

Islanders provide shelter, safety and education for Africa's most vulnerable children

By LAURA ELDER The Daily News | Posted: Thursday, November 26, 2015 12:00 am

One night, nine years ago, Linda Ercole-Musso couldn't sleep.

So like a lot of people afflicted with insomnia, she turned to the TV.

What she watched that night would forever change her and the lives of hundreds of children in Africa.

Ercole-Musso had tuned into a report by CNN Chief International Correspondent Christiane Amanpour, who had traveled to Kenya as part of a special documentary "Where Have All the Parents Gone?"

The CNN report looked at the millions of AIDS orphans living in Africa. Many were living on their own and fending for themselves. At the time, the disease had left 12 million children without parents in sub-Saharan Africa alone.

Amanpour's report moved Ercole-Musso to do something to help AIDS orphans. She and husband Ed Sulzberger had lived in Nigeria in the 1970s and 1980s 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.

Right about the time Ercole-Musso saw the CNN report, Sulzberger received an email from Isabelle Vandeplas, project coordinator for Happy Home Orphanage in Stella, a village about 250 miles west of Nairobi, Kenya. Vandeplas, a Belgian agronomist, and three Kenyans founded the orphanage in 2006 to help what was becoming an overwhelming number of children who lost parents to AIDS.

"Vandeplas was first and foremost an agricultural researcher; her orphanage work was her second job, unpaid as it were," said Sulzberger, who is executive director of African Childrens Haven.



Galveston couple help children in Africa

Linda Ercole-Musso and her husband, Ed Sulzberger, founded African Childrens Haven nine years ago.

Vandeplas and others kept noticing children in Africa whose stomachs were distended from hunger and who seemed to be alone, without any guardians — those children were AIDS orphans.

Ercole-Musso and Sulzberger emailed Vandeplas and told her they wanted to help raise money for the orphanage.

Ercole-Musso and other islanders had initially set out to raise about \$3,000 for Happy Home Orphanage. But they raised far more than that in the first year.

Nine years later, the organization, with the help of a network of island business owners and residents, has raised \$750,000, supporting many initiatives that serve more than 700 children and their families in Africa. By the end of the year, the organization will have raised more than \$800,000.

While African Childrens Haven still supports orphanages, its scope has grown. The organization's projects focus on the most vulnerable members of society, especially young girls and women. A major focus of African Childrens Haven is education.

"I was a teacher and am still a teacher," Ercole-Musso said. "I'm very interested in the value of education. Africans know that is their way out of poverty."

Most of the children at Happy Home Orphanage were recovering from malnutrition and not a single one had ever attended school, according to the organization. By the end of 2014, many had graduated from primary school, a considerable achievement for any African child, let alone an AIDS orphan living in a rural community, Ercole-Musso said.

Along with scholarships for students, African Childrens Haven also is helping to pay salaries and provide bonuses and health insurance for teachers at community schools in slum neighborhoods. The practice helps keep good teachers in the classroom, Ercole-Musso said.

Children in poverty are easy targets for drug and sex traffickers. African Childrens Haven also works to keep children from falling prey to crime and violence by investing in after-school programs that keep children engaged in sports and other recreational activities. The organization also is planning to establish computer labs where children can develop new skills and have access to resources that will enhance their studies.

The organization also is using its resources to fight illegal practices such as female genital mutilation and childhood marriage, which are still common in many parts of Africa.

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. First and foremost, it is painful and traumatic. The removal of or damage to healthy, normal genital tissue interferes with the natural functioning of the body and causes several immediate and long-term health consequences, according to the organization.

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

African Childrens Haven helps to support safe houses that shelter hundreds of such girls. The organization also sponsors educational scholarships to keep the girls out of harm's way, and provide them with a chance for a better life.

Often, Africa's problems seem daunting and overwhelming. But Ercole-Musso and Sulzberger have been able to witness tangible results and children thrive through the African Childrens Haven.

And those results have inspired other islanders to get involved.

"Having traveled with Eddie and Linda and gotten closer to them over the years, I heard about what they were doing in Africa and was amazed at what an impact they were having while doing so," said Robert Lynch, who is now treasurer of the organization.

Lynch, who is involved through local programs that help the less fortunate through Harris and Eliza Kempner Fund, said African Childrens Haven is directly changing lives for the better.

"They are helping girls and boys who are in desperate situations, providing a safe and healthy environment for them to grow and learn, which will allow them the space to open their minds to possibilities that they had never thought of before," Lynch said. "That has got to be the most rewarding aspect of being involved in African Childrens Haven. We are helping to provide a safe haven for those who need it most."

One of the early donors to the program was Kathleen DiNatale, owner of Yoga Haven, who raised money by offering restorative yoga classes for donations.

Cheryl Jenkins, manager of Hendley Market downtown, raised money by selling a line of earrings made by Ercole-Musso, who is an artist.

Seamstress Cathy Stovall donated her Twirligirli gowns for the girls in the orphanage. Those garments were well received by the young girls in the orphanage, Sulzberger said.

Lee Roane and colleagues at Galveston.com built African Childrens Haven's website and have hosted it free since 2007, Sulzberger said.

Steve and Billie Burdick at Galveston Computer Solutions have collaborated with the organization on a number of ventures involving the provision of computers for projects.

J.B. Schmidt, a certified public accountant, helped African Childrens Haven set up its accounting

system and provided advice on financial issues, while also giving a substantial discount on the preparation of IRS documents.

“Because of the generosity of so many people and businesses in Galveston, we’re helping hundreds of kids lead a better life and climb their way out of poverty,” Sulzberger said. “Even during the days that followed Ike, folks in Galveston kept up their support even as they struggled to put their homes and lives back together. I think that really says something about the community.”