

## The House of Hope

I had the privilege of going to China and witnessing the work that God is doing through Robin and Joyce Hill. They are wonderful servants of God who lovingly care for the “least of these”. I hope that many will read this book and consider their example.

– **Francis Chan**, author of *Crazy Love*

This is a wonderful book. It tells how God works through us to save the weakest of the weak, bringing people together from across the world to build families in amazing and miraculous ways. It can only encourage all who love to read about God’s grace, His faithfulness and His love for all people.

– **John Mumford**, National Director, Vineyard Churches UK and Ireland

Virgin Atlantic is extremely privileged to be associated with the Hope Healing Home and the inspirational, humbling work of Joyce and Robin Hill and their amazing team. All of us are proud of our relationship with the New Hope Foundation and are in awe of the dignity, kindness and love which those special people who work at the Home share with the special children in their care.

– **Jonathan Harding**, General Manager International, Virgin Atlantic

I have been fortunate enough to see the Hope Healing Home grow from an idea nearly two decades ago to the extraordinarily joyous and tangible message of love it is today. My sense of pride at the generosity and servitude of my family in bringing dignity and hope to the lives of these children cannot be expressed in words.

– **Adam Liaw**, Masterchef Australia 2010

It has been my privilege to watch as God has raised up Joyce and Robin to give life-saving care to many young orphans from across China. I know of nothing more central to our message of love or of greater importance to God, than to care for these that cannot care for themselves. You will discover how one couple fully sold out to God has made it possible for so many to live. A modern-day miracle of God using His people to change the world!

– **Jon Davis**, Lead Pastor, Beijing International Christian Fellowship

Liz Gifford's compelling account of how a family gave up their comfortable, expatriate life in China to take sick and abandoned orphans into their home is both moving and challenging. In telling how hundreds of China's most neglected children have been rescued from oblivion, the author remains lucid and unsentimental, letting the stories speak clearly for themselves. *The House of Hope* is what every reader longs for: a great story well told.

– **Rhidian Brook**, broadcaster and author

One of the greatest blessings of my work in China has been meeting Joyce and Robin Hill and getting to see through them what it means to be God's hands and feet in the world. They have shown me so clearly that until a child draws their last breath, we must do everything in our power to help them know love. Each and every day, through their tireless efforts, a true story of hope is being written for children who would otherwise be forgotten.

– **Amy Eldridge**, Executive Director, Love Without Boundaries Foundation

The reality of God's love explains how Rob and Joyce can so love the sick orphans of China! They have given their lives to care for each new arrival, as their very own, that each one may have life and be loved. New Hope Foundation is the "aroma of Christ".

– **Sally Allred Lockett**, Founder and Director, Portion for Orphans



# The House of Hope

God's love for the abandoned orphans of China

Elisabeth Gifford

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*Educational* and *Independent* newspapers. She holds an MA in Creative Writing from the course run by Sir Andrew Motion at Royal Holloway University, London.

# Foreword

The first time Mary Beth and I visited Robin and Joyce Hill in 2005, we immediately fell in love with the children and the way things were being done.

A year later we visited Joyce again, and she let Mary Beth go with her to see the new unit they were opening in an orphanage in central China. She told us that the orphanage was going to let her have the fifth floor to help the sickest children there.

We had already adopted three daughters from China by then, so we had seen the needs, but Mary Beth and I had never seen such devastating levels of need before. When Joyce explained how she was going to help those terminally ill children who were going to pass away – and help them to live their last days with dignity and love – then we knew that we had to do whatever we could to help Robin and Joyce carry out their work in China.

A year later we came back. We got to see how many of those same very sick children had survived. They had been given medical help and were thriving and being cared for – and we especially loved watching how Joyce really cares for all children as if they are VIPs. Some of them were well enough to go forward for adoption into families. It was so rewarding to see how many dying children were being rescued, loved and given a future.

Since then we have had the wonderful privilege of being a part of building the new home in Luoyang, Maria's Big House of Hope – named in honor and memory of our daughter Maria, who was a “special needs” orphan from China. We had the chance

to spend a couple of days there in the first week it opened in the summer of 2009. We saw two little ones arrive who were so ill that they could only be loved and comforted as they passed away. We also saw many children who would one day be well enough to be adopted into their own families. It was such a privilege to be there.

Nine years ago, after we had adopted our own three daughters from China, Mary Beth and I began dreaming of some way to help some of the needy children we had seen there. Partnering with Joyce and Robin has meant that that dream has become a reality.

I love the quality of the work that the Hills do... and the results of their wonderful work in China have been nothing short of amazing. To date, they have cared for over 1,000 babies.

We as a family have come to realize that God truly loves orphans. Every time we do something to make their lives better, I believe He is there smiling and singing. You don't even have to say much – just “show up” and, as James 1:27 reminds us, “pure and true religion” will happen.

Robin and Joyce have changed the lives of many children, and I can say from experience that if you get involved with them, you will be changed as well.

**Steven Curtis Chapman**

# Introduction

In November 1998, Rob and I clearly heard the call of God on our lives for the specific purpose of remaining in China and taking sick, disabled and abandoned children into our home; to love them and care for them as if they were our own, to treat their physical illnesses, and to heal the hurt in their hearts.

On 1 April 1999 (God does have a sense of humour!) we moved out to a small village and began to take children into our home. We thought we would be caring for just a few children, but to date Robin and I have taken in and cared for over 1,000 medically needy children. This may be a drop in the bucket compared to the needs out there, but every child has received our love and the best medical care we can provide. Many lives have been saved and many children now have “forever families”. Many lives of those around the children have been touched and changed.

Since we set up that first baby’s cot in our dining room, God’s hand in providing for us has been nothing short of miraculous. As our organization grows, our desire is to keep on providing the children with the best care possible, always with the same standard of facilities that we would provide for our own children.

There have been difficult times, but God held us in His arms when we were suffering and He has not once failed us. We feel personally honoured to have experienced these past few years. This is His work and His children whom we care for.

So many people have encouraged and supported the home in every possible way. God bless you all. We pray that you will

ceaselessly strive to walk with our Father in the plan that He has for your lives.

Let nothing deter you from serving Him.

**Joyce and Robin Hill**

# 1

## The overnight train to Beijing

*When my father and my mother forsake me, then the  
LORD will take me up.*

PSALM 27:10 (KJV)

**I**n September 2003 a woman boarded the overnight train to Beijing carrying a newborn baby. The baby was extremely sick. She laid the little boy on her sleeper platform and curled herself alongside him. The other five people in the carriage had not been pleased to see a baby, but for a newborn he was strangely quiet. The woman put her hand in front of the baby's face to check that he was still breathing and hoped he would last until the train pulled in at Beijing Station in the morning. There, a second woman would be waiting to rush the baby straight to a hospital.

The baby took some sips of water, but was no longer feeding. Any milk made him gag. If you got close, the baby's breath was starting to have a sour, rotting smell, and his stomach was tight and distended. The woman could not sleep that night. Sometimes she put her hand on his chest to check that he was still alive. Once, she changed his diaper. It was damp, but not dirty. Since he had been born four days ago, this baby had not yet passed any

meconium or waste matter. His diaper was never dirty. He had been born with a rare condition where there is no opening to the bowel. Soon he would begin to die as his digestive system began to back up. In such a tiny baby, this could happen very fast. Left to run its course, it was an agonizing death.

His birth parents had left the baby on the streets. It is hard to understand the kind of desperation that could drive parents to abandon their own child. Probably, they were too poor to be able to pay for hospital bills. Certainly they would not know that anything could be done to cure their baby's condition.

The very worst curse that you can give a Chinese father is to wish his son will be born with no anus, as this would mean not only the death of his precious son and heir but also the loss of the person who would continue to worship and pray for the family ancestors. Also, there are deep superstitions in rural China around dying children: in some areas, families still believe that the death of a child curses the house.

Perhaps both parents agreed to abandon the child. Perhaps the father took him while the mother slept. But during the night the baby was left on the streets of a town in Northern China. It was September, and the weather was still warm. By morning, he was found and taken to a Children's Welfare Institute. The staff wrapped him and left him, knowing that he would die.

The director of the baby's CWI happened to be visiting Robin and Joyce Hill at their new foster home in Beijing. Rob showed the director into the busy nurseries, with their active and healthy babies, and showed him the board with rows and rows of baby photos, explaining the different surgeries and medical care that had been arranged to save the children's lives. One little boy, called Gene, had been born without an opening to his bowel but had been given emergency surgery to save his

life. The director looked puzzled.

“We have a baby with that condition,” he said, “but we don’t expect him to live very long.”

“We can help him,” Rob said, “if you can just get him here.”

The director telephoned back to his Children’s Welfare Institute. Within hours, the child was on the night train, accompanied by one of the CWI nannies, and within days a network of people had drawn together to try to save the life of this fragile child; funds were already coming in from places as far apart as Singapore and Tennessee to pay for the further surgeries needed after this emergency colostomy to restore the baby to complete health. It would take the effort of many people from around the world to bring together the skills, the funds and the will needed to form the net that would save this child’s life. In some ways, it seemed an effort totally disproportionate to the size of this tiny, dying baby.

Far away on the other side of the world, another woman turned over in her sleep. It was getting colder now that it was September and she pulled the blankets up higher. Recently she had been restless and finding it hard to sleep. A short while ago she had applied to adopt a baby in China.

At Beijing Station, Marsha, a worker from Hope Foster Home, was waiting to take the baby from the CWI nanny. Joyce had briefed Marsha on the baby’s condition and so she knew that she needed to get him over to the hospital fast. When she took him from the nanny’s arms she saw a beautiful baby with a shock of black hair, but the child was very dehydrated and emaciated. She managed to get a taxi and watched anxiously as the driver negotiated the streams of Beijing traffic. The baby urgently needed to be put on a drip, as he would no longer take even a mouthful of water.

As a Beijinger, Marsha knew her way around the local hospitals

and how things worked. She insisted on seeing a doctor quickly in spite of the queues of people already waiting. The doctor examined the child. He was surprised to hear that this was not Marsha's child, but an infant she had only just met. He was also surprised to see such a rare case present itself at the hospital. He agreed to arrange surgery urgently.

Marsha rang the office at Hope Foster Home and explained to Joyce Hill that the baby was doing as well as could be expected. He was on a drip and surgery was scheduled for the next day. Joyce told her a nanny would be arriving at the hospital soon who would stay with the baby in hospital while he recovered from surgery. She would be the baby's own nanny and would care for the child over the next two or three years while he lived at Hope Foster Home and underwent the second and third operations needed to complete his recovery.

Joyce Hill added the baby's name to the board of pictures in her office: photos of so many babies, once given up as hopeless cases but now getting the medical care they needed to be healed. To the right-hand side was a board of older babies and toddlers, bonny and healthy, with small stickers on the corner of each photo. These babies were now adopted and living with their new families.

Some of the newly arrived babies still looked very thin and unwell in their little pictures. Some of the new babies, in spite of every effort, would not make it. But all the babies would get the best possible care that could be arranged medically, and the love of their nannies and foster parents.

Again and again, people asked the Hills why they put so much effort and time into these unwanted and sickly babies, sometimes against the odds.

"I think God is painting a picture," Rob explains, "of how

God wants these babies to be treated; of how much He cares for even the most unwanted and, to human eyes, worthless among us. I think He is showing us that He wants to give the best care to those we consider the least. How much He cares for all of us.”

Robin and Joyce Hill started off with one cot in the family dining room to care for one child. Since then they have cared for hundreds of sick and abandoned babies, working alongside several CWIs in China. Many lives have been saved, and many abandoned children have gone on to new lives with adopted families. Children who have been terminally sick have been cared for with love and have been able to die peacefully and with the best possible pain relief and care.

As well as their foster home in Beijing, the Hills have recently built a 150-bed unit, in partnership with the Show Hope organization, to care for children with a range of medical needs. The Hills now have four palliative care units for babies who are not expected to live, but where many of the children recover against all odds. They continue to take in sick children from near Beijing and from all parts of China, from as far south as Hainan Island and as far west as Urumqi.

Since they began in 2000, their work has expanded and they have met and begun to work alongside other people and organizations that have the same vision to help sick and abandoned children in China.

But there are still many needs to be met, and at present several areas in China are asking for the Hills to expand their help into new places. Sometimes, in a country of 1.3 billion people, the problems seem so vast that one might be tempted to feel hopeless and walk away. But the Hills always quote the starfish story:

*Hundreds of stranded starfish were dying along a beach, and an old man was slowly throwing them back into the sea one by one. Someone came along and pointed out that his task was hopeless and told him, "It won't make any difference, there are too many for you to save them." But the old man held up a starfish and said, "It makes a difference to this one," and then threw it back in the sea.*

It is impossible to meet the Hills and hear their story without asking questions about how you live your own life.

\* \* \*

Robin and Joyce Hill are quite clear that it was never part of their life plan to stay in China and open a foster home for sick and disabled children. They were living in China and enjoying a comfortable expatriate lifestyle when their local church organized a visit to a children's home and Joyce and Robin went along. They took toys and diapers, and looked forward to an enjoyable day playing with the children.

But what happened during that day changed the course of their lives. Joyce said, "It was a heartbreaking experience for me to see the children's needs. I felt that we were just going there as rich expatriate people and bringing a few toys and diapers, but then we were coming away, and nothing was really going to happen to change those children's lives. The people we were with had been there before, and they were playing and laughing with the older children. But Robin and I spent our time with the younger babies and were just devastated by the conditions they lived in; we were crying the whole time.

"I think God put a burden on us that day. When Rob and I

came out we stood at the Children's Welfare Institute gates and we prayed. We prayed that we did not want to come back unless we could make a real difference to these babies' lives."

For the next four years, Robin and Joyce tried to find a way to make a material difference to the children's lives. Through his company, Rob offered help, but he was told that there were no orphans in need. No doors opened for them to be able to do anything to make a difference. Over time, the memory got pushed down. Joyce and Rob continued with their life as before, but they were never able to completely forget the needs that they had seen that day.

In 1998, Rob's four-year posting in China with his Swedish engineering company was coming to an end and it was time to move on to a new assignment. The Hills had decided that they wanted to move from China.

2 November was Rob's fiftieth birthday. As he shaved in front of the mirror that morning he was in thoughtful mood. He found himself praying. "Lord, there has got to be more to life than tungsten carbide and balance sheets and selling stuff to people to make a profit. There's got to be more to life than this."

A few days later, some friends invited Robin and Joyce to a meeting about a possible local project. The Hills had been part-owners of a small factory producing refrigerator magnets that aimed to raise funds to support community projects around Beijing. Joyce had been involved in running the Beijing sales office. Now, a piece of land nearby had become available where it would be possible to build a permanent community centre, and the people involved were going to discuss how it could best be put to use. Robin and Joyce knew that they would be leaving China but they went along to the meeting to offer any input they might have. Various ideas were discussed and Robin was

pitching in with plenty of suggestions, but Joyce was strangely quiet. She sat through the meeting without saying a word.

She still did not speak as they left the meeting. They walked downstairs and got into the car ready to drive back home. Robin was surprised as Joyce sat next to him in silence. This was not her usual style.

“Well, what did you think of that?” he asked her finally.

She looked over at him and said, “I would like to ask our friends if we can use a third of the land. I think we should build our own home there and build a foster home for sick and unwanted babies. Rob, I think God is asking us to get into a river and I don’t know where we are going to end up, but I think we should get in and we should just go with it. We have this opportunity to take in sick babies, and I think we are being asked to stay in China – to stay here permanently.”

Robin stared at Joyce, speechless. He felt like a thunderclap had just hit him. He and Joyce found themselves sitting in the car, with tears streaming down their faces. It was a complete shock to both of them. Until that moment, neither of them had had any plans to stay, and certainly no plans to start a foster home.

Rob said later, “It was like God was sitting there saying, ‘There, that’s what I’m asking you. Do you want to do it?’ And there was a sense that this was going to be something different, a real fun, rollercoaster ride – and that He was going to be with us. It wasn’t like God was saying in capital letters, ‘I WANT YOU TO GIVE YOUR LIVES TO ORPHANS.’ It was more a sense that God was saying, ‘This is really going to be different, and I am going to be with you.’”

Rob had worked for Sandvik for over twenty years, and during that time he’d been promoted to senior management and was set for a good retirement through the company. But in the space of

two weeks, everything changed. He resigned from his company and he and Joyce decided to stay in China permanently and open a home for sick and unwanted babies.