



FROM *Mzungu* TO Friend

A simple act of service from a senior missionary left a lasting impression.

By David Dickson
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A *mzungu* in a tree? What was a *mzungu* doing up in a tree? And what was this tool he was using to cut through branches so quickly?

Such questions ran through the minds of Ugandans watching a foreigner (*mzungu*) using a battery-powered reciprocating saw to trim dead limbs from a massive shade tree. The tool itself was a marvel to the locals. Many of them had never seen anything like it before.

But even more amazing to them was the *mzungu* himself. Elder Roland Harris, a senior missionary from Utah, USA, trimmed branch after branch, cutting dead limbs from lofty perches. The people below were amazed that a foreigner would do such a thing for one of their own.

Ultimately, Elder Harris's simple act of service would mark the beginning of a friendship with someone who had wanted nothing to do with the Church or anyone in it.

Getting to Know Godfrey

Elder Roland Harris and Sister Janet Harris were serving a 23-month mission in the Uganda Kampala Mission. Sister Harris, a registered nurse, was called as medical adviser to the missionaries. Elder Harris, a retired construction superintendent who can fix almost anything in the universe, cared for Church facilities and mission vehicles.

Shortly after arriving in Uganda, Elder and Sister Harris hired a local Church member, Mary, to assist in cleaning their home.

Mary had been baptized three years earlier. "We just

grew to love her," says Sister Harris. "She helped teach us the ways of Uganda."

The more they got to know Mary, the more their friendship deepened. They learned quickly about her husband, Godfrey—a good man who nevertheless kept his distance from members of the Church, especially missionaries. "He wouldn't let missionaries in his home," explains Sister Harris. However, Mary still wanted Godfrey to meet them.

She invited the Harrises over for a brief visit. "We had no expectations," Sister Harris explains. "We told Godfrey that Mary is our dear friend now, and we want to know her family." Godfrey chatted with them but didn't really warm up to the idea of getting to know them more than as acquaintances.

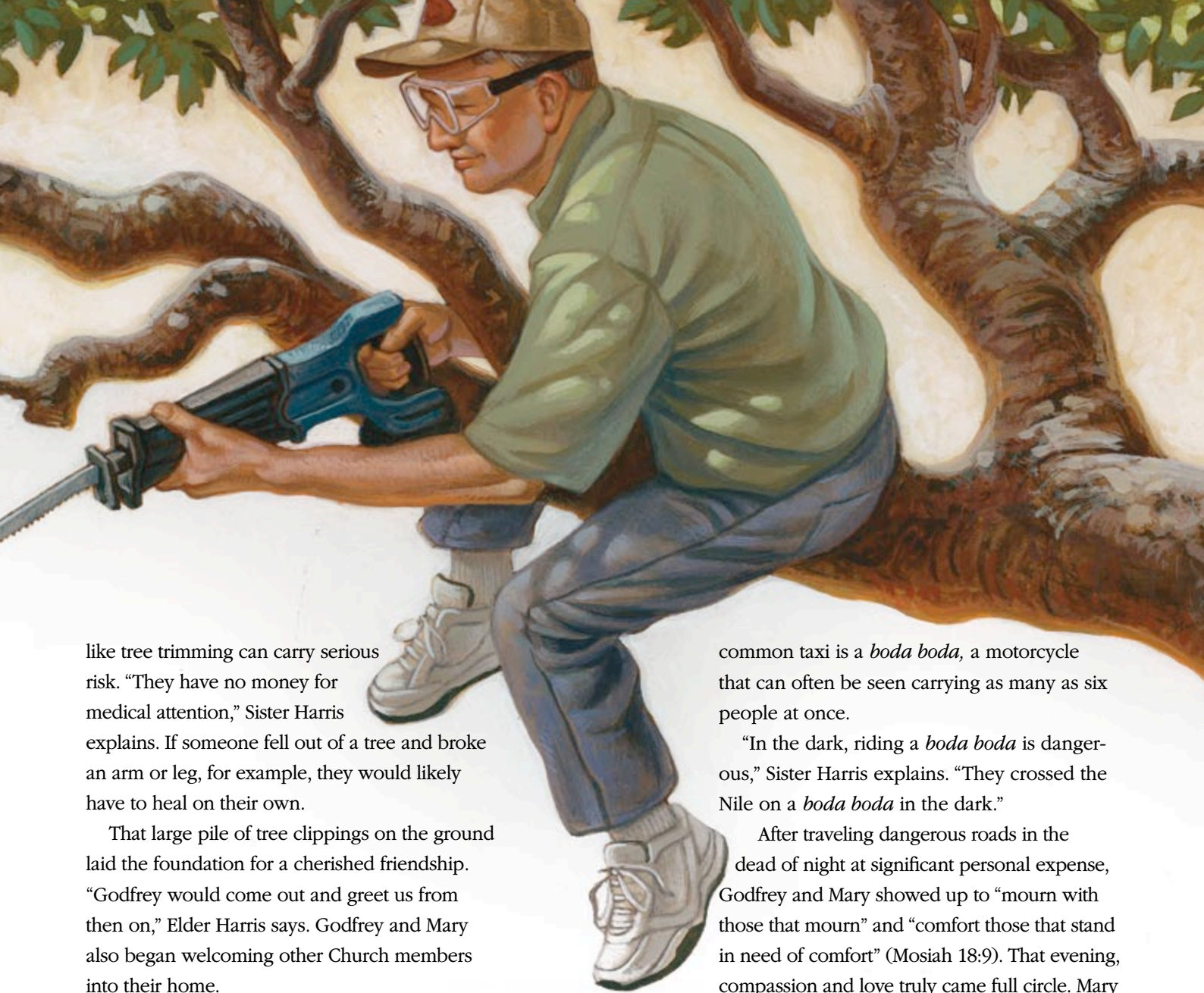
That all changed the day Elder Harris showed up with power tools, a ladder, and an offer to serve.

The Turning Point

Godfrey and Mary's home was surrounded by towering shade trees full of dead branches and overgrown limbs that stretched precariously above their roof.

Elder Harris set to work straightaway. He spent four hours in the treetops lopping off limbs up to 10 inches (25 cm) in diameter. The task was definitely overdue. "I was at least 20 feet (6 m) off the ground," Elder Harris says. As people walked by, they could hardly believe their eyes.

For his part, Godfrey was astounded. "He thanked us profusely," says Sister Harris. Even relatively simple activities



like tree trimming can carry serious risk. “They have no money for medical attention,” Sister Harris explains. If someone fell out of a tree and broke an arm or leg, for example, they would likely have to heal on their own.

That large pile of tree clippings on the ground laid the foundation for a cherished friendship. “Godfrey would come out and greet us from then on,” Elder Harris says. Godfrey and Mary also began welcoming other Church members into their home.

Crossing the Nile

Elder and Sister Harris grew closer to Godfrey and Mary as the months rolled by. Ultimately, this friendship became a strength and support for the Harrises when an unexpected tragedy struck halfway through their mission. They received word that their son Brad had been killed in a freeway accident.

As soon as Mary and Godfrey learned about this, they both put on their best clothes and headed out on a treacherous journey to be at the side of their dear friends.

In Uganda, few people own a vehicle. They either walk or hire a taxi. By far, the most

common taxi is a *boda boda*, a motorcycle that can often be seen carrying as many as six people at once.

“In the dark, riding a *boda boda* is dangerous,” Sister Harris explains. “They crossed the Nile on a *boda boda* in the dark.”

After traveling dangerous roads in the dead of night at significant personal expense, Godfrey and Mary showed up to “mourn with those that mourn” and “comfort those that stand in need of comfort” (Mosiah 18:9). That evening, compassion and love truly came full circle. Mary and Godfrey were the ones providing service. “It was quite remarkable,” says Sister Harris. Mary suggested that they all kneel together in prayer. Godfrey joined without hesitation.

Elder and Sister Harris went to California, USA, to attend Brad’s funeral. Afterward they returned to Uganda to complete their mission. Now back home in Utah, Roland and Janet Harris still remain close with Mary and Godfrey.

Service is a key that can unlock doors otherwise barred to us. As President Thomas S. Monson teaches, “When selfless service eliminates selfish striving, the power of God brings to pass His purposes” (“Willing and Worthy to Serve,” *Ensign*, May 2012, 68). ■



ILLUSTRATION BY GREG NEWBOLD