



A Walk On The Wild Side

Stuart Eastwood, chairman of Nyumbani UK, goes walking in the Nairobi slums

Joseph is a teenager. He turned thirteen last year. It was a day just like any other, for in his world there is little cause to celebrate anything. Joseph has a life quite different to most kids his age that I know. A life founded in poverty and terrible hardship.

Joseph lives with his eight year old sister, Julia, in Kibera, the largest slum in Nairobi, home to nearly one million people. Some years ago, his father came to the city from western Kenya, in search of work. Finding a job as a casual labourer, he sent for his wife and young son and together they set up home in the cheapest accommodation that they could find. Whilst waiting for his wife's arrival, however, Joseph's father engaged in a brief affair and unknowingly became infected with HIV. The infection was soon passed to his wife, who discovered her fate only when Julia was born.

Joseph's father died of AIDS three years ago. He had struggled to work almost to the end. Joseph's uncle declined to take on his brother's family, saying that he was already finding it too difficult to feed and clothe his own children.

Life became almost impossible for Joseph's mother. Sadly, she resorted to prostitution as the only way of feeding her small family, and so Joseph and Julia would lie in the bed they shared as their mother invited strange men to come into the single room home late at night. Joseph's mother withdrew into herself, no doubt hating herself, hating her life, surviving only for her children. Then she became ill, so ill that Joseph was forced to resort to the ghastly piles of rubbish, in search of food, competing with the goats that ferret through the stinking mass of waste. Desperate for help, Joseph eventually sought out our Lea Toto team after hearing about them and their work.

Joseph's mother died last year. Neighbours contributed to a basic wooden coffin and she was buried with little pomp or ceremony. Joseph was too numb to cry. Julia wept for the two of them.

After hearing Joseph's story, I asked to meet him. Accompanied by a young British doctor, Alex Aarvold, who is spending six months in the

Lea Toto programme, I visited Kibera. Navigating our way along narrow paths and alleys, overflowing with filth, we arrived at a small mud and wattle shelter, with a corrugated iron roof, a single room provided by a compassionate family that served as home to Joseph and Julia. A dark room with one single bed, some cooking utensils, little more. There, Joseph greeted me with a warm smile although Julia held back, shy, perhaps a bit overwhelmed.

Joseph spoke openly about his life, and it was soon evident that this was a boy old for his years. Waking each day at daybreak, he prepares himself and his sister for school. Breakfast is a simple meal of porridge that Joseph makes from the food parcel that he now receives from Lea Toto every fortnight. School is evidently a matter of great importance to Joseph. Fortunately, primary schooling is now free to all children in Kenya. Of course uniforms have to be purchased along with essential books and writing implements, but Lea Toto has helped the two children with these items. Joseph seems convinced that, by attending school, he will one day work himself and Julia out of the terrible existence that they have today and it is clear that he takes his studies very seriously.

The children walk some distance to and from school, and on returning home, Joseph sets about making an early evening meal for himself and his sister. This disciplined little boy is quite unlike any other teenager I have ever met. Laundry he tells me is done at weekends, which is also when he collects water for the needs of the following week. Access to clean water is not something that Joseph can take for granted. He and Julia walk long distances in search of a working community stand pipe to fill the plastic bottles that once contained cooking oils sold to prepare food for the table of much better placed families. Homework must be done before dark as there is no power, no electric light, and candles are a rare luxury. Life in Kibera is hard. Whenever the children have to answer a call of nature, they must walk for five minutes to the nearest pit latrine, a disgusting, rotting structure that serves hundreds each day.

Alex tells me that he has prescribed medication

for Julia. It is Joseph who is entrusted to ensure that she takes it, each day at the right time. "Without him," says Alex, "she would be in an impossible position. The boy is not only her brother, but her mother and father too".

Joseph's neighbour arrives, a small thin man, who is concerned to know what two masungus (white men) are doing on his patch. This is Joseph's benefactor, the man who provides him this wretched accommodation that in fairness to the individual concerned could fetch him a rent of £1 a week. I thank him for his generosity to the children; make him a token payment that might at least recompense him for the next few months of lost revenue. He takes the money with gratitude and departs.

We also take our leave. Joseph walks with us out into the main road alongside the rail tracks that take the daily train to Kisumu, the home of Joseph's father. I wonder what life might have been like for this boy had his father remained in rural Kenya, working out a life as a subsistence farmer as many do.

Joseph shakes my hand, makes eye contact, humbly thanks me for everything that we all do for him and his sister. No Joseph, I thought, it is I that should thank you. The short time I have been in your company brings home to me how rich my life is. How blessed I and my family are.

Joseph and Julia are registered with the Lea Toto programme. Our social workers now keep a close eye on them. Medical needs that they may have are taken care of as best as resources allow. As Stuart's account says, Lea Toto also provides the children with a fortnightly food parcel which covers basic needs. But as we prepare - rightly - for the celebration of Christmas and the joy of the family around us, can we spare a thought for Joseph and his sister? And the many children like them that live and survive the terrible slums of Nairobi. Just £2 will pay for a food parcel of essential and nutritious food. Will you sponsor a food parcel - just £4 per month will help a small family survive? Your help will be greatly appreciated.

WILL YOU HELP JOSEPH AND JULIA? Send your donation today

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Father To Them All

Last year John Carlin, a journalist with *The Independent*, visited the Nyumbani orphanage and wrote about our own Protus Lumiti, a dedicated man who brings hope to so many children who are HIV infected.



Protus Lumiti has loved and buried more than a hundred children. He is 34, unmarried with no children of his own. What he does is entirely out of the kindness of his heart: acting as father, mother and big brother to abandoned Aids orphans. Right now, in his capacity as head of the Nyumbani orphanage, near Nairobi, he has over ninety under his care.

It may be the saddest job in the world, but Protus has the consolation of knowing that it would be almost impossible to do it any better. If you were looking for someone, somewhere, to squeeze the most hope and joy out of a brief and parentless life, Protus would be the man, Nyumbani the place.

Funded almost entirely by overseas donors, Nyumbani's children live in small "families", each supervised by full-time surrogate "housemothers", in clean, airy cottages. There is specialised health care on the premises and access to that rare commodity for victims of the great African plague: life-extending anti-retroviral medication. There are fountains, lawns to play on, and an abundance of toys and swings. It would be paradise, save that in paradise there are no cemeteries. Behind the cabbage patch, neatly arranged under a tall eucalyptus tree, are little white wooden crosses. Most of the children's bodies are recovered for burial by family members in the communities where they were born. These crosses mark the graves of the forgotten children, those who no one outside Nyumbani wanted to know.

Protus has been living day and night with the children since the orphanage was founded in 1992. How has he coped? How does a human being respond to such relentless sorrow?

"When they feel sick, I feel sick," he says. "For I see them grow, I get to know them, I get to love them as if they were my own. Then I see them go down. I have seen a hundred die and been with them all in the last stages, holding their hands, and at each burial. Every single one."

Protus speaks with no righteousness, no pride. None of that vanity one sees sometimes in people who know they are doing something that is exceptionally selfless and good. Far from lugubrious, without a whiff of self-importance, he convinces through the quiet force of his personality and the extraordinary drama of his life, simply told. He sits across a desk in a small cramped office, a normal human being doing a superhuman job. When I ask him if he has developed any special emotional defenses he says he has not. He cannot afford to show it, he says, but he remains, in truth, as vulnerable as he did on the day he started work.

"It always pains you. When a little girl of 11 died in '99 I almost left. I could not take it any more. It was too much. But then I thought: if I leave, what will happen to the other staff, will they leave too, will they follow my example? I had to stay."

Staying means learning to control your own pain and plunging with enormous wisdom and patience into the world of a group of very vulnerable children. "Each child arrives here in pain after the loss of parents, many not

understanding the condition that they have. Nyumbani has to prepare them, to help them understand. It is terribly traumatic for them."

Nyumbani was the vision of New York Jesuit priest, Father Angelo D'Agostino. The children would not get better treatment in the finest establishment of its kind anywhere. Nor would they receive attention more devoted than that which they receive from Protus, around whom the children crowd when he goes out among them in the playground.

The beauty and relative opulence of Nyumbani diminishes the tragedy, but also in a way makes it more poignant. "They ask themselves once they are 15 or 16 what their future will be. The problem is they want to be involved in a normal life."

But the greatest trauma for all the children comes, Protus says, when there is a death in the orphanage. They began to see the place that has been a place of refuge for them in a more dark and sinister light, as the ante-chamber of death. "They start to worry and think they will be next. At this stage we must redouble our energies to give them hope and help, and in time they forget and life returns to normal."

Nyumbani has what they call "the nursing room", a small, well-equipped infirmary attended by full-time nurses. Before ARVs appeared on the scene in 1999, Protus said, it used to be full: seven or eight children at a time. Once in they rarely came out. It was seen by the children - correctly - as the death room.

When I visited Nyumbani, Samuel was there on his own. Nine years old, and terribly emaciated, he sat in a cot with a little fluffy toy dangling from a string above his head. Every 20 seconds or so he coughed, a cough that seemed to have been dredged up from a hollow place deep inside his stomach, the telling cough of the Aids patients who are beyond all hope. I look at him in profile, against a window, and he turns to me for a moment, with what I take to be a look of heart-



breaking sadness. Then he turns away and looks out of the window. Half an hour later I come by again and he is in the same position, still staring out of the window, immobile, thinking God-knows-what thoughts, but

looking as solemn and ponderously reflective as a person ten times his age might in similar circumstances. "Samuel's body system is closing down," Protus explained. "He is in a full-blown state. We can only give him palliative support to give his pain some relief. Soon Samuel will die."

It is hard enough for me to bear this news - someone who has never even talked to Samuel but has caught only the tiniest glimpse of him. Protus has lived with him for over seven years. And yet what comes across is the sense of a man utterly self-contained, possessed of a deep calm, who smiles frequently but rarely laughs. There must be a wisdom one acquires when exposed to so much suffering. But also you imagine that he has to hold on to this image of quiet composure in order to create the necessary atmosphere among his staff, and among the children, for fear that if he reveals one crack the whole edifice will come crashing down.

Which is what nearly happened when the little girl of 11 died in 1999.

"Caroline was her name," says Protus. "She is buried here. Everyday she held onto the hope that she would get better. Even in the last stages when her body was emaciated, she was full of this amazing vitality. She put up a terrible fight about going to the nursing room. She refused and refused to go. I visited her in her house to persuade her and when she saw my face, how serious I was, she cried and cried. She said over and over, 'I wish I could live, I wish I could be better'. It was on a Sunday that she died. She simply said, 'I want to go' and those were her last words and she turned as if to rest, and died. Somehow, irrationally, against all science I felt she might not die, she might pull through. That's how I had felt because there was such a spark of life in her burning always. I was prepared for a miracle, but at the end, nothing."



I put it to him that he is in the hope business. "Yes", he says, with a large, easy smile. "That is what we do".



Please pass this newsletter on to a friend and invite them to become a Friend of Nyumbani too

A letter from Nairobi



Dear Friend,

Once again I am delighted to be asked to contribute to 'Habari ya Nyumbani' which is designed to keep our friends in the United Kingdom abreast of news and developments in Nairobi.

Regretfully, I begin with sad news. Although we have lost no children for eighteen months, since our last newsletter, we said farewell to Anastasia in August, Samuel in September and Mary in October, all despite the best efforts of our nursing staff. May they rest in peace. We will not forget them.

On a happier note I can tell you that the number of children Nyumbani is looking after has passed the one thousand mark. 92 are accommodated at the orphanage, the remainder are registered with out Lea Toto outreach programmes.

Of the children living in the home; the youngest is a boy of 8 months. He came to us from Muranga, having been abandoned in the local hospital where he stayed for four months. We have called him Isaac. I am happy to say that he has blossomed and is now sitting upright.

Our outreach programme is based in three slums, Kangemi, Kibera and Kariobangi. Life in the slums is tough. Each and every day we hear of heart rending stories of misery and hardship. Our Kangemi programme is funded by USAID and we have over 600 children registered with us there. In Kibera and Kariobangi, which Nyumbani must fund itself, we have over 400 children registered. I must mention here the work of Dr. Alex Aarvold. Alex qualified as a doctor from the University of

Edinburgh not so long ago. Before settling down in the UK and pursuing his career, he offered us six months of his young life and is seen each day in the slums, tending to the needs of his patients. We are grateful to him and all the volunteers who come here and add value to our work.

I should tell you that on September 8th we celebrated our 12th Anniversary. Our Guest of Honour was Her Excellency, the First Lady of the Republic of Kenya, Mrs. Lucy Kibaki. More than 1000 friends of Nyumbani attended the occasion. As well as our Nyumbani kids, we were also joined by some of the children from the Lea Toto slum programmes.

I must also report that the Kenya National Sweepstake Lottery selected Nyumbani as a beneficiary, for the third time. When asked, we chose five computers that will be devoted solely to teaching the children computer skills. In order to house the "computer school" we have found a 40ft shipping container that will be adapted and secured. It is so important that our children have the opportunity to get ahead with skills that are increasingly necessary if they are to take their place in the world eventually.

Finally, I am delighted to tell you that Sister Mary Owens, known to many of you who have visited with us, has been appointed the Deputy Executive Director of Nyumbani. Mary hails from Ireland but has served in Kenya for many years, ultimately as Provincial of the Loreto Sisters. She brings much experience and her day to day involvement with Nyumbani will ensure that we spend wisely the funds so kindly given to us.

As I write this, the children are anxiously awaiting the now traditional year end visit of British Airways staff who are so wonderful in visiting with us at this time of year to arrange a Christmas party.

I close with a special thanks to you, a valued Friend of Nyumbani, a friend to so many vulnerable children who so desperately need your help. As we approach Christmas, you will probably be busy planning your festive season. Children will be writing letters to Father Christmas and their parents and grandparents will get much joy from seeing their faces as they open their gifts on Christmas morning. It is a special time. A time for family and loved ones. But may I please ask you to spare just a moment of that time to think about the little ones here in Nairobi? Will you spare something for them and contact our excellent team at Nyumbani UK? And if you already help us, will you take a moment to ask a friend to consider us?

For that and all that you do in showing compassion and support, you remain constantly in my thoughts and prayers.

Until next time, and with my best wishes for Christmas and the coming year,

Most sincerely, **D'Ag.**

[Father Angelo D'Agostino is the founder and medical director of Nyumbani. Father D'Ag recently received the Chairman's Humanitarian Award from the International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children in Washington.]

Father To Them All (cont...)

Before leaving Nyumbani I walk out of Protus's office, past the playground where the children are playing on the swings, behind the cabbage patch, and on to the children's cemetery under the eucalyptus tree. I read the names under each little white cross and find the two inscriptions I am looking for. They could not be simpler, more honest and unpretentious, more faithful a reflection of the spirit of Protus. "Caroline 1987 to 1999" and "George 1991 to 21/7/95". Brother and sister are buried side by side. Flowers grow over the neatly tended little mounds.

I go back to say goodbye to Protus. A child that might have been Caroline's age comes up to him, takes his hand.

I get in a car and drive to Nairobi city centre in a taxi with a labourer and a car mechanic who have been working at Nyumbani for several years. I say that Protus is a wonderful man and they nod effusively. "An extraordinary man," says the mechanic. "You know, he knows the names of each and every child," "Each and every child," joins in the labourer. "He is just like a father them all."

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Nyumbani UK update

Through the generosity of friends of Nyumbani in the United Kingdom, a 2 acre site adjacent to the orphanage was purchased this year and funds are now being raised to develop the site. Within the development plan there will be two hostels to accommodate the teenage children at the home. Work will soon begin on landscaping and preparing the area for construction with funds so kindly donated to Nyumbani UK by the Zurich Foundation.

Nyumbani UK is anxious to participate in the site development and is active in raising funds for this purpose. But we also have to meet our share of the recurring expenses of the orphanage as well as to participate in the fantastic work carried on in the slums by our Lea Toto programme. To raise funds, Nyumbani UK has made a major effort over the last few months to contact the many households in Britain with strong Kenya connections. Several groups were helpful in this task, most

particularly the Kenya Regiment, the Kenya Kongonis cricket club, the Old Cambrians and the ex Limuru Girls and Loreto Convent Girls. We are grateful to them for their support.

"Our strategy is to build up our existing band of supporters", says Sheilagh Vaughan-Davies, secretary to the board of trustees of Nyumbani UK. "The last newsletter added another fifty names to the list of people who kindly donate £4 each month." Nyumbani UK is run entirely by volunteers, so every pound donated is spent in supporting the children in Nairobi.

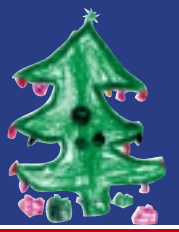
The next Nyumbani annual golf day will be held at Frilford Heath Golf Club in Oxfordshire on April 28th 2005, so why not contact us to find out more? It is always a great day out and once again, we are grateful to Coca-Cola Africa who has kindly offered to sponsor the competition for a third year running.



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Happy Christmas from all the children of Nyumbani



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Dear friend

My name is Faith. I am ten years old. I live in Nyumbani because I don't have parents. I came here when I was seven years old.

I remember when I was brought to Nyumbani. I was not scared because I was thinking that I was going to a hospital.

I was showed a cottage and they told me I could live with the other boys and girls who stayed there. Soon I made some good friends. Joyce Wanjiku is my best friend. Our house Mum is called Mum Grace and she looks after us.

Soon I began school and my teachers say I am doing very well. If you ever come to Kenya please will you come and visit me. Thank you very much for everything that you do to help us.

Love from
Faith x 



Thanks to:

Geraldine Smith, who wrote to say that a friend passed her a copy of our summer newsletter and that she was so touched by the stories that she read. Geraldine says that she had the privilege of growing up in Kenya and has wonderful memories of her childhood and school days. Geraldine determined to do something to help one of children that we care for. Organising a dinner party for her former school friends, and asking them to pay for her 'non Delia cooking' (her words not ours) she raised £120.

Emily Strauchen, who says that everyone who visits the orphanage, as she has, cannot help but be impressed. Hiring some space in a local wine bar for her 22nd birthday, she e-mailed over a hundred university friends and invited them to join

her. In lieu of a present she asked them to make a small donation to Nyumbani. And then sent us a cheque for £460.

Hilary Moore, whose painting of a winter scene is reproduced as Christmas cards that will be sold in aid of her church and Nyumbani.

Sam Stephens who ran his local half marathon raising £370 for Nyumbani.

And Nils Razmilovic who climbed Mount Kilimanjaro raising one pound for every foot of the height of the mountain, nearly £20,000. Breathtaking in more ways than one.

And many others whose innovative ways have raised much needed funds to support our work.

