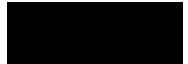




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Mission of hope

Brothers make difference in struggling Kenyan village

Michael Kiefer

The Arizona Republic

Jul. 21, 2003 12:00 AM

Three years ago, he took a job teaching at a missionary school in Kenya, but that wasn't enough. The school was lush and comfortable, in sharp contrast to the dirt-poor village just downhill, which was crippled by poverty, drugs, prostitution and AIDS.

There was an orphanage there, too, and Wilemon was drawn to it. He helped feed the children, played with them, gave them hope, talked to them about God. Then he came back and settled in Lawrence, Kan., still wondering what good he could do.



Courtesy of Zane Wilemon

A Kenyan girl stands in the breeze near her home in a poverty-stricken, AIDS-plagued land.

Wilemon, 25, has an infectious personality. He spread his goodwill to his brother Rance, 28, a mortgage banker in Phoenix, then his brother's college roommate, who lived in London, and then friends of friends from Manhattan and Texas and Michigan. Their tiny intercontinental coalition raised \$35,000 to take to a country where people are lucky to make \$200 in a year.

This month, the Wilemon brothers and five others are traveling to Kenya to build classrooms onto the orphanage where the children and villagers will learn how to use computers and sewing machines. They hope to start a program to teach prostitutes other trades in order to break the AIDS cycle that ravages the region.

They've got high hopes and ideals and, just possibly, enough motivation and good spirit to pull it off.

In search of a mission

Rance and Zane Wilemon are children of a split family from Arlington, Texas. They grew up confident, with WASPy, blond good looks, strong handshakes, and the gift of looking people in the eye.

Officially, they were Episcopalians, though neither was particularly religious. They were high school athletes and then frat boys, Rance at the University of Arizona and Zane at Kansas. They didn't seem the missionary type.

"This is so bizarre for both of us," Zane says. "It's so contrary to the path we were on in our lives."

When he graduated from college in 2000, Zane Wilemon thought he'd join the Peace Corps before going to medical school. A mentor asked why.

"I think God's calling me to do it," he blurted out.

In that case, the mentor said, consider missionary work.

Wilemon applied to the Africa Inland Mission, with headquarters in New York, passed the screening tests and was sent to a weeks-long orientation session. It was an intimidating experience. He was surrounded by fundamentalists, "these veteran

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Christians, who had read the Bible cover to cover several times, and quoting Scripture" and praying with hands in the air, a marked contrast to the subdued Episcopalians.

In October 2000, the mission sent Wilemon to teach French and coach basketball at the Rift Valley Academy in Kijabe, Kenya, a boarding school for the children of missionaries stationed all over Africa.

Wilemon wanted a more challenging assignment.

"When I got there I was really frustrated," he says, "because here are all these people who have everything - compared to what the Kenyans have - and they're just staying in their little luxurious space, and they're not giving beyond the gates."

The school was beautiful. The villages were not.

"Inside the fence it's all green," Wilemon continues, "and there's a couple of rugby fields and soccer fields. There's a basketball gym. You step outside that, man, and it's just poverty. It's AIDS. It's drugs. It's prostitution. The (Kenyan) people are incredible, but they're starving."

Hands-on helper

The school had an outreach program, and when the teacher in charge returned home, Zane Wilemon and a British woman named Alison Costain took over.

Just downhill is a village called Maai Mahiu. It was a gas stop for truck drivers traveling the semi-arid expanse from Nairobi northwest to Kampala, Uganda. Like other routes in Africa, the road was nicknamed "The AIDS Highway," because the local women prostituted themselves to the truck drivers, and were paid back by HIV infection.

An orphanage in the village housed about 120 children. They kept their worldly belongings in tiny boxes at the foot of their cots and brushed their teeth with twigs.

Wilemon talked to Costain.

"This outreach team," he said, "all it does is it goes out and delivers food and says, 'Here's what God's about and let's pray with you and we'll go back up to our beautiful home up on the hill.' And I was like, let's get to know some people. I want to make a difference in some people's lives. If God were wanting to change any place, it would be Maai Mahiu."

He decided to bring the children to visit the school. They could see its lights from the village. They called it "America," but they had never been there.

"It was such a simple thing for us to do," Costain says, "and yet for all of those kids it was something they will never forget. Even having opportunity to play is such a luxury. After that day, one little boy was asked what he thought of the day and he said that he felt like a king and a queen in a palace."

They fed the children, played with them. Once, Wilemon brought students from the academy to paint the orphans' dormitories while they were in school. He befriended a young boy with AIDS.

Villagers were impressed.

"I saw a humble, godly man willing to go all the way to be able to answer God's call in his life," says Jeremiah Kuria, a village pastor and director of the orphanage. "Zane was unlike the other teachers in his willingness to get close to the people in every way. He was able to know people by their names and visit them in their houses no matter what the condition was, and prayed with the hurting. He played a big role in comforting a girl who was raped by eight men and left unconscious. He even went out of his way to contribute to the hospital bill for her."

Open hearts

Wilemon's brother Rance came to visit from Arizona.

"I tried to prepare myself as best I could about what I would see," Rance recalls. "(But) I don't know if there's anything that can prepare you for that."

Yet he was struck by the sunniness of the orphans. They came up to him and tried to rub the whiteness off his skin.

"They don't know anything other than what they have," he says. "They're full of love, full of joy, beautiful kids, but the problem is once they leave that orphanage, there's nothing for them."

Rance came home and, shortly afterward, in September 2001, Zane came home, too.

Zane gave up med-school plans to study at a Bible college in Montana. Then he returned to Kansas to consider graduate school. He works as youth director at a church and volunteers with a Boys and Girls Club. He thought about going back to Africa.

The decision came to him in the form of Rance's old college roommate, Nathan Dillon, a sales representative in London.

"Zane, I really feel like I'm supposed to go to Africa a year from now," he said, "and I don't know where to start. I don't know who to contact. Can you help me get the ball rolling?"

Dillon had long thought of going to Africa.

"I had this kind of burning question to myself," he says. "What is my role, my quest for humanity - and it just kept coming back as nothing."

Wilemon contacted Kuria, who was studying at a seminary in Michigan, and asked what they could do. Kuria said that the orphanage had 11 sewing machines and seven computers in storage and needed classrooms to put them to use. Wilemon thought they also could serve the townspeople, especially the women.

Filling a need

Word spread.

Kate Linstrom works in the American paintings department of Sotheby's in New York. She'd known Wilemon in college, and she, too, had long dreamed of going to Africa.

"As cheesy as it may sound, I think that's part of the reason we met," she says.

There were others: a designer from Manhattan, a lighting technician from Texas.

Rance Wilemon took charge of the fund-raising.

"I'm more of a dreamer, and Rance is right there doing it," Zane says.

Their stepdad brought his band out of the garage and staged a benefit concert at a parish hall in Arlington.

"Folks came out of the pews and offered themselves," says the church rector, the Rev. Thomas Hightower.

Other parishes donated money as well, and the brothers put up a Web site, www.helpforkenya.com. They sent letters to family and friends and clients. Rance held a fund-raising party at the tony Scottsdale club 6. They raised the \$25,000 they set as a target.

Zane left for Kenya last week; Rance leaves July 29. They'll spend August in Kenya, and not without apprehensions. The State Department has issued a travel advisory, warning of terrorist danger in east Africa, after a bombing in the resort city of Mombasa last November. British Airways has suspended flights to the country and, citing security, President Bush chose not to visit during his summer Africa trip.

"We're somewhere between caution and fear," says Rance Wilemon.

But they're full of hope.

"Building a trade school will be very helpful, not only to the people of Maai Mahiu and the orphans but also to the future of the country in helping bring self-reliant people," says Kuria. "It might not be immediate but, with time, the fruits of this work will be visible all over the place."

Zane Wilemon says, "I want it to be a house of light in a town of darkness."

Reach the reporter at

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