

THE LANGUAGE CONNECTION

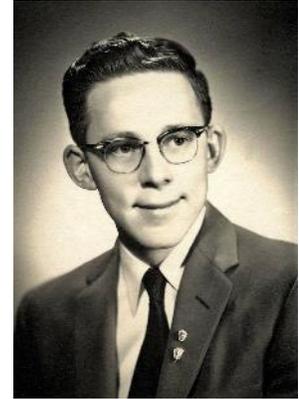
By Pam Rasmussen, International Ministries Office



Esther Stebbins settled into her first day of Spanish class at Wheaton just as a wiry young man with a crop of wavy hair entered the room.

"I wonder who that is?" she thought.

Her question was answered when, upon finishing a half-hour stint in the language lab, Jack Abbott arrived to take his turn at the same assigned booth. From then on, with each 'changing of the guard,' there was time for chitchat.



"I remember the thing that really impressed me about Esther was that I could talk to her so easily. I'd had a hard time talking with girls as I was pretty shy," Jack confessed.

As their friendship grew, so did their knowledge of one another.

Jack, the son of a pastor, was born right at the time his parents were finishing their schooling at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. Six weeks later, the family moved to Colorado. Esther was a native from Upstate New York, and had been raised in a Christian family.

Both had put their faith in Christ as children, but had similar experiences in doubting their salvation. It wasn't until their adult years that the issue was settled.

Jack entered Wheaton College and chose a Bible major, but, after his sophomore year, he changed to Greek to get more Bible courses. In his senior year, Esther came in as a junior, having already completed a three-year RN program at West Suburban Hospital in Oak Park, Illinois. Neither she nor Jack were aware of the way God was weaving their lives for the future.



"It wasn't until spring that we had our first date," Esther said. "We started dating April 1st, April Fool's Day," she laughed.

"I felt comfortable and confident about the 'rightness' of the relationship, different than any other I'd had before," Esther stated. "Jack seemed ordinary and real, not trying to be 'cool' or the 'way' some kids thought Wheaton students

should be, which made it easy for me to relate to him. I appreciated his quiet manner, his love for the Lord and desire for His will."

As their friendship deepened, they began to talk about the future. They were leaning toward a career in missions.

While Jack was in college, he'd heard of New Tribes Mission, and, on Friday evenings, he and a friend would pray for missionaries.

"When I left college," Jack continued, "I had a job teaching and was living with my parents. During that Fall, Dad had three different missionaries come for evening service. The third one was a representative of New Tribes Mission, and he sat down and talked with me. I told him that I was interested in Esther, so he sent me two packets of information, and I sent one on to her."

"As for me," Esther added, "when I was a very young child, I remember playing on the floor and my mother was talking to me about missionaries. That was the first I'd heard of them. She told me that there was a great need for missionaries, and told me what they were. I remember saying to myself, 'Well then, that's what I'll do if there's a need for them!' In all the ups and downs throughout the years, I never did lose that thought.

"I had never heard of New Tribes Mission until Jack sent me the literature. I had thought of doing jungle missionary work as a nurse. Then, when I read the literature, it seemed to be exactly what I would be interested in."

"We were engaged at Christmas of that year," Jack said. "And we decided that we would pray about entering New Tribes Mission and if that's what God wanted us to do. We decided by March to make a decision." By the time March rolled around, the couple had sensed God's direction to New Tribes.



A Wheaton tradition: Ringing the bell to announce their engagement.

On Saturday, July 13, 1963, the two were wed in Esther's home church – Second Baptist in Auburn, New York. Jack became a member there.

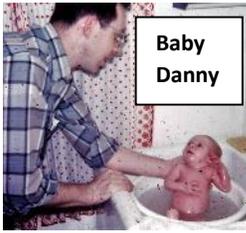
"They took us on for \$25 a month not long after we left for 'Boot Camp' [today called Missionary Training Center, or MTC] in Oviedo, Florida," Esther stated. "And we didn't have much more support than that."

The Abbotts had in mind that they would eventually serve as teachers at the Tamatama High School in Venezuela, because the man who had sent Jack the literature had told him of that need.

However, after moving in 1964 to the NTM Language School in Waukesha, Wisconsin, Jack began to 'shine' in linguistics. That caused him to wonder if he would be of more use working with a tribal language than teaching in a high school? But, at the point of finishing their language-school studies, the Abbotts were asked to stay on and teach.

"It's amazing to me how the Lord leads," Jack said. "Three different students had [earlier] asked me if I'd ever considered staying and teaching at the language school. I really hadn't thought about it."

“We were on staff for three years in Wisconsin,” Esther said.



By now, the Abbotts had two children. In 1967, their third child, Danny, was born, only to die nine weeks later from a heart defect. “It was a hard time,” Esther said, “as he had appeared healthy right up until three days before his death.”



In 1968, with the help of her brother, Esther moved with the language school to Camdenton, Missouri. Jack was in New Guinea that summer and Esther was expecting again.

“It was a month before Jack got back,” she said. “A month after that, David was born.”

That Fall, the first semester began in the new location, and things were rough.

“I had a baby in my arms, and there was no road to the Child Care [building], so I’d be going through that mud, and the kids would step out of their boots, and it would be all the way up their legs,” Esther lamented. “I can still remember the clods of dirt when we were getting them out of their clothes back home at noon.”



Over the next 20 years, the Abbotts watched the development of the MTC property, which included the construction of nice gravel roads, more student apartments, adequate classrooms and additional staff housing. Throughout that time, Jack and Esther honed their areas of service.

“I taught Introductory Linguistics,”

Jack said, “and Esther taught Introductory Spanish for 12 years, before moving into a preschool ministry.”



Teaching preschool was the perfect niche for Esther, and she loved every minute of it. “It was so much fun,” she said. “To me it was a blessing that God allowed me to do it.”

“In 1984, I felt I was at the end of what I could really do as far as improving the linguistics course without having some kind of field experience,” Jack shared. He was still thinking about that when the NTM leadership in the Philippines contacted him and asked if he’d consider going to there to be the director of the Tagalog Language Course in Lipa City.

“It was particularly good for Jack to have field experience,” Esther stated, “but I thought, ‘Whoa, do you **really** mean we are going overseas?’”



1982 – Two years before going to the Philippines.

Back: Esther, Jack, Joel, John, Beth

Front: David, Tim

“Our oldest child had just gotten married two-weeks prior and he and his wife were continuing missionary training. Our daughter had just graduated from Bible school and was heading for NTM’s boot camp in Canada. She was single. We offered for her to go with us, but it didn’t make sense. It was very difficult to leave behind an unmarried daughter!”

The three younger children went with their parents to the Philippines and were enrolled in boarding school.

Then Esther, especially, faced culture shock.

“It was major!” Esther confessed. “When we got there, we couldn’t speak the language, we didn’t know anything and we didn’t have our children. I said to myself, ‘I was a mother of five, I ran the house, I ran the department in child care. Now I am worthless! I feel like I’m somebody else.’”

Jack, too, had to make adjustments. His struggle came in attempting to learn Tagalog and speak it correctly.

“One of the problems I had,” he said, “was that, in the Philippines, status is really important. Because I was the director of the school, and an American as well, the people didn’t want to correct me.”

But, Jack’s analytical mind was consistently tucking the language into compartments. He understood the grammar, so was able to help his missionary students gain an understanding of it as well. His main task, however, was teaching them about the Filipino culture. During that first four years, Jack estimates that approximately 90 students took the course, many of them from mission boards other than NTM.



Teaching Filipino Culture to new missionaries

“We used to say, ‘We got here on different ships, but now we are all in the same boat,’” Esther joked.

“One of the things we did in the Tagalog course,” Jack said, “was rewrite the lessons so that people could understand them. I tried to make them a more meaning-based translation, rather than a literal one.”

Esther spent most of her time typing up the changes on an old electric typewriter. Another facet of her ministry was being a liaison between the new missionary ladies and their house help – assisting both sides in understanding one another.

The Abbotts served at the Tagalog Language School for one term, and then went on furlough. They returned to Lipa City for two more years, until the language course changed its



Esther checking Tagalog lessons

teaching approach and closed the school. Jack and Esther were then asked to serve at the school for missionary children in Aritao.



“I taught Bible, English and ‘Shop’ (woodworking) in fifth through eighth grades,” Jack said. “Esther team-taught in first through fourth grades and, also, taught Art and Music to all eight grades.”



At the end of that year, the Abbotts returned to the NTM Language School in Camdenton, Missouri.

“I went back and taught Language Acquisition,” Jack said “but, in the Philippines, I had come to the realization that [in Camdenton] we had taught a lot about analysis but very little about how to learn a language. I knew we had to do something different.”

He was excited when Vern Johnson, home on furlough from the Ivory Coast, shared with him a stack of notes taken at a course taught by Greg Thompson – a Wycliffe missionary in Africa. “I started reading through them,” Jack said, “and I realized, ‘Wow! This man has a different way of looking at learning a language.’ Our language course had been based on the theory of making habits – learning dialogues and drills. But Mr. Thompson taught learning a language through understanding messages – through developing a mental blueprint of the language from hearing it with meaning, and later producing speech.

“[So,] in 1998, we started teaching Total Physical Response (TPR). I can remember the difference it made when we started teaching it. I was absolutely amazed,” Jack smiled, “that, in six-weeks’ time, people were beginning to **use** the vocabulary they’d learned, and they hadn’t memorized it! Today, the approach has gone two or three steps beyond, but they are still using the basis of learning through meaning rather than through grammar.”

Although 1998 was a break-through year in teaching language acquisition, it was also a heartbreaking year for the Abbotts. Their 23-year-old son, Joel, their youngest child, was studying electronics in Missouri, with the goal of doing avionics with TA/C [Tribal Air Communications – NTM’s missionary flight program].

On an early morning in March, Joel hit black ice on his way back to school after visiting his parents. He was instantly killed.

No one ever expects to outlive their children. People often wonder how a parent copes with such a loss.



“Personally, during that time of the greatest sadness and hardest-to-comprehend thing I’d ever experienced,” Esther shared, “I had an inner peace that whatever God does is right.” God’s sovereignty was a theme she’d been teaching to her preschoolers right before He chose to take Joel Home.

To get through this gut-wrenching time, Esther set about honoring Joel’s memory. She created an album



with pictures of him interacting with the family, and included an autobiography he’d written in high school, which told of specific ways he appreciated each of his siblings. She also added letters to the family from his friends. There is a nice photo of Joel hanging under a clock between their kitchen and living room. Although 19 years have passed, Joel remains ageless in that frame. It’s how the Abbotts last remember him.

“At one time,” Esther smiled, “a long time ago, all of our kids were missionaries with New Tribes: In Mexico, Paraguay, at Language School and in the Philippines. Joel graduated from New Tribes Bible Institute in Waukesha, Wisconsin.” The children’s heart for the lost reflects on parents who prioritized the Great Commission.



(Photo taken in 1993) Today, the Abbotts have nine grandchildren, one great-grand and another on the way.

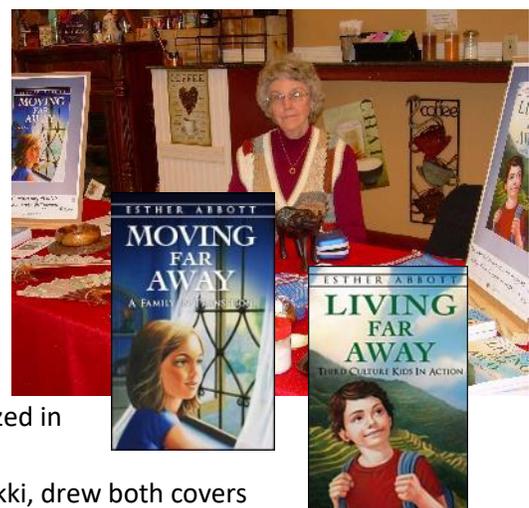
In 2007, Jack and Esther decided to move to the NTM Retirement Homes in Sanford, Florida. But before they left the language school, they’d had the joy of working with their son, John, who had joined the staff.



“He’s still there,” Esther said. “He was working under Jack. Gradually over the years, Jack began working under him.”

Her husband chuckled when she shared that tidbit.

After the Abbotts settled in at the retirement



homes, Esther began teaching second-grade math at NTM’s Lake Monroe Christian Academy (LMCA), about a mile from her house. She did that for five years, until the school downsized in 2012. Since then, she has authored two missionary novels for families, born out of her love for kids. (Her granddaughter, Nikki, drew both covers

and most of the illustrations.) More recently, Esther has been a reviewer of a new Bible curriculum for home schoolers, grades 1-6.

Jack, too, has not been one to sit still. He proofreads Bible-teaching curriculums and the formatting of tribal New Testaments. He is currently working on the Semandang translation from the Asia Pacific.

“As I look back, I’ve never lived in a tribal setting and I’ve never translated the Bible into another language,” Jack confided, “but I realize that a good number of my students have. What a privilege!”

At this point, Jack’s voice slightly cracked from a



heart full of gratitude for his part in the overall scheme

of missions. The young man who took Latin in high school and Greek in college didn’t realize then that God was in the process of giving him a set of language skills that would eventually connect him with hundreds of missionary candidates. The training Jack would help provide would equip those students to connect with tribal people around the world, ultimately connecting them to the Body of Christ.

“One thing I think of is that God just uses ordinary people,” Esther added. “I was impressed with how Jesus, when He was talking to His disciples in Mark 16:14, 15, reprimanded them for their lack of faith and stubborn refusal to believe. And then, in the next breath, Jesus said, ‘Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel.’ God can use ordinary, imperfect people in whatever way He wants.”

The Abbotts don’t boast being anything but ordinary, but, through Jack and Esther’s obedience, the Lord has certainly done extraordinary things to further His work.



Jack does quality woodworking: bowls, candle holders, lazy Susans and furniture. He uses wood from a variety of sources.



Jack (back, second from the left) was part of the team that edited the Papua New Guinea Siawi New Testament.

