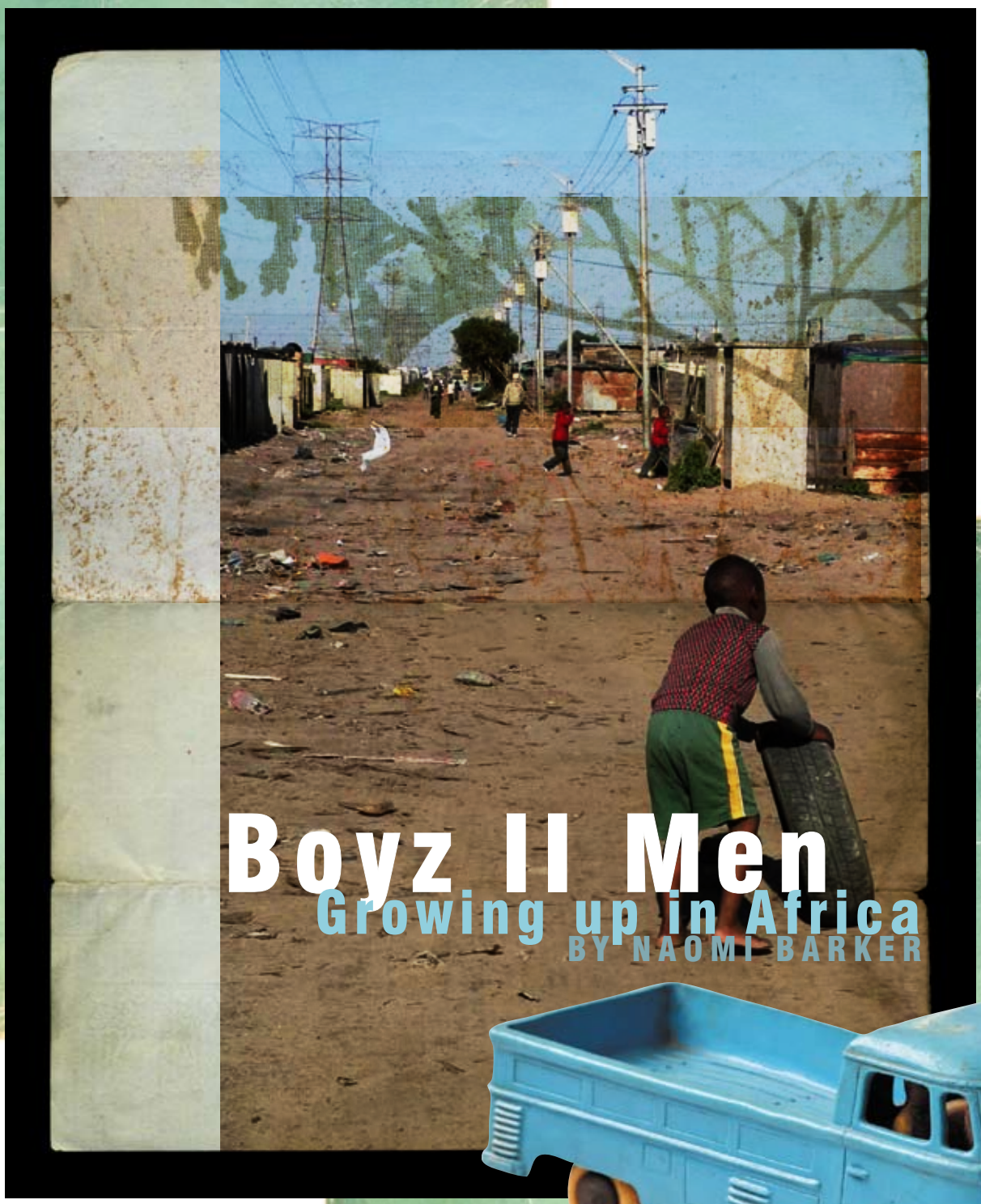

Boyz II Men

Growing up in Africa

BY NAOMI BARKER

Ten years ago we were facing some pretty major questions. Will Dawson and Joey ever get together? Is 'you had me at hello' the ultimate pick-up line? Will Boyz II Men churn out another Top 10 hit? But when John and Angela Wilmot decided to pack up and move to Malawi to join the Global Interaction team, ten years ago, they found a few other questions that needed answering.

The first important question the Wilmots had to answer was how they could raise enough cash to get themselves and their two little boys on a plane to Malawi. Once this question was answered, their oldest son, two-year old Michael, had a very pressing question – would he be able to take his Tonka trucks to Africa? Shaun, the small, silent type, just a few months young, well, he just wanted to know when his next feed would be.

Now, with ten years under their belt, John and Angela reflect on the huge adjustment it was to move, and what it took to be part of a Global Interaction team that was only just getting established. There were no programmes, no projects - just people eager to get things happening.

The team's focus was to empower the Yao people group to develop their own distinctive ways of following Jesus. You would think that in Malawi, a country where the majority of people are Christian, this would surely be a simple task. Wouldn't it?

Perhaps not. **The Yao, once a powerful force in the region, were, and are, a minority group among the people of Malawi and living in extreme poverty.** Through trade relations with Arabs, the Yao adopted Islam, and now follow a mix of Islamic and traditional African religious beliefs and practices.

Jump in John, Angela and team.

And what an entrance. It was all poverty-eradicating, gospel-spreading, bible-bashing ventures akin to that of *The Poisonwood Bible…* Or not. These guys spent a whole lot of time learning the language, understanding the culture and sitting in the dust just getting to know people.

Through carefully nurtured relationships, LifeGroups began to emerge for people who wanted to hear about God and figure out how to follow Jesus in a truly Yao way. In 2000, there were four groups operating in the local area. It spread like butter on hot toast.

Less than ten years later, across a huge geographical area, there's more than 120 LifeGroups with more than 4000 adults regularly gathering. What's even more exciting is that these groups are now led and directed by local people.

"In everything we do, we step back as much as possible so the local leaders can really step forward," says John.

"It's the local faith community doing life, interacting with each other, living out empowerment, transformation and wholism," Angela comments.

Rollover Tupperware and Avon, this isn't a pyramid-selling enterprise. This is a contagious kind of growth that's all about the Yao transforming Yao lives, through Jesus.

"LifeGroups are a natural and real growth of people being impacted by their faith and being inspired to respond to their own needs and the needs of the community," Angela notes.

A couple of months ago, the Global Interaction team was involved with the first Leadership Training Program, a five-day intensive for the leaders of LifeGroups. You may think this is all pretty standard, just your typical pastors' gathering at a beachside retreat with devos and tips for delivering the emotion-packed sermon.

But for these leaders it's life-changing stuff. They take the stories and lessons they learn back to their home villages and pass them on to the other members of LifeGroups.

Scott Girvan, another Global Interaction team member in Malawi, has been overwhelmed by the growth of these team leaders.

"A number of leaders have openly testified to God's work in their lives and have been challenged on a number of different levels," Scott comments. "Clearly, their faith is developing as they actively wrestle with how to follow Jesus in their own distinctive way."

LifeGroups naturally evolved into a birthplace for innovative ways of empowering people to tackle the difficulties of life.

So what does this look like in Malawi? It's an agro forestry programme. A rural development programme. Communal gardens. A community library and functional education programmes.

These education programmes are not just concerned with conjugating verbs and learning to differentiate quadratic equations – zzzzz… Students study everyday life issues like gender equality, HIV/AIDS, health and nutrition, orphan care, children's rights, farming, finance and business management. It's very practical and very necessary.

"It's so exciting to see what the Yao can achieve in responding to the very real needs of their community," says Angela.

After ten years, it's time for the Wilmots to move on. "We never came believing that the Yao needed us here forever," says John. "Overall, we came to do ourselves out of a job." The family will be relocating to be a part of Global Interaction work in outback Australia while the team in Malawi keeps going strong.

Throughout their time in Malawi, John and Angela have been amazed at the growth they've witnessed. LifeGroups have grown and flourished, as have local leaders. Even their own family has grown - to include five more kids.

But there are still some pretty important questions being asked. Michael's pretty keen to know if there are lions in outback Australia and Shaun wants to know if the Aussie mozzies will give him malaria.

In ten years, communities flourish, leaders develop and children grow up. Boys to men.

Don't forget, discussion questions about the feature articles (*Boyz II Men* and *Sex in the City*), as well as past editions of *Resonate*, are available at globalinteraction.org.au **Go online for further details on how you could join the team in Malawi…**