

Season to give, not to get

By RICHARD ILGENFRITZ

VILLANOVA — For most families, Christmas is a time when children eagerly await the arrival of St. Nicholas and gifts are lavished on everyone.

But for the Harper family of Villanova, Christmas will be much different this year. Instead of waking up in the comfort of their home to discover what Santa has left beneath the tree, Susan and Charles Harper and their children, Becky, Charley, Katie and Sarah, will spend Christmas in the faraway East African nation of Uganda.

It is a country that has been ravaged by 20 years of civil war.

So why would this Main Line family opt to spend Christmas in a war zone?

"Back in 1999, we developed the idea to do a giving, not getting, Christmas," said Susan Harper. This decision was to help her children understand that there are many others throughout the world who don't have what so many living on the Main Line take for granted.

"We think that if they have these experiences when they are young, it will shape their minds when they grow up," said Charles Harper.

The family is working with charities called Geneva Global and Invisible Children in the hope of raising money to help children who are suffering in Uganda.

According to Charles and Susan Harper, the charity from Invisible Children originated from a documentary of the same title that highlighted many of the problems children in Uganda are facing. Most of the



Sarah Harper receives a blessings from a tribesman on a past trip to East Africa. Prior to leaving on a trip to Uganda, Sarah Harper (back), 9, works on holiday cards with friend Mary Reese, 12, (center) and her sister, Katie Harper, 12.



children live in poverty, and very few are able to attend school. The few who can attend classes that are 150 to 200 students in size, said Charles Harper.

Beyond a lack of education is a life-threatening problem that has developed over the years. Rebel armies are kidnapping small children and forcing them into military service.

"These children have been completely robbed of their childhoods," said Susan Harper.

The Harpers hope to raise awareness about the plight of children in Uganda and to raise money to build schools there.

"Sixty percent of the schools in northern Uganda have been closed because of the war," said Charles Harper, who is an executive with the Templeton Foundation.

"Our commitment is to raise \$100,000," he added.

This concept of giving, not getting is not new in the Harper home. In fact, it started in 1999 when the Harpers first traveled to Haiti and to the Dominican Republic.

In the summer of 2004, the Harpers made their first trip to East Africa.

"It's a big experience for [the children] to meet with kids their own age," Susan Harper said.

The Harper children learned firsthand how vastly different their lives are from children being raised in poverty.

For example, said Susan Harper, her children were wondering what the bedrooms of children there would be like.

"Well, they found out that they didn't have a bedroom," said Susan Harper. In fact, on their last trip to Uganda, they met



an entire family who lived in a one-room hut.

"Charley played soccer," said Susan Harper. "The soccer balls were made with banana leaves."

But, she adds, the differences didn't seem to matter. "The kids had a lot of fun together."

As for the safety of his family in what could be a very dangerous place, Charles Harper said the fighting in the area has slowed over the past several weeks.

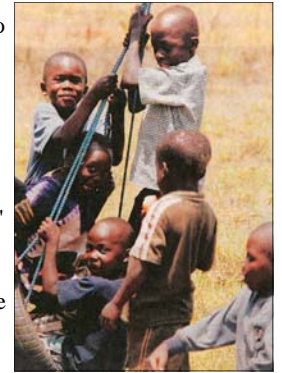
"We've been told it's safe," he said.

Since Uganda is a predominantly a Christian nation, said the Harpers, the family plans to meet with children living in refugee camps over Christmas. There, they will give small presents and cards they made at home.

The children said they don't mind spending time away from home during the holidays.

"I think it's a better us of my time," said 14-year-old Charley Harper. "I think it will make [the people] happy."

Donations to build schools in Uganda can be made to Invisible Children and sent to Geneva Global, Attn: Debbie Attardi, 1550 Liberty Ride Drive, Suite 330, Wayne, PA, 19087



On a past visit to a project, the Harpers visited outside Kampala, Becky Harper captures this photo of a gleeful group of boys on a tire swing (above). The Harpers, gathered for a family photo in Africa in 2004, include (from left) Charles; Charley (back), now 14; Sarah, now 9; Katie, now 12; Becky, now 18, and Susan.