

Comforting more than children

Brothers' generosity goes beyond initial calling

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

MAAI MAHIU, KENYA — Francis Mwangi contracted HIV from a fiancée he never had the chance to marry.

She died, leaving him to suffer alone with weeping lesions that stole his sleep and scarred his body from head to toe.

He turned to his family, but they refused to help. Only 28, last year he was dying slowly on the dirt roads of Maai Mahiu.

"I was stinking so that the flies would not come to me," he said through a translator.

A compassionate but poor woman took him into her home.

Teresia Muthoni was already caring

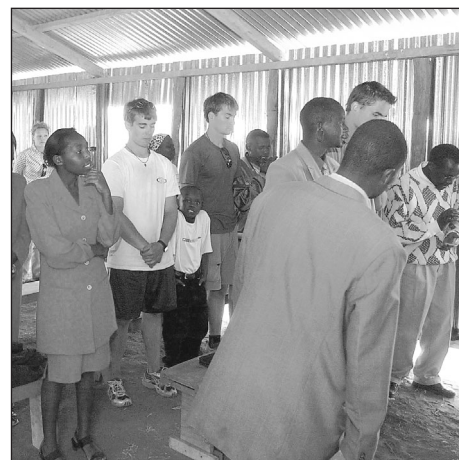
for her daughter Susan Wanjiro, 31, who had contracted HIV from her unfaithful late husband.

Muthoni's house, which has three rooms, a tin roof and dirt floors, was also home to her teen-age daughter and four grandchildren: Wanjiro's son and three whose mothers had died from AIDS.

But Muthoni couldn't ignore Mwangi. She hoped that Zane Wilemon could help him the way he'd promised to help her daughter just days earlier.

An AIDS-ravaged town

Zane and his older brother Rance run Comfort the Children International, a nonprofit missionary group. Their initial mission was build a trade center



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS/KHALIL SENOSI

Zane Wilemon, second from right (partly hidden), and his team pray with Masai people in Satellite, Kenya. Volunteers built the church.

where the orphans at the Maai Mahiu Children's Home could learn job skills.

But the Arlington natives were also touched by the plight of the town.

Some AIDS workers estimate that half of the adults in Maai Mahiu (pronounced MY MY-hue) are HIV-positive or have AIDS. Despite discounted prices, few can afford the



STAR-TELEGRAM/L. LAMOR WILLIAMS

Rance Wilemon moves stones for construction work as Kenyan schoolchildren, some of them orphans, watch. Many were fascinated by the sight of the white missionaries.



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Teresia Muthoni serves red beans to her grandson, Michael Kiru. Muthoni cares for Michael; his mother, Susan Wanjiro, who is HIV-positive; three other grandchildren whose mothers died of AIDS; and an HIV-positive man she took into her home last year.

drugs that slow the disease's progression. The average adult earns \$100 to \$150 annually.

Zane heads the AIDS and Christian outreach branch of CTC, which set up an account at an area hospital to pay for Wanjiro's and Mwangi's treatment.

Wanjiro's story is common in Kenya.

She was a faithful wife to a husband who contracted HIV from a prostitute. Before dying, he passed it to her and their unborn child. Widowed, pregnant and HIV-positive, she was kicked out of their family's home. She and her older son, Michael, returned to Maai Mahiu, to her mother.

"It was hard on my heart," Muthoni said through a translator. "I'd lost two [daughters] and had another who was sick."

Wanjiro gave birth to a boy who lived just 11 months.

Zane heard Wanjiro's story while

working at the orphanage last summer and sought her out. She had little faith in him when he first appeared at her mother's door.

"I thought he was just another white person who'd come to make empty promises and take my picture," Wanjiro said, also through a translator.

When he visited this summer, though, she beamed and hugged him like a long-lost family member.

By the time CTC interceded with Mwangi, doctors had given him months to live. His lesions were so severe that doctors thought they could do little more than drain them and give him pain medication to make his death as peaceful as possible.

"I was at the point of death, and there came a messenger from God," Mwangi said this summer. "His name is Zane."

While excited that they were able to help Mwangi and Wanjiro, the brothers do find some sorrow in their work.

"There are times when you really feel like your hands are tied because you can't help everybody that needs help," Rance said. "We try to figure out who has the most need and start there. Even that's hard because who's to say that one need is any greater than another?"

And there are many things they have no power over. The hospital they work with is in Kijabe, a larger, more-developed town that overlooks Maai Mahiu. As the crow flies, it's only about five miles up the mountain; a healthy person could walk it in about an hour and a half.

Wanjiro and Mwangi rely on public transportation. The mutatu (pronounced MOO-ta-TOO), a small 14-passenger van, can't maneuver on the treacherous unpaved mountain road, so they go the long way around, turning what would be a 10-minute drive into a nearly two-hour journey.

They arrive at the hospital prepared to wait. There are no appointments. This summer, when Zane drove them to Kijabe for their routine 20-minute check-ups — CTC bought an SUV that could go directly up the mountain — the whole trip took just under six hours. It would have been longer, but Zane was able to get them seen sooner because he's an American and he knows their doctor.

While the Wilemons receive some special treatment because they are white Americans, this also makes them targets for thieves.

Zane's backpack was stolen from between his feet at a coffeehouse in Nairobi. He didn't notice it was missing until it was time to head back to Maai Mahiu. The bag contained his passport,

letters to his fiancée and \$3,000 for the hospital account that pays Mwangi's and Wanjiro's medical bills.

"A lot of the people here make it very hard to help," Zane said. "It's not like that money was for me, but a lot of people really don't care that I'm a missionary and that I've come to help."

'A new perspective'

Still, they feel compelled by a higher power to help, and their outreach is once again branching out.

While working with the Rev. David Githiyyi, former director of the orphanage, they learned of a nearby community from the Masai tribe that needed a place to worship. Traditionally a nomadic people known for their fearlessness — young boys were once required to kill a lion as a rite of passage — the Masai are generally pagan.

Githiyyi had been preaching to the small but far-flung community. They had raised enough money to erect a frame of cedar and cypress planks and a corrugated steel roof but could not afford walls.

CTC provided the remaining \$300 to finish the church. Zane, Rance and the volunteers provided the labor.

The volunteers credit such experiences with changing their lives forever.

Although CTC is a missionary group, it does not require volunteers to be religious. Applicants simply must be willing to work hard and participate in the required activities, such as daily prayer before meals and attending the occasional local church service with the rest of the group.

Last summer, two female volunteers affirmed their faith by being baptized in a shallow river by the Rev. Jeremiah Kuria, Githiyyi's former assistant and Zane's initial contact at the orphanage. Another was baptized this summer.

Briana Carman, 25, another Arlington native, volunteered both summers. She said last year's trip taught her the meaning of faith.

"Faith is what the Kenyans rely on to bring them comfort and joy," Carman said. "By being obedient to God's will, Zane and Rance have led a group of people and given them a new perspective on life."

"There wasn't a day that went by that the people of Kenya escaped my thoughts when I was in the States. Their love of life, even those that are desperate for food and clothes, is inspiring and a lesson for everyone."

This year's group of volunteers included Fort Worth native Erin O'Shea, 29, a graduate of The Oakridge School in

Arlington. O'Shea said she had been looking for a volunteer trip when she came across a newspaper article about the Wilemon brothers. They were her classmates at Oakridge before they enrolled in the Arlington school district.

O'Shea, who now lives in New York, said the trip has given her renewed dedication and focus.

"People who think they understand the problems of the Third World won't ever know unless they go there. I didn't," she said. "I won't take myself so seriously or everything that's so easy to get caught up in in New York."

By the end of the trip, which began for Zane and Rance on June 12 and ended in late July, the brothers had Wanjiro and Mwangi well on their way to being self-sufficient.

CTC provided start-up money for Wanjiro and Mwangi's small business selling produce and charcoal, which is used for outdoor cooking. It also agreed to sponsor another AIDS patient.

The brothers are already making plans to return next summer and build a community center.

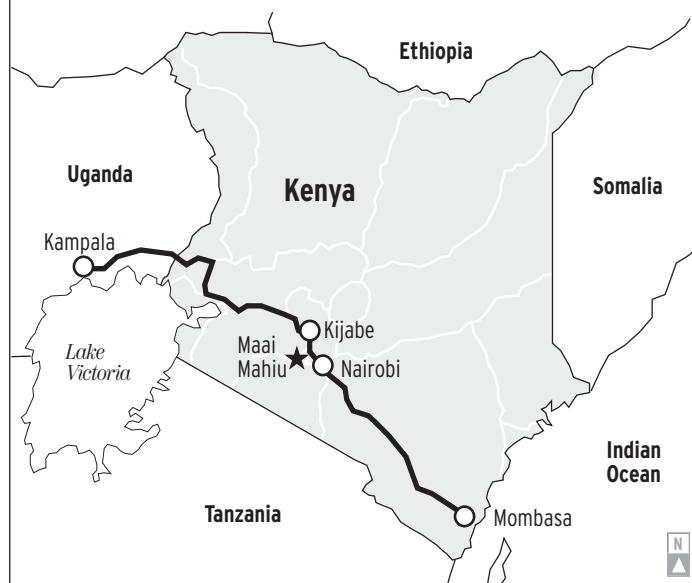
"The point is to bring hope to the community," Zane said.

ONLINE: Comfort the Children International, www.ctcinternational.org

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Maai Mahiu

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

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— Fort Worth native Erin O'Shea, 29, on volunteering in Kenya with Comfort the Children



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 information, call the church at (817) 496-6747.