

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This is the incredible, true-life story of Michael and Delane, an ordinary couple who listened as God led them from joblessness to starting and growing a business, then into ministries that have taken them from underprivileged neighborhoods in the United States to rural villages and orphan care in sub-Saharan Africa.

It's a story of life lessons by example, of the elation and frustration in starting and growing a business, interwoven with heartwarming and heartbreaking stories of serving in their community and abroad—and how God led the way in it all.

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INTRODUCTION

A baby boy was born in 2017 to a teenage mom who soon abandoned him in Lusaka, the capital city of Zambia, and he became one of the more than 1.2 million orphans under the age of fifteen in that south-central African country. He was born deaf, and initially was thought to be unable to speak. He was taken to Kabwata Orphanage (named after a neighborhood in Lusaka, Zambia) as an infant and would join the fifty-plus children already living there, who would become his “brothers and sisters.”

Angela was their “mother” at the orphanage that she had founded almost twenty years before, and they would have many “aunties,” women who dedicated their lives to loving and nurturing the children, helping to raise them and give them a future that most orphans in Zambia could only dream about. We were told that without Kabwata, Angela, and others, the baby boy would have had little chance of surviving infancy in this sub-Saharan country where the infant death rate is five times the rate in the United States, and if he had, he “likely would have been used to beg on the streets for his livelihood.”

Six years later, however, he was working hard, making progress each and every day in overcoming the challenges posed by his lack of hearing and speech. Angela once said he was one of the most intelligent toddlers she’d ever met. Following a medical assessment, it was confirmed that he would need to attend a special school in Lusaka for hard-of-hearing children, where he is now enrolled and thriving. Now a talented young student, he has been learning to speak using sign language.

His name is “Michael,” and Michael is a true blessing from God to the world, to Kabwata Orphanage, to his “brothers,” “sisters,” “aunties,” and Angela, and especially to us, my wife, Delane, and me. In Zambia,

it is tradition that a village elder should name a new baby, and that's how we came to know Michael.

My wife, Delane and I had been helping to support Kabwata Orphanage for ten years, and we were on our second visit to visit Angela and the kids in 2017, the year Michael was born. Much to our surprise, Angela asked us to name the new baby, the new member of the Kabwata family.

We were so deeply honored, and after much consideration, we chose the name Michael—after the great archangel of the Bible. Michael, the archangel, was a spiritual warrior in the battle of good and evil, a champion of justice. Our prayer was that the strength of this namesake would be a blessing upon little Michael, who had started life without much hope, but through the grace of God was given a home, a family, and a future. *Michael* was, indeed, a fitting name, and Michael was, indeed, a blessing from God!

Kabwata Orphanage is just one of the many ministries and adventures—including founding and growing our company, ParaWest—that God has led us to through His *whispers* over the past twenty years. The ministries we've been blessed to serve, both financially and with the sweat of our brow, have been such an integral part of our adventure that it seemed appropriate to begin this book here.

In his very successful book series that share “God Winks,” Squire Bushnell talks about seeming coincidences that occur, which, when looked at closer or looked back upon, are clearly God's doing. I like to call them “God *whispers*,” but these God *whispers* are somewhat different. They're *whispers* you hear in your heart. They're *whispers* that provide both guidance and confirmation along your path in life. I believe every Christian experiences them, but the choice to act upon them or to ignore them is a decision each individual must make of their own “free will.”

Over the past twenty years, Delane and I have been blessed to have heard and acted on His *whispers*, and it's safe to say that there have

been too many to count. But through these many years, those *whispers* have been as clear to us as if He'd written a script for our lives and revealed it along the way.

Today, ParaWest Management, our apartment management company (named to complement our former partner's name, "Paramount Financial"), has offices in Scottsdale, Arizona, and Houston, Texas, and operates in more than fifteen cities across five states. Over the past twenty years, we've managed real estate assets valued at more than \$1.5 billion and completed renovation projects totaling more than \$75 million. All this takes a big team, and we have nearly two hundred employees to get the job done. That "job" is to provide desirable, high-quality rental housing to our residents, as well as investment management services to our clients and partners.

Although the means that ParaWest has provided toward ministries may not be considered "substantial" in a world where new mega-millionaires and -billionaires are minted each year due to the global reach of the internet, we have been blessed to be able to use the resources that He has given us in ways that have impacted and changed many lives along the way. And we have seen how He can take any means or gift, no matter how large or small, and multiply its effect many times over in doing good in this world!

Initially, this book was going to just be a self-improvement-type guide about our adventure and God's hand in it, with self-help suggestions to the reader along the way to provide ideas on how to look to similar possibilities in their own life. It seems like every book today lays out some kind of "action steps" (e.g., step 1, 2, 3 . . .) to achieve something, and that was to be the initial premise. After much reflection, however, we determined that God didn't want us to share just a "1, 2, 3 to-do list." He wanted us to tell *our story*, to encourage readers from their own perspective and their own circumstances to look to Him for inspiration, direction, discernment, and wisdom... to listen for His *whispers* in their own lives.

So, that's what we've done. This is our story, our lives, our legacy. It's a legacy of business, ministries, people, places, and faith, all driven by His *whispers*. It's a legacy that includes our entrepreneurial adventure with God, a story about starting and growing a business that we had never planned to start, woven with stories of the ministries we had never planned to serve, and God's hand in all of it and in the lives that have been touched along the way.

Our adventure has been about looking to Him for guidance and thanking Him each and every day. It's about working hard and smart, doing the best we can and applying strong values and principles, so that we're positioned for Him to use us for His glory. And it's about using the God-given resources He has provided to help others along the way, to be His light in this world, as well as His hands and His feet. We know we could never have accomplished these things on our own. It has been God's doing and God's plan all along!

In the following pages, we'll take you on our adventure with God at our side. Yes, it's been a true adventure, taking us from Scottsdale, Arizona, to Houston, Texas, and halfway around the world to Africa. Our journey has impacted thousands of lives, including our own employees, partners, and clients, and those we've served, including underprivileged children and families, homeless families, refugees, orphaned children, and many others. We'll describe the successes and the failures, the good times and the struggles, and how we've seen God's hand in it all along the way.

And yet, even though this story is about our lives, our business, and our adventure, it could easily be rewritten to tell the story of almost anyone, in any job or any business. We believe that no matter where you're at in life, you can fulfill your dreams by listening to God's *whispers*, working hard, and seeking and following His will. Our prayer for you, dear reader, is that you'll listen to your own God *whispers* and find your passion and self-fulfillment through a God-led adventure

that will bring you all that your heart desires—as you look to Him and seek to help others along the way.

“God Notes”

In writing this book, we found that there were so many great stories of how God had worked in our lives; however, many of them didn't fit directly into the narrative of our entrepreneurial adventure. So, we've included them along the way and called them “God Notes” (i.e., footnotes from God). Hopefully, some of these may invoke readers' stories of their own.

CHAPTER 1

Downsized

We hadn't planned on starting our own business, and we certainly hadn't planned the adventure it would lead us on for the next twenty-plus years of our lives. We both had successful careers and were not considering the risks and dramatic life changes that starting a business would entail. If we've learned anything in this life, however, it's that we're not in total control, and the paths we're led down may be far different from those of our early hopes, dreams, and aspirations. So we began our adventure in March 2003, and here's what led up to that.

It was President's Day, February 17, 2003, but I had to work. The company I had worked with for the past six months was quite small, and the owner didn't accommodate many holidays other than the biggies such as Christmas, the Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, and the like. Delane was staying home that day as her company did, in fact, celebrate the holiday.

Our workday started early, so I arrived at the office at 7:30 a.m. As I walked into the office that day, however, things were different. My boss had moved into what had been our controller's office the previous Friday, and no one else was around. So I stepped into his office to chat, and over the next five minutes, I learned he was "downsizing" the company—including my job, which no longer existed. And, as they say, that was that. Out the door I went, with a modicum of severance and vacation pay, not the way I had expected to start my week.

When I arrived back home a little after eight, Delane was just getting out of bed. Somewhat still in shock, I rambled on to her about what had happened, and of course, she, too, was taken aback. We

hadn't seen this coming. Losing my job, however, was only the half of it. Delane had been notified about a week earlier that the company she was working for was *also* downsizing, and her salary was being cut in half. We hadn't seen that one coming, either, but at that time, we felt that as long as I was working, we'd be okay. But not anymore!

Now, anyone who's been working for a few years is familiar with that ugly term: *downsized*. It's kind of a wannabe respectful explanation for firing people: "laying them off." However, the truth is, it's a terribly negative term, and its effects, although often inadvertent, hurt people's lives. Livelihoods are important. It's how we pay the bills, put food on the table, and keep a roof overhead. It also gives us meaning and purpose, or at least adds to it. So, yes, *downsized* is not a positive word in any sense, but it is one so many must deal with at some point in their lives.

Anyone who's ever lost a job, either through cutbacks, layoffs, or for any other reason, understands the emotions and insecurities that grab you. Thoughts go through your mind like, *What am I going to do? How will we support our family? How will this affect our teenage boys, and how will we ever be able to send them to college? Will I ever be able to get another job?* and on and on and on. We had nowhere to turn. We had no fallback plan.

So we looked to the Lord for guidance, and we heard His *whispers*, and shortly thereafter, we had our direction and the start of a plan.

Delane and I had worked in the same profession—the apartment investment and management industry—and each of us had cultivated successful careers dating back more than two decades. We had worked together for several years a while back before going different directions with different employers. We knew we worked well together, and we knew each other's strengths and abilities.

We had occasionally broached the idea of starting our own company, but we'd never gotten serious, as the financial startup funding had been beyond our reach and the risk of not having a paycheck was

too great. This time was different, however. This time we were hearing God's *whisper* that we should "step out in faith," and this time God provided a simple starting point and a plan for action. God's *whisper* was strong, indeed!

So we decided to step out in faith and go for it. We prayed for guidance and began developing the plan He had placed in our hearts. Within three weeks, we had our first clients and were open for business. What we didn't know at the time, however, was that this was the beginning of a lifelong adventure. God knew, though, as this had been His plan for our adventure all along!

