

Trying to 'break the back of poverty'

By Jessica DeLeón

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* A local couple will soon resume their efforts to feed and educate children in Kenya.

Steve Peifer was a missionary in Kenya in 2000 when he was startled by what he saw at a school one Thursday.

The students were lying on the dirt floor.

They hadn't eaten since Monday and were weak, the teacher told him.

"Your life's never the same after that," Peifer said.

He started a program in Kenya that feeds 11,000 children each school day. He also created 11 computer labs at local schools.

He and his wife, Nancy, adopted 6-year-old Kenyan twins.

This week, he was named the Championing Children recipient in CNN Heroes: An All-Star Tribute. He even got a kiss from the award's presenter, supermodel Tyra Banks.

Peifer's family has been living in Bedford for six months and plans to return to Africa on Dec. 27. He hopes the award will help raise more money for the project.

"I think we can sustain what we have," he said. "We're hoping to take it to the next level."

'How short life really is'

His journey began out of a personal tragedy.

Nine years ago, Steve and Nancy Peifer were living in Grapevine and had just had a baby boy.

Stephen lived for just eight days.

"It caused them to look at life differently and see how short life really is," their friend Yvonne Schnitzius said.

Nancy had always wanted to be a missionary in Africa. Before the death of the baby, her husband had no desire to go there.

"I just felt like what I was supposed to do was make her dream come true," he said.

So Steve, who worked for Oracle, and his family went to Kenya. They worked with the African Inland Mission International, taking food to villages for a year.

"There's a Kenyan proverb: 'It's hard to wipe the dust of Africa off your feet,'" he said. "It just stays with you."

Even when they returned to Texas, the Peifers knew they had to go to Africa again.

In their research, they found that most Kenyan children eat only one meal a day.

Steve Peifer figured that if the children had more food, they would stay in school.

The Peifers thought of a plan. They would give the schools corn and beans with oil, which would provide nutritional requirements for the day. The schools would prepare the food without charging for it.

No students dropped out that term. At another school, one child dropped out, but 200 youngsters joined the program.

Peifer then set up solar-powered computer centers at 11 schools. Students now go to

school early to use them.

Peifer's goal is to keep a generation in school.

"You can't achieve academically if you don't have good nutrition," he said. "That's how you break the back of poverty."

'The hardest thing'

Africa has become a way of life for the Peifers.

Six years ago, they started the process of adopting their twins, Ben and Katie, who were 5 months old.

For two years, despite the Peifers' petitions, Kenyan courts kept putting off completing the adoptions. They were final March 4, Stephen's birth date.

Steve Peifer, 51, works as a counselor at the Rift Valley Academy, a boarding school for missionary children in Kijabe, Kenya. Nancy Peifer, 50, heads the foreign language department there.

The family came back to the United States in July to see their oldest son, J.T., 18, start his freshman year at Wake Forest University. Their other children — including Matthew, 16 — have been attending Covenant Christian Academy in Colleyville.

On Dec. 27, the family will return for a 2 1/2 -year stay in Kenya.

During his U.S. stay, Peifer has been speaking to churches on weekends.

Clarence Stiefel, a deacon at Mid-Cities Bible School in Bedford, said Peifer is a good speaker for the cause.

"He's so humble, and yet he's doing such great work," he said.

The program is seeking more donations. It costs \$1.47 to feed a child for a month, and schools ask the program for help all the time.

"The hardest thing in the world is to have to say no to hungry kids," Peifer said.

He hopes that the CNN award will help raise more money.

He was chosen for the award by a panel of 15 celebrities, including T.D. Jakes, minister of Potter's House in Dallas. The panel selected the winners from 18 finalists out of 7,000 nominations, according to CNN's Web site.

Thursday night's ceremony, hosted by CNN reporters Anderson Cooper and Christiane Amanpour, took place at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City and featured performances by Norah Jones and Sheryl Crow and celebrity presenters such as Masi Oka and Kyra Sedgwick.

Peifer described the event as "surreal," since he's surrounded by poor people all the time. "It was one of the chapters in this book you know will never happen again," he said. "But it was fun to be a part of it."

Online: www.cnn.com/2007/LIVING/12/06/heroes.show/

www.cnn.com/video/#/video/living/2007/12/04/heroes.steve.peifer.cnn

www.aimint.org/usa/stories/cnn_heroes.html

How to help

Send donations to Africa Inland Mission, P.O. Box 178, Pearl River, NY 10965. Designate on the

check whether the money is for food or the computer program.

To see Peifer

Steve Peifer will speak at 7 p.m. Wednesday at Mid-Cities Bible Church, 3224 Cheek-Sparger Road in Bedford. 817-283-1609 or www.mcbbc.org

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