

# Kenya Beckons

Winnie Barron wants to establish an orphan center in Makindu and name it for an orphan girl who died there.

by Jennifer Moody, The Democrat-Herald

The boy was 12 and called himself Madonna when she met him a year ago, Winnie Barron remembers.

A street child who had been on his own for years, he had taken it upon himself to become Artful Dodger of Makindu, Kenya; leader of a gang of orphans who scoured the dusty streets of the tiny village looking for food and other supplies for abandoned children like themselves.

It was Madonna who first brought Barron, a Brownsville firefighter/paramedic and physician's assistant volunteering in Makindu with Northwest Medical Teams, to meet Nyumbani. She was 5 1/2, living in a two-walled chicken shed and dying of AIDS.

Barron carried Nyumbani during the hour-long walk back to the hospital where she worked. Despite Barron's efforts, less than two weeks later, that was where the little girl died.

Barron hasn't forgotten her, or Madonna, or the scores of other children she met in Makindu who had been orphaned or abandoned through war, starvation or disease.

Her dream now is to return to the village this fall to create a center that would help feed and educate the children there. She has named the project after Nyumbani, which means "home" in Swahili.

It's a massive undertaking, Barron agrees. She has spoken with people who tell her outright that even if she can get it off the ground, it won't last.

"But to me, that's not how you can judge its success," says Barron, who plans to go back to Kenya in early September. "To me, the way you judge success is by each child you extend a caring hand to. And

each child you help can help another child."

The children Barron hopes to help have been largely overlooked by the rest of the community, she says.

Some have been taken in by other families, and some by elderly women who do what they can to provide clothing or an extra potato now and then. Many, however, live on the streets.

According to some estimates, between 35 and 40 percent of Kenya's population is HIV-positive, Barron says. Prostitution is common and condom use is openly discouraged by many public officials.

Options for people with AIDS are few and expensive, so most people don't inquire about test results.

Children of parents who die from AIDS are sometimes rejected by family and friends. Occasionally, the parents themselves will turn their children out into the streets, believing they will be safer and won't contract the disease.

With nowhere to turn and no means of support, hope dies, Barron says.

"What I'm trying to do really is a simple thing," she says. "I can't promise that these kids are going to survive. ... I can't guarantee the long term success of this project. But I can promise that one, these kids will know love. They will know that people care. And in doing that, we will give them an incredible gift, because they will know hope."

Although it is not yet a reality, the Nyumbani Orphan Center is well past the dream stage.

Barron has a building, a partner in Kenya and nonprofit

status through Sharing Hands, a United Way agency in Brownsville.

Sharing Hands adopted the center as a project on June 8. Through it, an advisory committee is helping Barron make phone calls and presentations seeking donations. The organization, which hopes to make the center a two-year project, will be Barron's anchor while she is in Africa.

"Personally, I'm very excited about it," said Don Andrews, Sharing Hands executive director. "I think it's a wonderful situation and have ever since Winnie came back and started talking about it."

"The people of Brownsville are a very wonderful group of people," Barron says. "They have huge global hearts. When you ask me if I have a team - I have a huge team. I have all of Brownsville."

Barron plans to leave in early September to get the center under way.

The idea is to target 75 to 100 children ranging in age from 4 to 14 years. It will help provide them with food; education, including vocational skills training; clothing and medical care.

Barron plans to have classrooms, a library that includes information on AIDS, a goat or two for milk, and a "bio-intensive" garden training plot that can produce food with minimal resources. The idea is to be a resource rather than a residence, at least at first, she says.

She figures the first year's costs will total between \$25,500 and \$30,000. Once the basics are set up, she says, it won't take much to keep it going. Teaching the children vocational training will help make the center self-sustaining because

they may be able to sell crafts or other goods they made themselves.

Barron will spend two to three months in Kenya getting the center running. From there, she says, the hope is that an organization will "adopt" it - an organization that will respect the community's own beliefs, traditions and structures and won't impose its own agenda or doctrine.

"There's so much wisdom in these communities," she says. "That needs to be honored and utilized."

A Makindu teacher named Dianah Nzomo met Barron last year while she was with Northwest Medical Teams. An orphan caregiver herself, Diana Nzomo was the one who asked Barron for help in developing a center.

"She keeps writing and says, 'Are you really coming?' and I say yes, I really am," Barron says, laughing.

She's going regardless of how many donations she receives, how many people go with her and how the center eventually fares.

"If all I can do is hold one child and get through one day to pass on the promise, that's all I'll do," she said. "But I'm going to try to do more."



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