



Posted on Fri, Jul. 18, 2003

## The gift of hope

**Arlington man's program nurtures orphans on Kenya's 'AIDS Highway'**

By L. Lamor Williams  
Star-Telegram Staff Writer

**ARLINGTON** - The 4 a.m. call had to be a prank, Cindy and James McAlister thought. After all, it was April Fools' Day.

There was no way Zane Wilemon -- her son, his stepson -- was serious about becoming a missionary instead of going to medical school. He'd already graduated from the University of Kansas and taken the Medical College Admission Test.

It just had to be a prank.

That was more than three years ago. After spending a year in Kenya, Wilemon, now 25, returned to the United States to raise more than \$25,000 to begin building a vocational school. He started his return trip to Africa on Thursday.

"I felt like there was more than just medical school," Wilemon said. "That was a pivotal moment in my life. I was so full of joy, I had to call and share it with someone."

Although the Kenya Project is a missionary program, Wilemon's spirit of caring has been so infectious that a number of people, both Christian and non-Christian, have quit their jobs so they can join him in the small, poverty-stricken town of Maai Mahiu. Wilemon founded the Kenya Project, which is intended to better the lives of orphans so poor that they use twigs for toothbrushes.

While in college, Wilemon said he just couldn't make time to volunteer and maintain his studies. After talking with his mother that April morning, he contacted the Peace Corps and two mission organizations. He settled on Africa Inland Mission.

"At first I was surprised because it was four in the morning," Cindy McAlister said. "Then we talked to him again and we were just thrilled."

He was assigned to teach French and coach basketball at the mission's Rift Valley Academy, which overlooks Maai Mahiu -- literally translated "hot water" because of the hot springs scattered throughout the area.



STAR-TELEGRAM/PAUL MOSELEY

Pastor Jeremiah Kuria, left, and Zane Wilemon will return to Africa to work on the Kenya Project.



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Pastor Jeremiah Kuria holds a woman's bag made from goat leather. Zane Wilemon's mementos of earlier visits to Kenya include a Samburu spear and a woman's hand-beaded

But he was teaching the children of missionaries, not ministering to the townspeople. Then Wilemon got a chance to work with the academy's outreach program, which took beans and corn to nearby villages. One of the food delivery stops was the orphanage.

"I'd never seen a town in more need of hope," Wilemon said.

## Living with AIDS

Every day, the 140 orphans have a lunch of corn and beans. For dinner every night they have *ugali* -- white cornmeal and spinach added to boiling water to make a stew. They don't always have spinach.

Many of the orphans have lost their parents to AIDS. More than 50 percent of the town's approximate 10,000 residents are HIV positive, said Pastor Jeremiah Kuria, who leads the Africa Inland Church Orphanage. The town is on what is called the AIDS Highway, a major trade route between Nairobi, the Kenyan capital, and Kampala, Uganda.

The HIV/AIDS rate is exacerbated because truckers come to the town, have unprotected sex with prostitutes, move on to the next town and do the same thing again. Prostitutes can't afford to give up their trade because every penny is needed to feed their families, said Kuria.

Wilemon and Kuria hope that the Kenya Project will give the women more choices.

"We want to build sort of a safe house, where they can stay while they learn a trade," Wilemon said.

Kuria said it's also paramount that the orphans have job skills when they leave the orphanage at 18.

One classroom of the four planned for the school is already under construction, using local resources and labor to boost the economy of the small town. It's about 100 yards from the orphanage, which sits on about three acres.

"We want to be encouraging to the community, and we don't want them to feel like they're coming to the orphanage," Kuria said Wednesday while visiting Wilemon in his parents' central Arlington home. Kuria is in the United States studying at the Reformed Bible College in Michigan.

The orphanage already has 11 sewing machines and seven computers, but until the classroom is built, there is no place to use them.

## Moving forward

Wilemon and Kuria left Thursday to return to Kenya, and reinforcements from across the country will join them in about two weeks.

In all, seven people will join Wilemon and Kuria, including Arlington natives Rance Wilemon, Zane's brother who lives in Arizona; Briana Carman, who lives in New York; Zack Burdick, who lives in Houston; and local videographer Kyle Spradley. Others are from Georgia and London.

Spradley will film a documentary to distribute to the churches represented by the group. Locally, major contributors to the Kenya Project are the St. Peter and St. Paul Episcopal Church in Arlington and All Saints Episcopal Church in Fort Worth.

Father Thomas Hightower, rector of St. Peter and St. Paul, said Spradley is a perfect example of how the project has touched lives.

"A while ago he was on the sidelines in the parish," Hightower said. "Now he's come forward to say 'Let me offer my services.' "

Spradley said he couldn't help but go with Wilemon: "I've mostly done corporate or commercial stuff and at the end of the day it hasn't changed anyone's life."

Wilemon said getting to this point hasn't been easy. His and Kuria's first project was collecting clothes, toys and other items from employees at Raz Imports, which is owned by his biological father Stan Wilemon. They filled 12 boxes -- each big enough to hold the average deep freezer -- and shipped them to Maai Mahiu, but only six boxes arrived.

The Kenya Project was born during a brainstorming session with Kuria.

Wilemon said he had no idea the project would turn out this way.

"It's God's deal. Not mine. I'm just trying to be obedient," he said. "It's already bigger than I ever expected it to be."

## **How to donate**

### **Kenya Project**

Send checks payable to "St. Peter & St. Paul Episcopal Church" and write "The Kenya Project" on the memo line to:

St. Peter and St. Paul Episcopal Church

3900 Morris Lane

Arlington, TX 76016

For more information on the project, go to [www.helpforkenya.com](http://www.helpforkenya.com)

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### **International donations**

Send checks payable to "Rural Children's Trust Fund (Kenya)" to:

Voyage Concepts Ltd.

81/83 Victoria Road

Surbiton KT6 4NS United Kingdom

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