

They Call Her “Mama Sue”

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An unassuming dirt road in Entebbe, Uganda leads to a modern glass-and-cement warehouse where hope – in the form of emergency food relief – is being packaged.

In the middle of this warehouse stands a 60-year-old white American woman named Sue. She wears a dark t-shirt and sports short gray hair and a bright smile. Sue Kanney is from Monclova, Ohio, and this is only the second time she’s ever been outside of the United States.

The youngest of six children, Sue grew up on a farm raising pigs and growing wheat, soybeans and corn. She was daddy’s little girl and later helped him raise horses.

In 1979, she married the love of her life. Sue and Ed raised two sons together – John and Jim – in Ohio. The family was bound together by love and care.

“Mom would make chicken noodle soup and she’d doctor it up a little bit,” recalls John, who now lives in Springfield, Illinois. “We may not have had the biggest house and all the material things in life, but

we had the home environment and the family environment.”

In the midst of raising two children, the Kanneys also built a wedding photography business. For 28 years, that photography studio was their third child. But when Ed was diagnosed with cancer in 2012, the pair scaled back the business.

During this difficult time, Sue began working part-time for SkyLIFE, an Ohio-based company that works to improve humanitarian assistance through innovative aerial delivery techniques. When Ed passed away in April 2014, the SkyLIFE family was there for her, and eventually her relationship with the company would take her on a whole new route in life – literally.

“What started out as a folly has become a mission for me,” Sue says. “My 98-year-old mother was suffering from colon cancer... She told me, ‘Sue, go and do something important.’”

Two years ago SkyLIFE approached Sue with a life-changing opportunity: To work on their behalf in Juba, South Sudan. At the time, [South Sudan](#) was in the middle of a civil war that continues today and has displaced millions of people.

When she brought the idea to her sons and extended family, they were taken aback, but

encouraged her to go. They knew their mother's first-ever trip overseas would mark the beginning of the next chapter of her life.

“They know their mother is a strong person, but since their dad died, they’ve been very protective of me,” says Sue. “I was very proud of their reaction.”

“God knocked, and she answered it,” says John. “It was a moment where you realized that things are going to be okay. Life goes on. We lost my dad, but there’s a lot of other people out there that still have things a lot worse. It was an opportunity for her to get a little something in return for giving.”

Sue traveled to Juba in April 2016, a few weeks before her older son's wedding and almost exactly two years since her husband had passed. Sue spent more than three months in South Sudan, where she helped produce SkyLIFE's innovative, lifesaving boxes. These packages, engineered with special plastic tubing and webbed material, are filled with fortified vegetable oil from the World Food Programme (WFP) before being loaded onto the back of a plane and safely airdropped to families in need in South Sudan.

After her work in South Sudan, she spent the summer of 2016 in the U.S. before traveling this time to Uganda, where she has spent the last six months.

For a self-described conservative woman from the Midwest, the experience has been tremendous.

Sue has formed lifelong bonds with her warehouse coworkers, from sharing handfuls of soybeans to visiting their homes and exchanging gifts. On a recent trip back to the States, John says she kept receiving text message updates from her new friends.

“Their nickname for her in Uganda is Mama Sue,” he says with a chuckle. “They would give what little they have off their backs for her, and she’s taken that and reciprocated it and would do anything for them.”

Sue attends Sunday mass every week, and she’s loved being a part of the packed house at the local Catholic church in Entebbe. People of all ages attend, perform consecration and give the handshake of peace to their neighbors. On Palm Sunday, she brought her palm frond to church, but instead of simply placing it on the seat behind her, she waved it in the air with everyone while singing hymns.

“There was a young man next to me, and I shook his hand and he said, ‘Now we’re supposed to exchange palms.’ So you exchange palms with the person next to you!” Sue recalls. “Why aren’t we doing this in the United States? That is so cool.”

“You know how when everyone talks about their mom, ‘Oh, you know, she’s the nicest person in the world. She’s the best person.’ I say that about my mom except for it really is true,” Jim chimes. “Everyone that knows her will agree. She is the kindest, nicest, most passionate, never-hurt-a-fly person in the world.”

In today’s political climate, Jim understands the significance of his mother’s work in saving lives and in representing what it means to be American.

“I almost feel like she’s fighting a battle on two fronts, fighting the real enemy which is hunger and poverty, and then she’s also fighting the perceptions that other countries may have of us,” he says from his home in Toledo, Ohio. “If anyone is out there representing our country, I can’t think of a much better person than my mom.”

As she speaks with us via WhatsApp, Sue describes the joy she’s seen in the faces of those receiving assistance from WFP. Regardless of what little they may have and the violence they have faced, the sight of food – lifesaving, nourishing food – makes them radiate. It’s a reminder of their shared humanity.

“All the people over here want the same thing that we do,” she reflects. “They all want to live in peace, they

want to worship who they want to worship without being afraid, they want to put food on the table for their children. We all want the same things no matter where we live.”