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Galveston residents help those left orphaned by AIDS

Couple raises more than \$9,000 to benefit new facility in Kenya

By **Harvey Rice** Published 5:30 am, Saturday, August 18, 2007



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Ed Sulzberger and his wife, Linda Ercole-Musso, originally meant to raise \$3,000 for the Happy Home Orphanage in Kenya.

GALVESTON — A few thousand dollars raised in Texas by a Galveston couple are helping change, and in many cases save, the lives of 25 children in a poverty-stricken East African province.

Ed Sulzberger and his wife, Linda Ercole-Musso, set out to raise \$3,000 for a new orphanage for children left homeless by an AIDS epidemic, but they have raised more than \$9,000. The money is enough to meet six months of operating expenses for the Happy Home Orphanage in Stellah, a village about 250 miles over rough roads west of Nairobi, Kenya.

"It's quite wonderful," Happy Home Project Coordinator Isabelle Vandeplass said about the donations in a telephone interview from Stellan.

Vandeplass, a Belgian agronomist, and three Kenyans founded the orphanage last year in Kenya's Migori District, where an AIDS epidemic is decimating the population and leaving orphans in its wake.

Vandeplass said AIDS infected about 30 percent of region's population. That's twice Kenya's national rate of 15 percent, according to aidsinafrica.net. Orphans are readily taken in by family and community members in this tribal culture, she says, but the number of orphans is more than the community can absorb.

She said some farmers have taken in as many as 20 orphans.

"That's the sobering reality," Sulzberger said. "A lot of these kids would be dead by now if it hadn't been for the orphanage."

Alfred and Rose Sagwa Mdeizi donated a building in Stellan for the orphanage, and the first 10 children took up residence in November, Vandeplass said.

The orphanage began operations just as Sulzberger and Ercole-Musso were looking for a charity that could use the fundraising skills developed while working in Africa, South America and Asia for international development organizations and the World Bank.

Ercole-Musso said she was inspired by a CNN report on AIDS orphans in Kenya.

"I said, 'Eddie, I saw this show and it was so moving to me,' " she said. "Let's get involved with these kids."

Then Sulzberger saw an e-mail from Vandeplass. They both are associated with the World Agroforestry Centre in Nairobi, which helps farmers in developing countries use forestry to improve their income. Sulzberger is executive director of the Agroforestry Council International, the charitable arm of the center in the United States.

Vandeplas sent an e-mail to center employees seeking contributions for the orphanage, and Sulzberger responded by offering his services.

Every dollar raised by Sulzberger and Ercole-Musso is used to care for the 25 girls and boys at the orphanage. Vandeplas said the only administrative costs are for postage and the bank transfer fee.

Knowing that 100 percent of the donation is going to the orphanage helped convince donors, Sulzberger said.

"Our friends in Galveston have stepped up to the plate," Ercole-Musso said. More than 50 percent of the U.S. donations came from Galveston, Sulzberger said.

One of those donors was Kathleen DiNatale, owner of Yoga Haven. DiNatale raised \$1,200 by offering restorative yoga classes for \$20 donations.

Cheryl Jenkins, manager of Hendley Market gift store, raised \$100 by selling a line of \$5 earrings made by Ercole-Musso.

The donation that perhaps brought the most joy was a bundle of packages tied with ribbons that Sulzberger brought on a trip to the orphanage in June.

Seamstress Cathy Stovall, who is starting a home-run business called twirligirlee, made colorful garments she calls playgowns for the girls in the orphanage.

"They found them so lovely, they started dancing with the gowns," Vandeplas said.

She said Sulzberger and Ercole-Musso have raised about one-third of all donations, the bulk coming from Belgium. The U.S. donations enabled Happy Home to repair the roof in preparation for expanding the orphanage to 50 or 60 children, Vandeplas said.

She said the orphanage will be kept small so the children can receive individual attention. They will be raised at the orphanage, remaining part of the community, and will not be put up for adoption, she said.

Ercole-Musso said the orphanage is an example of the importance of individual action. "Individuals can make a gigantic difference in the world," she said.

Donations can be mailed to 4012 Pirates Beach, Galveston, TX 77554. Checks should be made out to Agroforestry Council International.

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