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Rexburg family recounts near-fatal ax assault

By LINDSEY BUSH

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Editor's note: Wes and Alyssa Haws recently left eastern Idaho to make a new life in Ethiopia. This two-part series examines their lives in the African nation, the five Ethiopian children they hope to adopt and the attack that almost ended their dream.

Aug. 27 started like any other for Wes Haws. He awoke before the rest of the household and prepared to make his way to the wheat field owned by Morrell Agro Industries, a Utah-based company, about a mile from his Ethiopian home.

The 2,400-square-foot house was one of just four in the settlement with a concrete floor. Unlike many of the surrounding mud-and-stick dwellings, the Haws' house also came with rare amenities such as running water and electricity. It resembled his family home near Rexburg.

It was a safe and comfortable shelter for Haws; his wife, Alyssa; their 1-year-old son, Everett; and the five Ethiopian orphans the couple planned to adopt.

That August morning, Haws got into his Toyota Land Cruiser and headed for the wheat field. Two Ethiopian workers followed behind Haws in a front-end loader and bulldozer, cutting a crude road as they made their way to the field.

Once there, Haws went right to work. Using his GPS, he began plotting the field's boundaries. The rainy season had been discouraging and dried brush covered the gritty soil. From where Haws stood, few trees were visible across the arid expanse.

Morrell Agro leased the 27,000-acre site from the Ethiopian government. The transaction angered many villagers.

Traditionally, village elders distributed land to families, who would pass it from generation to generation. Though the Ethiopian government promised to reimburse the villagers, at least one of them -- a 17-year-old orphan -- wasn't interested in money. He would defend what he believed to be his family's land at all costs. Suddenly, Haws' head exploded in pain. It was the loudest crack he'd ever heard.

"I didn't fall over, but I thought I'd been shot," he said. "I kept asking, 'Have I been shot? What happened?'" and I started feeling around. I thought I'd just been grazed ... but I was bleeding a lot." It wasn't a bullet he felt crashing against the back of his skull. It



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Wes Haws and his wife, Alyssa, have lived in Ethiopia since August 2009 and are in the process in adopting five Ethiopian children. But an ax attack that nearly killed the Rexburg native almost ended their adoption dreams.



Courtesy photo

The Haws family -- from left to right, Kate Hill, Tofik, Mumbarick, Mesafint, Wes Haws, Everett Haws, Alyssa Haws, Gutama and Dambitu -- gathers around Wes as he recovers from emergency brain surgery.



This photo shows a Morrell Agro Industries field. The company introduces dry-land farming techniques in Ethiopia.

was an ax, wielded by the 17-year-old orphan.

The two Ethiopian workers who had followed Haws to the field carried him to the Land Cruiser. One of them got behind the wheel while the other, cradling Haws' head, wrapped a jacket around the wound and began applying pressure.

"I was bleeding a lot and the guys that I was with didn't know how to drive (the SUV)," Haws said. "So, I ended up having to shift. I was pretty clear-minded, but it hurt a lot."

They headed straight to Haws' home.



Alyssa Haws and her 18-year-old sister, Kate Hill, were in the house when they heard screams from outside. A woman burst into the house yelling that Haws had been shot.

Alyssa ran out the door and found her blood-soaked husband. She held him.

Haws needed immediate medical attention, but the closest hospital was too far away to attempt to drive.

Arrangements were made to bring in a plane. But it would take the aircraft two hours to get there.

Haws was moved to Morrell's company "health clinic," a modified 20-foot shipping container. The air inside was hot and thick with sweat, Morrell farm manager Alan Baum said. Baum's wife, Shelley, ran between the clinic and her home, collecting water to clean Haws' wound.

"It was gruesome," she said. "I've never seen anything like that before. There were about six people crowded around him and we didn't have a light. I couldn't tell how deep (the wound) was, but we couldn't get the blood to stop."

Haws' blood pressure crashed.

Baum and another Morrell employee, both members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, offered a healing blessing.

Finally, the plane arrived. Friends and family helped Haws into the aircraft. Soon, the plane was airborne, headed for Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital.

Once they were on board, the extent of Haws' injury became clear.

"You could see everything," Alyssa Haws said. "It was much worse than I had thought. It was not something a wife should have to see."

Her husband's brain had started to swell and was protruding from his broken skull.

"That was unreal, being on the plane and holding Wes," Hill said. "The plane ride was really turbulent and we were all really sick to our stomachs."

Alyssa Haws thought she would vomit.

"I was holding the bandages and padding onto his wound," she said. "I tried to press tighter, hoping not to hurt the injury more but to prevent additional leakage of brain from the wound site. I was scared."

By the time they landed in Addis Ababa, nearly seven hours had passed.

"Wes and I always joked that the last thing we wanted to do in Ethiopia was brain surgery," Haws said. "We wanted to get him out of the country, but the doctors said, 'You don't have time.'"

Though her husband was approved for surgery, Haws said the hospital wasn't authorized to supply blood for transfusions.

"We had to forfeit our passports to get blood from the Red Cross and then replace the blood to get our passports back," she said.

There still wasn't enough blood on hand, so Alyssa donated her own.

"They came at one in the morning, frantically asking for my blood," she said. "They took it -- syringe full by syringe full -- and put it into Wes."

Somehow, Haws survived.

A week later, he was flown to a hospital in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. There, he was monitored for another 10 days. He suffered just one significant side effect: His right-side peripheral vision was gone.

"There have been a lot of miracles," Haws said. "I mean the ax could've (struck) pretty much any lower (on the head and neck) and I'd be in a wheelchair with a straw -- or dead."

Once released from the hospital in Dubai, Haws, his wife and son returned to eastern Idaho. Hill stayed in Ethiopia to care for the five orphans.

"Oh boy, it was probably the hardest thing I've ever done in my life," Hill said. "I'm 18 years old, I've got five kids -- a single mom, basically -- and in a foreign country. It was really, really hard." Hill had expected her sister to return after two weeks.

But once Haws and her husband got to Idaho, they learned that he needed more surgery.

In mid-October, neurologist Dr. Brent Greenwald used plastic to rebuild Haws' skull.

"He's phenomenally lucky," Greenwald said. "It's an extremely rare injury. He was fortunate that the injury was localized to (the occipital lobe) of the brain and he didn't suffer infections from it."

Nine days after her husband's surgery, Alyssa Haws returned to Ethiopia, where she remains today. On Dec. 13, the family celebrated a small victory when the government approved the couple to adopt one of the children, a boy named Mesafint. Unfortunately, that approval was rescinded five days later. Alyssa Haws continues working to complete the adoption of the five Ethiopian orphans.

Her husband and 1-year-old son, meanwhile, are staying with her parents, Val and Linda Hill, near Rexburg.

"It's a lot harder without Wes because we're so used to working as a team," Haws said. "You never want to be separated from your spouse, especially when he needs you, too."

The couple had hoped to complete the adoption by Christmas, but that appears unlikely. Haws said the 17-year-old boy who attacked him has been sentenced to 14 years in prison.

Despite the attack, Wes Haws' love for Africa hasn't changed.

"You hear horrible stories about Africa, and, obviously, this is one of those horrible stories. But things like this happen -- they happen everywhere," he said. "Africa has a lot of potential and a lot of people that need help. I don't want this to be a scary story that keeps people from making a difference."

Part 2

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An African adventure

While Wes Haws recuperates, his wife returns to Ethiopia

By LINDSEY BUSH

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Wes Haws is an adventurer with a stubborn streak.

"When he gets his mind on something and he wants to do something, there's no stopping him," said Dan Robison, a childhood friend. "He's very persistent and stubborn."

So when Haws announced that he'd be living and working in Ethiopia and, later, that he and his wife, Alyssa, were adopting five Ethiopian children, family and friends took it in stride.

"I thought it was kind of unusual at first," Robison said. "But Wes has never been someone who's lived a conventional lifestyle. Nothing he's done up to this point in his life has been completely normal, and adopting five kids isn't out of the ordinary."

There's nothing normal or ordinary about the life that Haws and his wife are making for themselves in the Ethiopia wilderness.

Nor do such terms begin to explain his fierce determination or ability to survive an attack by an ax-wielding teenager.

Simply put, Haws is fearless.

His unlikely journey began soon after high school graduation. That's when Haws began traveling the world, building dome houses for the less fortunate. Eventually, that work led him to the Village of Hope, an orphanage in Ethiopia.

While working at the orphanage, Haws developed a bond with the Ethiopian people, their culture and, especially, the nation's disadvantaged children.

One boy in particular caught his attention. Haws saw the boy trailing behind a cleric, known as "Pastor Pigo," at the orphanage.

"(The boy) looked really sad and timid about everything," Haws said. "He wasn't with the other kids. He kind of sat back."

The boy, Mesafint, had been living with his father and stepmother after his mother's death. Haws learned that the 11-year-old had been neglected and abused by his stepmother. Mesafint hid and slept in trees to escape the abuse.

Pastor Pigo found the boy's hiding place and brought him to the orphanage, hoping to give Mesafint a



Courtesy photo

The Haws family, from left, Wes Haws, Gutama, Tofik, Alyssa Haws, Dambitu, Mumbarek, Everett Haws and Mesafint, pose for a family photo in Ethiopia earlier this year.



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Wes Haws talks about the injuries he suffered when he was attacked with an ax while working on a project in Ethiopia.

better life.

"From that day, I always spent a lot of time with him because he was always by himself," Haws said. "He knew a few English words, and I taught him some more."

Haws decided to sponsor Mesafint and began paying for the boy's food, as well as the tuition to allow him to attend an English school.

Two weeks later, Haws returned home to eastern Idaho.

In February 2008, less than six months after his return, Haws married Alyssa Hill of Rexburg. They had dated casually in high school. Each of them, as it turned out, had separate dreams of visiting Africa. Both also had hoped to one day adopt children.

"Ever since I was little, I had this draw towards Africa," Alyssa Haws said. "I can't remember not wanting to go to there."

The couple spent their honeymoon in Ethiopia working at the Village of Hope. While there, they discussed adopting Mesafint.

"It's crazy. It's ridiculous," Alyssa Haws said. "We were just married and we decided to adopt an 11-year-old."

But the newlyweds also developed a bond with three brothers and a sister at the orphanage: Mumbarek, Tofik, Gutama and Dambitu.

"These children reached out and touched our hearts," Haws said. "We left Ethiopia touched by their genuine love for Wes and I."

The couple understood, however, that adding Mesafint and four more Ethiopian children to their family wouldn't be easy.

"We knew we couldn't adopt four more kids and take them to America," Wes Haws said. "When we got to America, we kept telling people that they should adopt these four kids."

Once back home, the Hawses began the required international adoption paperwork, knowing Ethiopia would play a significant role in their new lives together.

In August 2009, the couple -- along with a natural addition to the family, 3-month-old Everett -- returned to Ethiopia on a more permanent basis.

Haws landed a job with Morrell Agro Industries, signing a five-year-contract as a project manager. His first assignment was to help introduce dry-land farming techniques to villagers living near the Ethiopian city of Goba.

The Hawses also worked to complete Mesafint's adoption. They didn't anticipate the large amount of cash they would need -- \$20,000 to complete the process.

But Haws' job with Morrell Agro Industries had improved their chances of making the boy a part of their family.

Once they had lived in Ethiopia for two years, the couple learned, the \$20,000 requirement would be dropped. That would make it much easier for them to adopt Mesafint, now 14. It also opened the door for the couple to adopt the other four children.

"A lot of people thought it was crazy and weren't supportive," Wes Haws said. "So, we mostly just didn't tell people, we just did it. We love these kids."

At first, there were language difficulties. Mesafint grew up speaking Ethiopia's national language, Amharic. While at the orphanage, the boy began to learn English and Oromifa, a dialect spoken by the local Oromo tribe. The other four children spoke only Oromifa.

While the couple pursued the adoptions, they brought all five children into their Ethiopian home. The children began studying with an English-speaking tutor and learning English from their future parents.

Just five months later, the children were communicating in English. Haws and his wife were on their way to completing their family.

On Aug. 27, however, the blade of an ax almost ended their dream.

Wes Haws was fighting for his life after an angry teenager crashed the ax into the back of his skull. After surviving the attack and receiving medical treatment in Africa, Haws and his wife returned to eastern Idaho.

Alyssa Haws' sister, 18-year-old Kate Hill, volunteered to remain in Ethiopia and care for the orphans.

Back in Idaho, Haws faced more surgery -- this time to rebuild the section of his skull that was shattered by the ax blade. The surgery was successful, but Haws was not allowed to travel. In late October, Alyssa Haws tearfully hugged her husband and returned to Ethiopia. She remains there today, waiting for the Ethiopian government to grant the adoption.

On Dec. 13, the government approved Mesafint's adoption, giving the family five encouraging days before revoking that decision Friday.

The family had planned to reunite for Christmas, but that hope has all but faded.

Still, Haws and his wife have no intention of giving up their dream.

"Most people have rallied behind us," he said. "There have been a lot of prayers for my recovery and a lot of miracles have happened. We're hoping for a few more so that our family can be together. They lived with us, they were our kids, we raised them, we were their parents. We still are their parents."