

Missionary

Continued from P1

Was her son released? “I can’t comment on that,” said Smucker. “I’m afraid of saying anything. It’s a hard situation.”

Who are the 400 Mawozo? Reporters describe them as brazen, violent, and unpredictable.

The New York Times reports the gang is infamous for mass kidnappings. Haitian officials estimate the gang makes \$70,000 a week from ransoms and extortion.

In the case of these missionaries, the 400 Mawozo asked for \$1 million dollars per person for a total of \$17 million.

How does Smucker feel about paying a ransom? “I can’t comment on that.”

The July assassination of Haiti President Moïse and the 7.2 magnitude earthquake in August has cast Haiti into a state of lawlessness. The Christian Aid Mission reports 600 kidnappings in the first nine months of 2021, up from 231 kidnappings in Haiti during the same period of 2020. Gangs command many areas of the country and control goods and fuel at seaports.

Do you know whether your son is safe? “I can’t comment on that.”

While the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the U.S. State Department and Christian Aid Ministries negotiate for safe release of the hostages, Smucker doesn’t dare breathe a word that could endanger the delicate talks.

Releasing even the smallest details probably won’t help. Even the slightest gaff has the potential to harm her son and the remaining 14 hostages.

Smucker hasn’t heard a single word from her son in more than six weeks. “Not A. World.”

‘God had him there’

He’s 3,000 miles away. She has no contact. Smucker feels helpless, but not without hope.

“Of course, it’s extremely scary,” said Smucker. “I’m confident that he was there for such a time as this, as it says in the book of Esther. I believe God had him there.”

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The Smuckers raised their five children, now ages 28 to 9, in Poland. “It was a mission,” she said. “We were doing a church plant as well there.”

She believes their travels have given her children a mission world view. “I know he has that world view, as well,” she said. “I don’t think this would hinder (his mission work) in the future.”

Smucker leans on her Menonite faith. She meets twice daily with her support group, members of the organization and others directly involved. They give one another moral support and pray together.

They know the 400 Mawozo gang has released hostages in the past. They released two of their group earlier this month.

Community support

As Smucker has been quiet about her ordeal, so has the community of Madras come around her in quiet support.

The kidnappings caught on when she saw it in the news. She started praying about the situation weeks before she found out Smucker’s son was among the hostages.

She was shopping at Penelope’s Soaps and Such, where Smucker sells her candles, and an epiphany hit her.

She would bless Smucker by buying her candles, and she would bless other people by giving the candles to them.

She gave a candle to her doctor and thanked the staff for their grace throughout the pandemic. She added a card explaining the connection to the kidnapping.

The next time Vattimo visited the candle store, she ran into her doctor buying candles. The story moved her doctor to also buy candles and give them away.

“It blesses everybody. Laura’s blessed. I’m blessed,”

said Vattimo. “The people receiving them are blessed. The people giving them are blessed.”

Vattimo’s “Candle Project” started Nov. 11 and took off. She posted her idea on Facebook. Soon people from all over the state sent Vattimo money to buy candles and give them away. She bought candles \$200 and \$500 at a time.

Vattimo does what she calls matchmaking. When a friend whose mother suffers from Alzheimer’s donated money, Vattimo used it to buy candles for the staff at a memory care facility. When a sheriff’s office retiree donated money, she bought candles for people at the sheriff’s office.

Vattimo did all of this without telling Smucker.

“I thought there’d been an accounting error,” said Smucker. “My candle sales were too high.”

Smucker’s business partner, Angela Rhodes, was in on the secret and filled her in.

“Candle sales have gone through the roof,” she said, with grateful amazement. “More than doubled. I’m humbled and grateful.”

The Smuckers and the other families of the hostages have no power over their circumstances, but their community has found ways to provide tangible comfort.

\$185K grant reinforces COCC equity efforts

From a press release

Central Oregon Community College’s (COCC) office of diversity and inclusion was recently awarded a \$184,902 grant from the Meyer Memorial Trust’s equitable education portfolio that will support, expand and implement a range of equity and diversity programs at the college.

The majority of the award will be applied to COCC’s college preparatory programs designed for underserved district high schoolers, aimed at specific operational costs and the funding of a Native American program staff member’s salary.

The funds will also help underwrite a similar program for Black high school students that is currently in development. Other dollars will enhance equity-centered professional development at COCC, bringing more training offerings to faculty and staff.

“This incredible aid will directly benefit the futures of many youth in our underserved communities, offering them educational direction and access to technology and resources that they wouldn’t otherwise have,” said Christy Walker, the college’s director of diversity and inclusion.

More than 80 student participants of the college’s

Latinx, Native American and Afrocentric college preparatory programs will receive a complementary laptop to empower their educations thanks to this and other funding.

The college preparatory programs feature two components: an embedded high school classroom during the school year and an on-campus, weeklong symposium in the summer. Free to participants, these college-credit-earning programs celebrate culture and foster leadership while spotlighting college offerings and wraparound services through academic encouragement.

The programs are currently embedded in Redmond High School, Ridgeview High School, the Redmond Proficiency Academy, Culver

High School, Crook County High School, Madras High School, Bridges Career and Technical High School in Madras, the Roots Alternative Education Program at Warm Springs, Bend High School, Mountain View High School and Summit High School. While geared toward specific cultural identity groups, the programs are open to all students.

Measuring high school graduation and college enrollment rates is essential to assessing the programs’ success. Data from recent years shows that 85% of participants in these programs are graduating high school, while 75% are enrolling at COCC or another college; in comparison, Oregon’s 2020 four-year high school graduation rate was 82.6%.

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