

THE HEART OF THE CONGO

by Becky Rodia



Photo by Kenneth Lundquist, Jr.

PREPARING for her flight to her new home in the United States is Olga and her birth mother Tee Tee. Also pictured is Jeffrey Luken Hartlage who helped locate an adoptive family for Olga.

When professional pilot Jeffrey Luken Hartlage moved to Africa in August 2005 to fly supply missions for the humanitarian organization Air Serv International, his mind was on making a living, not saving a life. In fact, when the aviator — known to his friends as Luken — arrived in Congo, he was more concerned with preserving his own life. Upon his arrival, militiamen and civilians seized his bags and harassed him. A cab ride to his new home in the capital city of Kinshasa introduced him to the area's extreme heat and air pollution, as well as the stench of raw sewage in the street. If the culture shock wasn't enough, Luken suffered a bout of malaria, and vertigo that required medical evacuation.

"It was horrible. I wanted to quit the first hour I was there," he said. "But that was my one rule: 'You can't quit.'"

Other pilots on the mission kept to an attitude that was all business, but Luken had his own ideas.

"I get bored easily," Luken laughed. "I was climbing the walls. Shortly after I arrived in South Africa to train for Congo, it was my 44th birthday. I decided to go to a grass track at a local high school and run. There was nobody there, and I was rather lonely. Then I saw

An extraordinary Congolese woman and a big-hearted American pilot join forces to facilitate a wave of U.S.-Congo adoptions — beginning with a new home for the woman's daughter.