

News on Nyumbani



The first facility for HIV positive orphans in Kenya.

www.nyumbani.org

Volume IV, Issue 4

Fourth Quarter 2003



Special Holiday Greetings from Nyumbani:

As I write this letter in early November, I am reminded of many memories of Thanksgiving and Christmas in the U.S. with family and friends. Fortunately for me, I have developed another set of fond memories over the past 20 years—memories of Thanksgiving and Christmas with the Nyumbani children, the staff, with Jesuit colleagues, with the many Americans who toil here in Kenya. These many citizens of Nairobi have become my second family. We will celebrate here with prayers, mass, and the many wonderful festivities of the season, but I also will think of my friends in the U.S.

Speaking of family and friends, I want to share a wonderful family celebration I attended in Providence, Rhode Island, on September 14—it was the celebration of my sister's 90th birthday. The excitement, joy, and thanksgiving for being surrounded by family made Sister Savina D'Agostino, FMM, seem much younger than her years.

I was in the U.S. at the time to attend the Annual Nyumbani Benefit Dinner, which has been described to me as: "The Best Ever." It was a star-studded evening that resulted in increased support and awareness of our children in Nyumbani and the Lea Toto program. Some of the reasons for that success were: Kathleen Matthews (our mistress of ceremonies for over ten years), Mark Shields (our witty, charming and profound guest speaker),

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson (who, with others, received a medal for his support of the Nyumbani programs), President Jim Desmond and his outstanding committee (who pulled all the details together), and too many others who deserve honorable mention but whose names, they know, are close to me and the children.

By coincidence, the week following our dinner, Kenyan President Mwai Kibaki and his wife Lucy Muthoni Kibaki were in the U.S. on an official state visit. Through friends and colleagues, I attended with John Noel the formal reception hosted by President and Mrs. Bush.

Following that impressive occasion, Mr. Noel and I were invited to attend a special luncheon hosted by Secretary of State Colin Powell at the State Department. There I received a very pleasant surprise when the Chief of Protocol seated me at the head table with Secretary Powell and President and Mrs. Kibaki. This surprise was a special highlight of my visit home. The next day, I attended a businessmen's luncheon honoring the Kenyan President and the ministers with whom he traveled. These events provided me a good opportunity to make important contacts with the government officials with whom I will be dealing in the months and years ahead.

I also wanted to share an honor the orphanage has received. Nyumbani is fortunate

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Sister Mary Owens, IBVM, who has been with Nyumbani since Father D'Ag founded the orphanage over 10 years ago, delights the audience with her thoughts on how far the Nyumbani efforts have come.

The 2003 Nyumbani Benefit

The 2003 Nyumbani Annual Fundraiser was a roaring success in many ways. More than 270 people attended to show support of the orphanage and its outreach programs. Many distinguished guests were honored with special awards for their efforts on behalf of Nyumbani. Attendees were updated on the strides that have been made in 11 years as they met the other people who share their passion for the cause.



Father D'Ag applauds Kathleen Matthews, news anchor for the ABC-WJLA television station in Washington, D.C. who has served as mistress of ceremonies for the last decade.



The Honorable Tommy Thompson, Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, talks to the Nyumbani benefit audience about the Administration's commitment to fighting the HIV/AIDS pandemic.



Shields talks with Dr. Joseph O'Neill, Director, White House Office of National AIDS Policy, (right), who made a surprise visit to the benefit with his brother, Nyumbani supporter Rev. Bill O'Neill, SJ, (middle).

A Miracle from Miami: Fundraiser Brings in \$13,000 in One Night



Rev. William Byron, SJ, a long-time friend of Nyumbani, shares a laugh with guest speaker Mark Shields.

Dr. Paul Perito, his friends, family and colleagues managed to pull off a miracle in Miami, Florida recently when they raised over \$13,000 in one night -- and the money is still coming in.

Dr. Perito, who has known Father D'Ag since he was a child, developed a list of about 250 people, sent them an invitation to a cocktail reception at Norman's, one of the nation's top restaurants, "and told them to bring their checkbooks," he says.

He then worked with an editor to produce a videotape featuring clips from the many programs that have been done about Father D'Ag and Nyumbani, and showed it at the reception.

The AIDS Alliance of Miami, who helped coordinate the event, pledged a

sizable donation, but the rest of the money came from the people who attended. Dr. Perito says he expects the amount will eventually climb to \$20,000, and he is already planning next year's event.

Helping him make the miracle happen were Jane Fincher from the Miami AIDS Alliance; Dr. Perito's close friend Roxie Bogran, who coordinated the evening; Roxie's two young girls; and his own two young girls. The pharmaceutical company Pfizer Laboratories paid for hors d'oeuvres. The donations, however, came from the generous attendees.

"Many of my medical colleagues deal with AIDS in their practices, and they wanted to help," Dr. Perito says. "If we could have these kinds of events across the country, think what we could do!"



Being a Teen Is Different at Nyumbani

Editor's Note: The children of Nyumbani and Kenya are separated from their counterparts in the USA by much more than many miles and an ocean. Volunteer Ted Neill followed Julia, one of the older girls, around for one day to reveal some of those differences.

Housemother Mom Anne begins the wake-up process in Cottage D at 5:30 a.m. As the oldest girls in the cottage, Julia (14) and Magdalene (10) climb out of bunk beds first—knowing they are expected to help 14 younger children, then get ready for school themselves (they are the only two old enough to attend an off-campus school). The two girls go about their duties with little comment until they arrive at breakfast, dressed in the mint green dresses and red sweaters that are the uniforms of their school. Magdalene asks why I'm at the table. I tell them I'm writing a story, but don't tell them it is focused on Julia.

You see Julia probably wouldn't understand the gulf between teens in the U.S. and her country or why we'd want a story. Julia was born in the coastal village of Mombassa—the third child of four. She remembers the village fondly—at least up until her parents got sick with what everyone would eventually recognize was HIV/AIDS. At that point, her memories get darker, including seeing her younger sister die from the disease, then watching as neighbors gathered outside with torches to burn their house. She remembers her father chasing the arsonists away. Sadly, she then remembers her father succumbing to the disease, followed by her mother. At the morgue where her mother's body lay, she remembers that a social worker suggested that, to make things easier, she pretend she never had a mom.

She laughs that comment off now as she goes about her morning duties.

At the breakfast table, children down their medicines, along with breakfast. Some, like Julia, who are on the triple drug cocktail keeping her alive, have six pills to take.

Julia and Magdalene, seated next to each other on the bus, leave Nyumbani at 7 a.m. At Hekima School, I follow Julia into Standard 2 class while Magdalene files past us to Standard 4. You see, even



Julia (left) and Magdalene (right) pose with Amani, one of several Kenyan popstars that visited Nyumbani on Nyumbani Day 2003

though Julia is older, she is two grades behind because when she first arrived at Nyumbani, she was too sick for school—bedridden for weeks at a time. Because of the discrepancy between age and level, she lies about her age to avoid teasing.

In reality, she is lucky to have lived to this age. Anti-retroviral drugs have saved Julia's life, though repeated throat infections from before drugs left her voice raspy and trachea visually deformed.

Still, Julia has grown into an exceptionally caring child/teen—the Nyumbani house mothers agree that she is one of the most helpful children on the compound. The level of discipline in Julia's cottage is high, and most people at Nyumbani credit this situation partly to her. At the same time, Julia is the child that will perceive when a mother or volunteer has had a bad day and ask what is wrong. The simple fact that she notices is exceptional, considering that most children her age are absorbed in themselves.

I experience this thoughtfulness the day I spend with her – when at lunch she is concerned that I have not brought a packed lunch. When I assure her that I have been taken care of, she remarks: “Good, I did not want you to be having nothing!”

At recess, I sit in the window and watch the kids—happy that no visible divisions exist between the Nyumbani children and the community children still at the school. Unfortunately, many local parents pulled their children out of Hekima when they heard that the Nyumbani kids were from an HIV orphanage. On the playground I notice that Magdalene stud-

iously avoids Julia, and I see at last a typical pre-teen reaction: Magdalene feels that as a Standard 4, she can't associate with Julia without risking being un-cool. Julia confesses this hurts almost as much as when the children make fun of her neck. But she shrugs both off and wears hooded jackets to cover her neck.

At 4 p.m., school is out and the Nyumbani bus takes the two girls home. Julia snacks, then washes her uniform by hand behind the cottage and sits down to do her homework. At five, she helps Mom Anne give baths; at six, she supervises as children prepare for dinner. When Mom Anne arrives with food, the children are seated quietly. Mom Anne thanks Julia, who displays a bashful smile.

After dinner, it is time for more medicine. Julia makes sure even the youngest, Amal, drinks anti-retrovirals down to the last drop. At 8:45 p.m., Julia and Magdalene—friends again now that school is at a distance—finish their homework together. I follow the friends back to the cottage while they play at being scared of the dark. The cottage girls have not fallen asleep, so I read to them, and at 9, I give the children hugs. At that point, Julia calls my attention to a chart she has drawn with crayons and posted on the wall. It is a schedule of rotating hugs to make sure every child in the room gets a turn at being first. I ask why she went through the trouble. “It is only fair,” she explains, “this way everyone gets attention the same and everyone will be happy.” Julia would have it no other way.



Special Greetings

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nate to have won one of ten global awards for anti-retroviral drug programs from Brazil. This is especially important to us because there are still no affordable anti-retroviral drugs available in Africa. We ask you to pray these drugs will become available to save generations of Kenyans facing annihilation from HIV/AIDS.

In some happy news, I should report that our increased capacity has allowed us to house 93 children at the orphanage, and that the Lea Toto program has grown immensely: more than 800 children are now being helped by our community outreach program. Lea Toto is made up of two parts: a small group supported by your contributions to Nyumbani, and a much larger group supported for the past three years through generous grants from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). We are indebted to USAID for ever-increasing support and dedication to our goals.

I also would like to mention that Father Rick Ryscavage, SJ, who has served on our U.S. board for three years, will be moving from Washington, D.C. to the New York City area. We will miss his

wisdom and strong spiritual presence at our board meetings and annual dinners.

Now a report on our vision to begin a Nyumbani Village for street children and senior citizens here in Kenya. We have encountered obstacles that have prevented turning the first shovelful of earth, but that action is now in sight. I would be remiss if I did not mention that this is made possible by the heroic efforts of John and Patty Noel from Wisconsin, as well as John's hardworking staff. Their commitment and drive this past year has put flesh on the Village skeleton. Through John's motivation, the hurdles are falling and the dream is coming into focus.

Finally, as we think about the first Christmas and the Child of Bethlehem in his poor stable surroundings, let us use that vision as a vision of Hope. We have so many children here in Nairobi facing desperate situations. But instead of hopelessness, we can be certain that the little baby born 2,000 years ago will give us the strength, courage, and focus we need to help children with HIV/AIDS, the street children, the homeless senior citizens, and others in Kenya with problems too numerous to mention.

Fr. Angelo D'Agostino, SJ,
MD

Make the Holiday Special

Here are four ways you can celebrate the joy of the holiday season.

- ★ Nos. 1 and 2: The U.S. Board is offering Christmas cards and a calendar featuring the children of Nyumbani. To order, contact info@nyumbani.org or 703/934-8534.
- ★ No. 3: The CD-ROM featuring the voices of the children of Nyumbani that has reached top levels of popularity in Kenya will soon be available for purchase, though it may not reach the U.S. in time for Christmas. To place an order, contact tbanks@nyumbani.org.
- ★ No. 4: Use the enclosed envelope to share your heart and your financial resources with the children of Nyumbani and its outreach program.



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More pictures from the fundraiser