

CHARITY ORGANIZATION | MISSION WITH A VISION

Isle-based mission helps sanctuary for African girls

By VALERIE WELLS

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» GALVESTON

Two Galveston men in November delivered a shiny new John Deere tractor to a girls' school in Kenya.

It took an hour on a bumpy dirt road for Ed Sulzberger of African Childrens Haven, a Galveston-based charity, and John Eames of Galveston Automotive Professionals to go about 3 miles from the Mission with a Vision school to the school's farm. When the sun-burned men arrived with the tractor, about 30 girls had already walked to the field and waited.

"When we first met, they were very shy," Eames said. "As soon as I got them up on the tractor, I couldn't get them to keep quiet."

The tractor will help the school produce food for the girls and it will generate money by selling surplus crops, Sulzberger said.

Many of the girls at Mission with a Vision are either victims of female genital mutilation or they ran away to escape the mutilation, Sulzberger said.

Sulzberger and his wife Linda Ercole-Musso in 2006 started African Childrens Haven to raise \$3,000 for an orphanage to help 25 African children orphaned when their parents died from AIDS.

Now the charity is helping about 700 African children through 11 different projects including



COURTESY

Galveston-based African Childrens Haven bought a tractor for a girls school in Kenya to grow their own food and sell any surplus to support themselves.

Mission with a Vision.

"It's amazing how things grow," Ercole-Musso said.

The couple lived in Nigeria in the '70s and '80s when they were first married and had a fondness for Africa, where they also still had many friends and connections.

Sulzberger was associated with the World Agroforestry Centre in Nairobi, which helps communities increase the use of trees in agriculture landscapes to improve their food security, nutrition, income and health.

Both Sulzberger and Ercole-Musso had worked in Africa, South America and Asia for international development organizations. They've kept in touch with their contacts who help them make new

connections to help children in need.

The girls in need at Mission with a Vision are Maasai, an ethnic group in Kenya that has a cultural tradition of female genital mutilation, an illegal practice in Kenya. A girl's genitals are cut to prepare her for marriage, Sulzberger said.

To escape the mutilation and to escape a child marriage, some girls run away to sanctuaries such as Mission with a Vision. The school there gives those girls a safe place to live and prepares them for college. A few students have already graduated and have started professional careers, Sulzberger said.

Female genital mutilation has no known health benefit, according to the

World Health Organization. On the contrary, the practice is known to be harmful to girls and women in many ways.

Babies born to women who have undergone female genital mutilation suffer a higher rate of neonatal death compared with babies born to women who have not undergone the procedure, according to the World Health Organization, which estimates that between 100 million and 140 million girls and women worldwide have been subjected to types of female genital mutilation. Estimates based on the most recent prevalence data indicate that 91.5 million girls and women ages 9 years or older in Africa are living with the consequences of female

genital mutilation. An estimated 3 million girls in Africa are at risk of undergoing female genital mutilation every year.

A grassroots effort in Kenya is growing to stop the ancient tradition, and more Maasai who want to break the cycle want girls to become self-sufficient women, Ercole-Musso said.

African Childrens Haven raised money this year to buy a tractor to help Mission with a Vision with that grass roots effort.

Sulzberger reached out to organizations for support for the tractor project, including the Permanent Endowment Fund of Moody Memorial First United Methodist Church.

The Rev. Bert Bagley, who is executive director of the fund, was hesitant at first, he said. Although the project was in line with the fund's mission, Bagley and some board members had questions.

When Sulzberger told the board that Eames was involved, that information changed their minds.

"We instantly approved it," Bagley said. "It's hard to vet international grants."

In this case, however, the charity asking for the grant was based in Galveston and Eames' reputation as an automotive expert sealed the deal, Bagley said.

The fund gave African Childrens Haven a \$68,350 grant to buy a new tractor in Kenya. Eames went with Sulzberger on the trip to inspect the tractor, take care of any issues and make sure Mission with a Vision could use the tractor and take care of it.

"It's the largest grant we've ever gotten," Sulzberger said.

The grant also will pay for operating and maintaining the tractor for the first year, he said.

Two of the older girls at the school are now certified heavy equipment operators who can teach other girls how to use the tractor, Sulzberger said.

Ercole-Musso didn't go on the November trip to Africa, but the next time she goes to Kenya, she will stay for a month to work at Mission with a Vision, she said.

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