

## CONVICTION, CONGO, AND CRAFT-MAKING

“When my parents were expecting me, they dedicated me to God’s service, like baby Samuel in the Bible,” says Ruth Brown.

We talk on microphones through a window at Pilgrim Place Health Services Center where Ruth is recovering from a fall. Ruth has lived independently at Pilgrim Place for most of 20 years, but a few months ago HSC became her home.



Fellow residents know her as “the craft lady” because a visit to her old house meant stepping carefully. Every surface and most of the floor was chock full of everything from woody wreaths to delicate “Fabergé” eggs. You edged around racks of greeting cards decorated with intricate scrolled ornaments or artfully folded tea bag medallions. Before COVID 19, these hand-crafted treasures were eagerly snapped up at Pilgrim Place’s annual Fall Festival, always held the second weekend of November.

In recent years, Ruth’s equally talented daughter, Evelyn, worked alongside her mother, helping with the “fiddly bits.” “Mom’s favorite craft is whichever one she is working on right now!” she says. Ruth is rightfully proud that her imagination has earned significant aid for residents in need. “One year, I made a whopping \$4,000 in two days!” she brags. No doubt, her warm smile and her talent for recruiting helpers made her an excellent salesperson.

Craft-making to help others is indeed a ministry; but Ruth’s life of service stretches all the way to the Democratic Republic of Congo. She says, “I graduated from the College of the Pacific with a degree in education and music, taught elementary school in Lockford, California for a year and, then, I heard a missionary speak at church. That led to a deep conviction, and I dedicated my life to full-time Christian service.” Ruth began to work toward a degree in Christian education at Berkeley Baptist Divinity School, and there she met her future husband, Arley Brown, who was born to a missionary family in Belgian Congo.

The couple served in Congo as American Baptist missionaries for 40 years. While Arley taught school, Ruth raised their three children: Miriam, who was born in Belgium while the Browns were studying French there; Rita and Evelyn, who were both born in Congo, although in different areas as their parents were moved often. At each station, Ruth found time to work with Congolese women's groups, teaching sewing, literacy and leadership skills.

She also home-schooled her daughters until they were old enough to attend boarding school in Kinshasa, the capital city. Six-seated Missionary Aviation Fellowship airplanes flew the girls home three times a year for vacations. Interestingly, the three sisters spent these breaks helping in their parents' work, just as now, Ruth and Arley's grandchildren have done.

"After our daughters left for boarding school, I taught English, music and art in government local high schools," says Ruth. "Many of the villagers who walked by our home became good friends, and we shared skills about raising rabbits and chickens, or gardening and compost."

Ruth was well prepared for rural life because she grew up on a fruit ranch above Placerville, with a view of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. "Farmlands, forests and streams beckoned my sister and me, but I early learned to thrive on hard work, ingenuity and simple joys. My parents had few financial resources, but they were highly creative." She adds, "I guess that's where I got my interest in crafts—any craft!"

In Congo (called Zaire in the 1970s), this included book-binding. For the last 13 years of their service, Ruth and her husband worked together in a Theological Extension Program that targeted village pastors and helped them to overcome strong witch craft beliefs in their community. Arley wrote or translated lesson materials while Ruth illustrated, formatted, printed and bound them into books. The couple retired to Pilgrim Place in 2000, bringing their love of the Congo to Claremont. Sadly, Arley died in 2006.

Congo is a vast nation with a population of nearly 101 million and a history of colonial oppression and tribal war, particularly in the central and eastern areas. At least 4.5 million people have been displaced and 2 million children are still at the risk of starvation.

Asked whether she found life in the Congo difficult, Ruth thinks for a moment or two. “Not difficult,” she says “challenging!” With a twinkle in her eye, she adds, “*Snakes—Cobras! Boas! Venom-shooting Vipers!*” Oh my, challenging indeed.

*By Anna H. Bedford, 9/1/20*

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