

# Answered prayers

Faithful through frustrations, two native North Texans work to bring hope to orphans in an African town where half the residents have HIV or AIDS



STAR-TELEGRAM/L. LAMOR WILLIAMS

Volunteer Erin O'Shea looks on as foreman David Mbogo places a cornerstone and workers mix cement for classrooms for the Maai Mahiu Children's Home.

**BY L. LAMOR WILLIAMS**  
STAR-TELEGRAM STAFF WRITER

**MAAI MAHIU, KENYA** — Highway A109 is a blessing and a bane to the small trading center of Maai Mahiu in central Kenya.

It connects residents to major cities, including Nairobi, the capital. It's the main way out for those determined to escape the dusty town of about 10,000 people.

But the 600-mile stretch of potholed asphalt also brought death to Maai Mahiu (pronounced MY MY-hue).

A109 is known as the AIDS Highway because the truck drivers who travel it propelled the spread of the disease. As adults become ill or die, they leave an ever-growing population of orphaned or abandoned children to fend for themselves on the garbage-strewn streets.

These are the children that Zane and Rance Wilemon are determined to help.

The brothers, who grew up in Arlington, learned of the town's plight in 2000, when Zane was teaching at the

Rift Valley Academy in Kijabe, northwest of Nairobi.

"I'd been working with RVA but not doing much outreach," he said. "We took some supplies to the orphanage in Maai Mahiu, and the need was so great. I just knew there had to be something more that I could do."

The brothers raised nearly \$40,000 and traveled nearly 20,000 miles this summer and last to build classrooms so the orphans could learn a trade. Their efforts are rooted in a deep faith that has steeled them through frustrations and challenges.

The headquarters for their organization, Comfort the Children International, is in Phoenix, where Rance lives and works in real estate. Pragmatic and organized, the 29-year-old handles day-to-day operations.

Zane was a youth minister in Kansas, but he and his wife recently moved to Austin, where he attends the Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest.

Rance is working to finalize the organization's nonprofit status. In the

meantime, they are working with St. Peter and St. Paul Episcopal Church in Arlington and raising money via various small fund-raisers in Arizona and Kansas.

"We filed all the paperwork about nine months ago," Rance said in July. "We had no idea it would take this long, and people are sometimes leery of donating if you don't have the official" designation.

## The orphanage

Maai Mahiu covers 10 square miles and is a slow hour's drive from Nairobi.

It's a rural community, with a town center about the size of Kennedale. AIDS outreach workers estimate that nearly half the town's residents are HIV-positive or have full-blown AIDS.

Zane Wilemon was 24 when he first visited the village and met the children from the orphanage. He was struck by the tragedies that had brought them there and the resilience of their spirit.

Sheeru (pronounced SHE-roo) and Sarah are two of the youngest children. The girls, who aren't sisters, are believed to be about 8. But no one knows their exact age or last names because no one knows where their parents are.

They share a bed in a small one-room apartment where Aphia Kihereko, matron of the girls dorm, lives. The apartment has a sitting area with a sofa, two chairs and a coffee table and two credenzas for storage and food preparation. The cooking is done outdoors. The beds are separated from the rest of the room by hanging curtains.

The orphanage is operated by the Nairobi-based Africa Inland Church, which provides money for each child. Typically, there's an application process, but Sheeru and Sarah were found abandoned in town about two years ago.

Sheeru had been tortured and raped. Her hands bear the scars of lacerations and puncture wounds.

When she first arrived at the orphanage, no man could touch her without sending her into a screaming, panic-stricken fit of terror.

"Just hearing us would terrify her," Rance said of meeting Sheeru, last year. "She won't talk to men, but she will let me hold her hand and give her a hug."

Sarah was left to wander the streets after her mother had a mental breakdown.

"She's never known her father, and she was basically abandoned for dead," Rance said. "One of the cooks found her."

Some of the children have no known relatives. Dennis Macharia, 15, was enrolled at the orphanage by his guardian, who eventually died of AIDS. His mother also died of AIDS after leaving him with the guardian.

His father has never been a part of his life.

"We don't know many of the boys' stories; they just aren't as willing to talk," Rance said.

In June, 129 children, ranging from 5 to 18, were living at the home, which has room for 140.

The orphanage sits off A109 on a little more than seven acres. Grass and trees grow in the dusty red soil that frames the compound. Banana trees ring the vegetable garden that supplies the beans and maize that are the staple of the children's diet. Meat is served once a week.

The two dorms — one for boys, the other for girls — are built of stone and mortar. The roofs are corrugated steel. They resemble military barracks, with bunk beds and footlockers for the children's few possessions. There's electricity but no air conditioning or indoor plumbing.

The girls sing while washing clothes in a large concrete basin that catches rainwater near the banana trees. The boys play soccer with homemade balls and occasionally tease the girls. The girls often respond by chasing them down for a wrestling match.

After dinner, chores and a bit of free time, the children gather in the cafeteria for a daily worship service. There's a quick message, sometimes from one of the older orphans who is studying to become a minister. Before and after the message, the girls lead songs about *Yesu Cristo*, Jesus Christ, in hauntingly high-pitched voices.

Then, it's time for homework and bed. If they attend the service, Zane, Rance and the other volunteers stay afterward to tutor the children.



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS/KHALIL SENOSI

From left, Erin O'Shea, Rance Wilemon and Adam Modl, all of Comfort the Children International, build a school wall in June in Maai Mahiu, Kenya. The school will allow orphans to learn trades.

#### The AIDS Highway

Maai Mahiu is a town of about 10,000 residents located along Highway A109, also known as the AIDS Highway, a major trade route between the Kenyan capital of Nairobi and Kampala, Uganda.



STAR-TELEGRAM/DAVE SEYMOUR

But, more than tutoring, the orphans need trade skills. They must leave the children's home when they turn 18, and they face life on the streets.

Zane, Rance and other volunteers have worked to build a trade-center complex of four classrooms. There were no power tools or modern conveniences to make the work easier.

Mortar was mixed by hand — eight wheelbarrows of sand for every 50-pound bag of cement. The dry mixture had to be thoroughly sifted with shovels.

After the sand and cement were mixed, water was slowly added, one bucket at a time.

The mixture was heavy, and muscles were already taxed after lifting hundreds of hand-chiseled stones. Still, everyone pushed through.

"It's what we committed to do," Rance said.

Fortunately, June is in the beginning



STAR-TELEGRAM/L. LAMOR WILLIAMS

Zane Wilemon nails up iron sheets for a church for the Masai tribe. The Kenya Project paid about \$300 to finish the building.

of Kenya's winter, and temperatures hovered in the low 70s.

#### Help and hope

Small farm animals — especially goats, donkeys and turkeys — wander the streets of Maai Mahiu, whose people are mostly Kikuyu, the largest of Kenya's 42 tribes. Kikuyus account for about 6 million of the country's 30 million people.

The dirt roads are littered with black plastic grocery bags, and foul water runs in streams that crisscross the streets.

Zane, Rance and the other white missionaries are a novelty to the town's children.

They often chase the missionaries and chant: "How are you?" Zane and Rance pretend to run away and, when they are caught, they give each child a high-five and chant in return: "How are you, how are you?"

Some of the town's adults have taken advantage of the brothers.

Last summer, for example, the Wilemons moved ahead with plans to build classrooms. They oversaw the construction of two rooms, but they paid about 380,000 Kenyan shillings (\$5,000) too much.

The Rev. David Githiyyi and the Rev. Jeremiah Kuria, who ran the orphanage at the time, weren't available to help negotiate prices for supplies and labor. The labor force at the site grew until the brothers wound up paying men who were never hired.

"This year, we told Rev. Githiyyi how much we were willing to spend per worker and how many workers we would allow," Rance said.

The brothers left with a feeling of accomplishment last year after completing two classrooms. But they were disappointed when they returned this summer and found that the classrooms had never been used. Githiyyi had retired, and Kuria's role has been diminished while he attends Reformed Bible College in Michigan.

"The pace that the Africa Inland Church is working at is frustrating," Zane said. "They said they were going to start using the classrooms immediately but haven't. We've done our part and they're not pulling their weight, so we're washing our hands clean and just starting new as an entity



STAR-TELEGRAM/L. LAMOR WILLIAMS

Teresia Muthoni takes care of her grandson, Michael Kihu, and his mother, the third of Muthoni's daughters to have HIV.



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS/KHALIL SENOSI

Masai women pray in the church in Satellite in the Kenya countryland. The church was built by volunteers from Comfort the Children International, a Phoenix-based organization founded by brothers Zane and Rance Wilemon, formerly of Arlington.

within ourselves."

The brothers once hoped the classrooms would also serve as a community center for the town, but now they plan to build a free-standing building in the village.

"A community center could just impact an array of different areas, from children to parents and grandparents to AIDS patients to prostitutes to single men and single women," Zane said.

AIDS-prevention classes could be taught, for example, and people could seek social services and learn job skills.

Maai Mahiu lies along the route to one of the most popular safari destinations in the world, the Masai Mara game reserve. But there is no industry in the town. The average adult earns \$100 to \$150 annually.

With the exception of service-station attendants and a few hotel or restaurant employees, those who work are self-employed, selling produce or meats, crafts, furniture and other handmade goods. There are also barbershops and beauty salons.

"So many people go to waste here just because they don't have opportunity," Kuria said. "Money is really secondary here. We need to motivate the people and educate

them."

Walking around the town, the lack of work is evident. Pool halls fill early with men who have little else to do. Those who don't drink or gamble stroll the streets chatting with each other or sit beneath shade trees.

Without work, residents can't support their families — or pay for life-sustaining AIDS medication.

"They can't even get jobs to pay for their own meds," Zane said. "We give them money, but that doesn't give them a sense of self-worth. It just tells them that God has answered their prayers and someone is at least trying to help.

"The fact that these people still have some hope is just amazing. I would have given up a long time ago."

**ONLINE:** [www.ctcinternational.org](http://www.ctcinternational.org)

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## The orphanage

The Maai Mahiu Children's Home is affiliated with 17 others in Kenya, all run by the Africa Inland Church. Stichting Redt een Kind, a Netherlands-based foundation, is the largest contributor to the children's homes. The organization gives monthly need-based contributions to each of the 17 orphanages.

## IN HIS OWN WORDS

# The delicate balance of sharing tragic news, showing compassion

*The following is from Zane Wilemon's journal, describing the day in late July that he and the Rev. Jeremiah Kuria told James Kiru that he was HIV-positive.*

Two nights ago was one of the most difficult moments of my life. I had to tell James Kiru, a 13-year-old orphan, that he has HIV.

Sitting next to him sharing a cup of chai along with Jeremiah, we sat alone ... the three of us, after saying a prayer that God would be present, that He would sit with us.

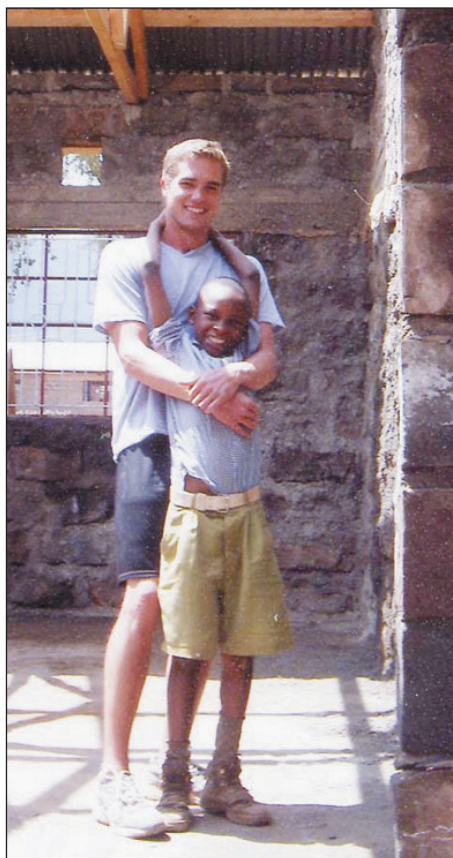
As we sat there asking questions, it became clear that this orphaned child had no idea what disease his body carried, no idea why he takes nine pills a day, no idea why he visits the hospital twice a month for checkups and blood tests, no idea why three years ago he laid on a hospital bed sitting at death's door, no idea why as a young child he watched his mother suffer from a similar illness — only hers ended with an excruciatingly painful death.

Jeremiah and I sat for about an hour, fumbling over questions, looking into each other's eyes for some answer, for some way to get through this. How do you tell an orphaned child with absolutely no support system that he has HIV, that his body carries a disease that will eventually, inevitably, take his life?

In all honesty, looking back on it, I don't know how we did it, but we did.

After Jeremiah asked him if he knows we are his friends and that we love him, I decided that it was time. We had danced around the issue in fear for about an hour.

Would he refuse taking the medications? Would he despise us for telling him and deny himself proper care and treatment? Would he not believe us and be angry? All of these questions and more raced through my



STAR-TELEGRAM/L. LAMOR WILLIAMS

Zane Wilemon, top, helped build this classroom for James Kiru's orphanage. James, 13, was born with HIV but didn't know it until Wilemon broke the news to him this summer.

head.

It didn't matter; he needed to know. I had spoken with his doctor, the nurses, his dorm mother, the director of the orphanage. None of them knew how to tell him. No one knew what to say.

The sad thing was, at that moment, neither did I. Who am I to tell him? I don't live with him. I'm not a family member. I'm not the director of the orphanage. I'm not his doctor.

Then I realized what made it my place to tell him were not my qualifications or the time that I spend with him. What made it my place was that he loves me and I love him. That God had brought our paths together and at this particular moment in his life he needed someone. Someone to love him enough to be honest.

Turning to James, I began to tell him how much I love him and I asked him if he knew how special he is to me and to every person who enters his life. I talked to him about his heart and how when God created him He put something special inside his heart.

Jeremiah then asked him if he knew how much God loves him. Growing increasingly aware of the weight in the air, James responded

with a muffled, "yes."

I then asked him if he knew what HIV stood for and if he knew what it does. I then proceeded to inform him about the disease and that it causes a person's immune system to become weak, so weak that it becomes difficult to fight off any illness. I told him that that was why his mom died.

At that moment, his head dropped.

Placing my hand on his leg, I proceeded to tell him that just like many things that we receive from our parents, he has received HIV from his mother. His body collapsed as he broke into tears.

As he began to cry I kept talking. I told him it was nothing he did. I told him that it wasn't his fault and that he is going to be OK. I reassured him the best I could by telling him Jeremiah and I are here for him.

I told him I loved him, Jeremiah loves him, and that we will never stop loving him.

I told him that he is going to live a full life and that he will continue receiving the medical care he needs to keep healthy.

We sat there, Jeremiah and I, alone with a 13-year-old orphan crying ... crying in absolute fear that his life is no more.

Crying with no one to hold him, no mother, no father, no one. The tears would not end.

It took everything I had not to cry. I couldn't even look at Jeremiah because I knew if I did the tears would flow. So we sat and we sat with only prayer to comfort us in the stillness.

I asked James to talk to us but he couldn't. He could barely catch his breath between the pain of his tears.

About 30 minutes passed and he finally calmed down enough to where he could look at us. I asked him what he was thinking and immediately his head sunk back down with tears.

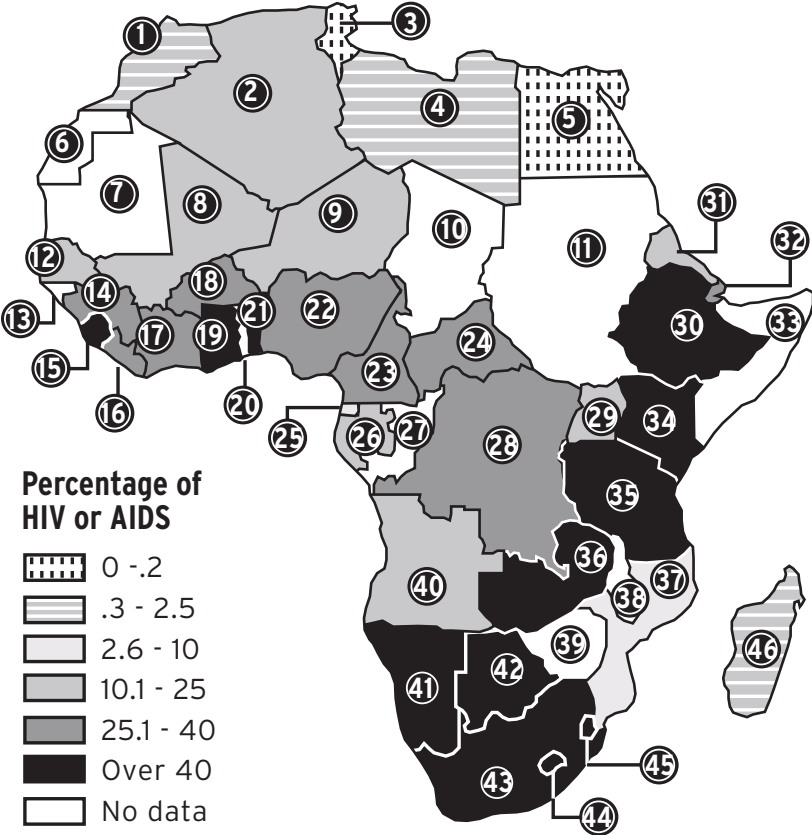
I then realized there was nothing we could do except be with him. So there we sat, losing track of time, only aware of how hopeless our situation was and how real the pain.

So that was exactly what the three of us did ... we shared the pain. Looking back, I know what we did was right. I've never done something so right that hurt so badly.

The pain is still so present. It pains me even more knowing how prevalent it is here in Africa. Knowing there are thousands of other children just like James; however, most of them will never have someone to tell them, someone to love them, someone to share the pain.

# AIDS in Africa

Kenya is one of 12 African countries gripped by an AIDS pandemic. More than 40 percent of Kenyans have HIV or AIDS; in urban centers such as Nairobi, the infection rate could be as high as 74 percent, according to the Census Bureau's HIV/AIDS Surveillance Data Base from June 2000.



- 1. Morocco
- 2. Algeria
- 3. Tunisia
- 4. Libya
- 5. Egypt
- 6. Western Sahara
- 7. Mauritania
- 8. Mali
- 9. Niger
- 10. Chad
- 11. Sudan
- 12. Senegal
- 13. Guinea-Bissau
- 14. Guinea
- 15. Sierra Leone
- 16. Liberia
- 17. Cote D'Ivoire

- 18. Burkina Faso
- 19. Ghana
- 20. Togo
- 21. Benin
- 22. Nigeria
- 23. Cameroon
- 24. Central African Republic
- 25. Equatorial Guinea
- 26. Gabon
- 27. Congo
- 28. Democratic Republic of the Congo
- 29. Uganda

- 30. Ethiopia
- 31. Eritrea
- 32. Djibouti
- 33. Somalia
- 34. **Kenya**
- 35. Tanzania
- 36. Zambia
- 37. Mozambique
- 38. Malawi
- 39. Zimbabwe
- 40. Angola
- 41. Namibia
- 42. Botswana
- 43. South Africa
- 44. Lesotho
- 45. Swaziland
- 46. Madagascar

SOURCE: [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)

## How to help

TO DONATE: Make checks payable to St. Peter and St. Paul Episcopal Church, with The Kenya Project in the memo line. Mail the checks to the church at 3900 Morris Lane, Arlington, TX 76016. For more information, call the church at (817) 496-6747.