

Winnie's World

From Brownsville to Rwanda, Winnie Barron affects those around her heart.

by Jennifer Moody, Albany Democrat-Herald



A pencil-thin braid dangles from Winnie Barron's cinnamon-brown hair, tipped with turquoise-colored beads to keep it from unraveling.

It is longer than the rest of her short waves, long enough to brush her shoulder as she moves. She thinks about cutting it off sometimes. Then she remembers the small brown hand reaching from her backpack to finger it, and she can't find it in her heart to actually reach for the scissors.

The hand Barron remembers belongs to a little girl, a 5-year-old child whose body weight when Barron first met her in Rwanda four years ago was just a little over 15 pounds.

Her name is Marie, and her family was killed along with hundreds of thousands of Rwandans massacred during the war that ravaged the country. She was found under a pile of slain family members in a hut in a tiny village where no one else was spared.



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Photo by Mark Ylen; Democrat-Herald



Winnie and Robert Clark of the Brownsville Rural Fire District get ready to practice a water rescue during a February weekend drill. Photo by Mark Ylen; Democrat-Herald

Barron, a paramedic and emergency medical technician (EMT) captain for the Brownsville Rural Fire District, was spending 2 1/2 months in Rwanda that year as a volunteer with Northwest Medical Teams. It was her job to help rehabilitate a hospital there.

Her first day in Rwanda, Barron arrived to find a building missing half its walls. There was blood everywhere. Across the street was the mounded earth of a mass grave.

Barron was sitting on a cot talking to a nurse about what would be needed to run the

hospital. She had been sitting there for several minutes before she realized there was a body under the sheet next to her – a dehydrated skeleton of a body, covered with oozing lesions, a body so withered the intravenous needed had to be placed in her scalp because there wasn't an ounce of fat elsewhere on the body in which to insert it.

"She was so emaciated," Barron remembers. "She would wail continuously until you covered her back up with a sheet. You knew she'd seen things no child should see."

Barron went back to that cot every day to talk with Marie and try to play with her. Ever so little, Marie would peek out from the sheet, allowing huge chocolate eyes to take in the form of the tall American woman with the mile-wide smile.

About two weeks after Barron arrived – she'll never forget the exact moment – Marie was crouched as usual under her sheet while Barron played and laughed with some of the healthier "kiddos" in the hospital. She felt a slight tug

on her backpack. Marie had crawled inside. She slipped stick-thin arms around Barron's neck. And there she stayed, for the next eight weeks.

The braid is just one of many memories, but to Barron, it's one of the most tangible.

"Every time I think I'm going to cut it off, I can't, because I can feel Marie," Barron says, brown eyes far away. "I can hear her singing in my backpack. I can feel her playing with my hair."

"It's my little piece of Marie."

The other volunteer firefighters in the Brownsville Rural Fire District say the story of Marie is par for the course where Winnie Barron is concerned.

"She is committed to serving wherever her heart calls her, making better by healing or comforting whomever she touches," wrote fellow firefighter/EMT Christina Plevs for the Distinguished Service Award that Barron Received. "She sympathizes

with the suffering and the tragedy she sees everywhere. She has a gift and shares it freely wherever she goes."

Barron was born in 1957 in Harvard, Mass., the youngest of seven children. A brother turned her given name, Winifred, into "Fred," but her mother wouldn't have it.

"She said, 'I had four boys and three girls, and you're not going to call one Fred!'" Winnie recalls, laughing. Family members tagged her "Pooh" instead, which has stuck.

Now 40, Barron has been a volunteer for Brownsville for 13 years. She has been a paramedic for 18 years.

She traces her career back to her childhood. The family moved to Colorado when she was age 7 and Barron remembers watching the cast of "Emergency!" perform rescue operations on television as a child.

"I fell in love with Johnny (the paramedic) on 'Emergency!' and thought that would be a wonderful thing to do," she recalls, smiling at the memory.



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Myrrie, left, is ready for her bath. She weighs between 23 and 25 pounds, 10 pounds more than she weighed when Winnie first met her eight weeks before. She reached 26 pounds by the following week, when Winnie left Rwanda.



Barron went to Colorado College and then studied special education at the University of Colorado at Boulder before traveling to Spokane, Wash., to visit her brother, Pete Barron, and his family in Colorado. From there, it was paramedic school, then training as a Medic I in Seattle, then back to Spokane as a full-time paramedic for four to five years.

"I was the first woman paramedic in Spokane," she says. "It was quite an honor."

During that time, Pete and his wife and kids had moved to Brownsville. Barron visited him there and liked the Willamette Valley so much that she moved to Philomath and joined the fire station there.

When she realized how many times she drove to Brownsville to visit her nephews, however, she found a house there and joined the Brownsville fire crew. A year or two later, she went to physician's assistant school

at Duke University in North Carolina, then came back to the Northwest. She now works as a physician's assistant at Junction City Medical Clinic, but she says she couldn't give up the paramedic part of her job.

"You see people at their worst and at their best... it's hard to describe, but it's been a real gift, to have people allow you to be with them in such a vulnerable situation," she says.

In contrast, she says, at

doctor's office, "They're in there and outta there and I write them a prescription and they're gone. And you miss out on a lot."

As EMS captain, it's Barron's job to respond to medical calls – and that's what 85 percent of the calls to Brownsville are – and to restock the ambulance after the call is completed. She attends drills ranging from hazardous material trainings and burn-to-learns to water rescues and triage. She also must take classes to keep up her medical certification.

It all takes a lot of time, but it's really a selfish endeavor, she confides.

"I get so much out of it," she says. "It is a gift. It truly is a gift that people let us in the lives at the most passionate, intense, crucial and vulnerable point in their lives and they let us share it."

Something clicked in 1994, Barron says. She was watching the news on TV, seeing the aftermath of the massacre in Rwanda, and suddenly she just couldn't watch anymore.

It wasn't enough to send money to help, she knew. She had to go herself and do what she could ease the suffering there.

"Lots of people who love me said, 'You can't possibly make a difference. They're going to continue to die,'" she says matter-of-factly.

But in her mind, she was listening instead to her mother telling her the parable



Winnie Barron with a group of children from an orphanage in Rwanda, across the street from the hospital where she worked.

of the man walking down a shoreline choked with beached jellyfish and throwing jellyfish after jellyfish back into the surf. A passerby told the man he couldn't possibly make any difference, but as the man picked up another jellyfish, he said "It makes a difference to this one."

I always remembered that," Barron said.

So she called Northwest Medical Teams in Portland and joined one of the Rwanda teams. And met Marie.

Marie called her "Eggs," she remembers. It was the only solid word of English she knew and the only solid food she could tolerate without getting sick. She gained weight under Barron's care, reaching 26 pounds during Barron's time in the country, and eventually emerged enough from her sheet shroud to smile and play with Barron.

Saying goodbye to Marie was one of the hardest things Barron has had to do in her

life. She tried to adopt her, but "it didn't work out, for a number of reason," she says. "I thought maybe that wasn't best. That's her life, her country, her heritage."

She tried to keep the contact the only way she knew how – by setting up contacts with other workers who might have news.

One contact person knew of a person from Zurich who was working in Rwanda and said Marie's mother had been found and reunited with her child. It's a story Barron isn't sure is true, but she's trying to find out what is.

Barron went to Africa last September, this time for three months to Kenya. The borders to Rwanda were closed because of the still-tenuous political situation.

She had to extend her stay to run a hospital there when the doctor there was injured in an accident, and it was then, for one week, that the borders opened. She didn't

find Marie during that time, but she was able to spend, she says, "a glorious week back in Marie's land."

There are other trips Barron wants to take. She would go on a mercy mission every year if she had the money and if her job would allow her the time. She was on the list for Kuwait, but the "safe" zone there was bombed and the trip cancelled. Romania is another country on her list. She hopes this fall to go back to Kenya and is looking for grant funds to establish a center there for the thousands of children orphaned by AIDS.

"I would love to go anywhere they would take me," she says.

Part of the reason is that people are so desperately needed, she says, and not just in medical capacities. Irrigation projects, farm work, teaching – "A lot of people literally go over just to rock the children."

She doesn't worry about herself, she says – doesn't worry about being shot or being infected by the illnesses around her.

"You have to go knowing there's a risk, clearly it's a risk," she says. "But you can't go worrying about it. I went for a blink of time... and I had a world like this to go back to."

"I brought hundreds and hundreds of pairs of rubber gloves, but you end up blowing them up and using them as balloons for the kids, because that was more important. That's the kind of medi-



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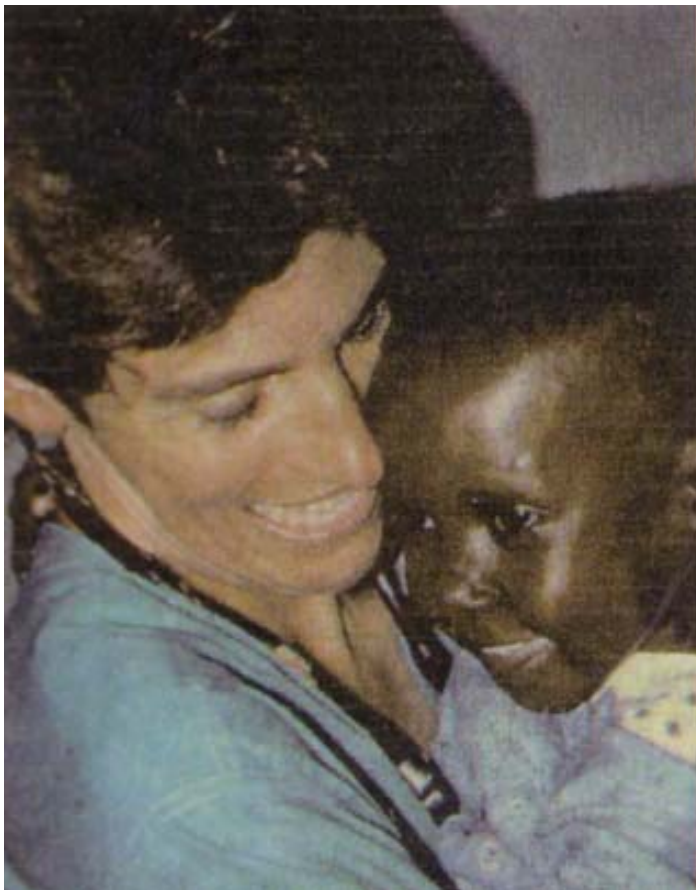
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cine you can't bottle."

She would give Marie more of that kind of medicine, if only she could be sure she has found her. She would go in a heartbeat, if only she had clear, irrefutable proof that she were alive and safe.

And even if she doesn't get it, she says, she'll go back when she can, to help whoever she can.

"I do have a creed, but the church is the world," she says earnestly. "There's a huge amount of magic in this universe. Complexity can obscure it, but... if you go to Rwanda, where hundreds and hundreds of people are dying, and you see a child smiling – that's a piece of magic in the universe."



Winnie and Myrrie say goodbye on Winnie's last day in the country.