There's not really another feeling like that."