

# News on Nyumbani



*The first facility for HIV positive orphans in Kenya.*

[www.nyumbani.org](http://www.nyumbani.org)

Volume V, Issue 4

Fourth Quarter 2004

## A Holiday Wish

For you, our Nyumbani supporters, we wish a season filled with loved ones and laughter. Your generosity helps to spread that joy and sense of family to the innocent children of Kenya. Keep us in your prayers this season, and if you can, use the enclosed envelope to send a contribution.

## Easier Donations

American Express is making it convenient to donate on-line: Now you can donate dollars, Membership Rewards® points (we receive \$5 for every 1,000 points) or set up recurring donations. Visit [www.americanexpress.com/donate](http://www.americanexpress.com/donate), click Donate Now and search for the U.S. organization name Children of God Relief Fund.



## Calendars/Christmas Cards:

To help raise funds, we are selling calendars and Christmas cards featuring the children of Nyumbani. Calendars are \$12.50 each and a set of six cards is \$5. Prices include U.S. shipping. Please send an email to [info@nyumbani.org](mailto:info@nyumbani.org) or call (703) 934-8534 to order.

## Dear Friends of Nyumbani:

**W**hile the antiretroviral medications we received to date have helped a number of the children survive and prosper, recent weeks have given us a shot of reality — reminding us how devastating this disease is. Sadly, Samuel N. passed away on September 21, followed shortly by Mary W. on October 11. Samuel was admitted to Nyumbani in February 2000, and Mary came to us in October 2003 from the Lea Toto program. Both suffered from poor health, and although both received the antiretroviral therapy (ART) as well as our care and love, we couldn't do enough to stop the disease from taking them. Both are sadly missed. May they rest in peace.

I am happy to tell you, however, that most children at Nyumbani are in good health, and we are working on bringing help to more children. It is hard to believe that 12 years have passed since we opened our doors to three HIV-positive orphans. We now care for 94 children at the orphanage and 1,265 through the community-based outreach program Lea Toto.

We celebrated those 12 years on September 8 with a Mass officiated by our good friend Archbishop Giovanni Tonucci, the Vatican Ambassador to Kenya. Another good friend, Her Excellency Lucy Kibaki, First Lady of Kenya, was our guest of honor. She brought special greetings from His Excellency the President, Mwai Kibaki. More than 1,000 other friends of Nyumbani also came to celebrate.

The children at the orphanage were joined by some of the children from Lea Toto. However, this mix created a touch of sadness because it showed us the vast difference in health between our children who live on campus and receive ART and our Lea Toto children, who do not receive the medication because we haven't been able to obtain the funds. As many of you know, I have lobbied hard for donations of the drugs over the past several years. We were heartened to hear Her Excellency say in her anniversary speech that these HIV+ children have a right to ART. We just have to find a way to afford it.

Nyumbani now has 14 volunteers from overseas and 10 from Kenya, who do everything from helping us repaint the schoolhouse, plant gardens and renovate the playground to holding the hands of sick children who visit the campus hospital. We thank all our volunteers for their generous contributions of skills and funds. We especially thank Ted Neill, our Volunteer Coordinator, who is leaving us after two years of dedicated service. He will be missed by the children, the staff, and this newsletter to which he has contributed his time and superb writing talents.

Immediately after our anniversary celebrations in Kenya, I left for the U.S. to attend the annual fundraiser in Washington, D.C. This year's event was the most successful ever, with donations and pledges topping \$120,000. It also was graced by the presence of the Secretary of Health and

*(Continued on page 2)*



# Hearts to Hearts: A Successful Benefit

September 14, 2004, proved once again that the hearts of the people of Washington, D.C. and surrounding areas are eager and happy to reach out to the hearts of the innocent children of Nairobi, Kenya.

A highlight of the evening was the give and take of married partners Kathleen Matthews (ABC-TV Channel 7 News Anchor) and Chris Matthews (NBC-TV national host of "Hardball" and "The Chris Matthews Show"), who shared their personal lives, political opinions, and the joys they and their three children experienced on two visits with the children of Nyumbani.

Judy Pancoast, a composer of music for children, also took the podium to explain her week at Nyumbani, during which she helped the children compose and perform two songs she later turned into a CD. Judy played those touching songs, then sang her own song of how Nyumbani has affected her personally.

The audience also was treated to a documentary video entitled "Song of Nyumbani," which explained how an original musical, choral, and ballet art performance was created and produced by Dr. Art Myers. The performance used photographs Myers took when he visited Nyumbani.

The Nyumbani Medallion of Hope was conferred on 14 individuals by Father D'Ag and Benjamin L. Palumbo, the U.S. Board President. Two of the honorees received especially warm recognition for their efforts on behalf of Nyumbani and its outreach programs:

- \* Protus Lumiti, Nyumbani's General Manager, drew a standing ovation from the many past volunteers in attendance, as well others who know of his efforts and commitment to the children.
- \* Giuseppe and Mercedes Cecchi, major supporters of the Nyumbani children, received heartfelt thanks for donating funds for the evening's expenses, which allowed more proceeds to go towards the children.

The Benefit Committee was chaired by Board Member MaryLynn Qurnell who said the evening "was the result of a lot of hard work by many people who came forward to take care of the details. We all appreciate the hard work of these good people."

DVD copies of "Song of Nyumbani" can be ordered for \$35 from Dr. Myers at [art@artmyers.com](mailto:art@artmyers.com). One-third of proceeds go to Nyumbani. Copies of the 2-song CD created by Judy Pancoast can be ordered for \$7.50 by e-mailing [info@nyumbani.org](mailto:info@nyumbani.org) or calling 703/934-8534. All CD proceeds go to Nyumbani. Both prices include U.S. shipping.

## Father D'Ag's Message

(Continued from page 1)

Human Services, Tommy Thompson, and the Czar for the Global AIDS Fund, Ambassador Randall Tobias. The dinner's cost this year was borne by most generous donors, Giuseppe and Mercedes Cecchi. Almost 300 guests enjoyed this generosity. While so many people deserve thanks, I would like to single out MaryLynn Qurnell, who was the Benefit Chair, and U.S. Board President Benjamin L. Palumbo.

During my stay in the U.S., I also spoke widely about Nyumbani throughout the nation. I find my visits to parishes around the country to be very stimulating and personally rewarding. This year, I spoke at numerous masses in Washington, D.C. and four states, and at three major universities. I also spoke with the Italian Ladies of the greater Washington Area who held a highly successful silent auction fundraiser at the Vatican Embassy under the auspices of the Apostolic Nuncio to the United States. The response at all of these events, both personally as well as financially for the children, was most gratifying, and I would welcome invitations from other locations and groups around the country. Please contact me at [angelo@nyumbani.org](mailto:angelo@nyumbani.org) or (in the U.S.) Erin Melendy at [info@nyumbani.org](mailto:info@nyumbani.org).

Fr. Angelo D'Agostino, SJ, MD



Photographer Art Myers (left) is thanked by Mistress of Ceremonies Kathleen Matthews and Father D'Ag.



Father D'Ag presents medals to Giuseppe and Mercedes Cecchi.



Board President Ben Palumbo (left) congratulates Protus Lumiti.



Ambassador Tobias is cited for his Nyumbani efforts.



Chris and Kathleen Matthews visit with songwriter Judy Pancoast (center).

# Developing an Imperfect Paradise

By Nyumbani Volunteer Ted Neill

At the recent burial of Samuel N., one of his great uncles asked to address the gathered mourners following a eulogy given by Anne Nypenya, Samuel's Nyumbani house mom. The uncle said, "It is amazing to me to see that, although God took away Samuel's first mother, he truly created a new one in this woman before us. I see now that Nyumbani is not just a home, but a true family."

It was an especially gratifying moment for me because Samuel was from Cottage D, the cottage where I worked for the past two years. In that time I have become close friends with Mom Anne, and I have seen that she truly does treat the children in her cottage as her own. Samuel's distant relatives were granting her the same respect they would give Samuel's natural mother.

The entire episode encapsulated one of the most important aspects of Nyumbani I have realized in my two years, and that is: we have moved beyond what we were founded for; we are no longer just a hospice, but truly a home and a family.

Granted we still have deaths (three this year), and as long as there is no cure for AIDS, those deaths will continue to shadow our existence. But with antiretroviral treatment, the death rate has dropped significantly. The long-term effect is that we are no longer providing care just for dying children, but rather, we are raising children with futures.

For those of us at Nyumbani who have been a part of this ongoing transition, this shift has brought challenge and gratification. Unlike working in a hospice, where the main aim was to keep sick kids happy *today*, we now must prepare children for life *tomorrow*. In doing this we have seen that once the children's medical issues are addressed, the next set of issues are social: How will we teach them to live with HIV/AIDS hanging over their heads? How will we teach them to cope with social stigma?

Now that our kids are growing, ensuring that they have a positive upbringing — that they come from a "good family" — becomes more important than ever. What is most inspiring to me is to see how the Kenyan staff, the house mothers and fathers in particular, are making sure this gets done. For those who care about Nyumbani, but live abroad,

the Kenyan staff is often invisible. Yet they are the ones who pick up where the doctors leave off. Once the kids are physically healthy, it is the mothers and fathers who make sure the children are emotionally healthy, nurtured, and that they grow up with self esteem and positive values that will help them be well-adjusted teenagers, and then adults. And the nurturers do this despite the ever-looming threats of death and the pain of losing a child. It takes true bravery to attach oneself to the children at Nyumbani, especially after you have buried those you love. And yet our staff perseveres and our children are loved.

Admittedly, pulling sick, abandoned babies off the street and seeing them recover presents a better attention-getting picture than the long hard slog of making teenagers do homework, tuck in their shirts, and do their chores. But the task of raising responsible teens is no less important, and in the end, it may have a huge impact, at least in Kenya. Already our teens are making a difference and changing perceptions in that country. For example, at a recent concert where our singing group Watoto wa Mungu performed, an audience member exclaimed: "Those children are so lively and happy. I thought any child from Nyumbani would be sick and miserable."

When I ponder Kenya's present-day situation (40 years after independence), I think about where the U.S. was at 40. We had a government still ironing out many constitutional issues; corruption in business and government was marginally controlled; many Americans were poor; and we still had the horrifying institution of slavery, which would eventually bring civil war. At that time, the U.S. was not so different from what today we call a third world country; we certainly were a "developing" nation.

But even with these obstacles, the U.S. had nothing like HIV/AIDS to overcome, which is why I personally believe it is our obligation to aid those suffering from this disease. HIV/AIDS is not only a disease threatening individuals, it is a scourge on whole nations, regions, and continents.

Despite this apocalyptic language and the pessimistic numbers that Africa faces, however, the Kenyans at Nyumbani are truly having a "go" at it — doing

## We Need Your Input

In our efforts to improve the annual benefit, we are asking for your feedback. We would greatly appreciate any and all comments, which should be sent to P.O. Box 3465, Fairfax, VA 22038-3465 or to [info@nyumbani.org](mailto:info@nyumbani.org).

Replies will be confidential and will be used by the group planning next year's benefit to make it an even better event.

Thank you for your help.

their best with limited resources to fight HIV/AIDS and its effects. After two years here, I have many people I admire and am grateful towards, including Father D'Ag, Sister Mary, Protus Lumiti, Nyumbani donors and volunteers, and others I don't have space enough to give due credit. But my greatest admiration goes towards the staff. Thanks to them, Samuel's last days were spent surrounded by loving hands, words, and faces, so that when he did pass away, he went from one imperfect paradise into a more permanent one. As for the other children who are blessed with better health, I'm sure that with the care at Nyumbani, they will grow up and go out to make Kenya itself their own imperfect paradise.

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A copy of the latest U.S. financial report and official registration filed by the Children of God Relief Fund, Inc. can be obtained by contacting COGRF, Inc. at P.O. Box 3465, Fairfax, Virginia, 22038-3465, or by calling (703) 934-8534. Residents of the following states may also obtain this information by contacting: NEW YORK - New York State Attorney General's Charities Bureau, Attn: FOIL Officer, 120 Broadway, New York, New York 10271; VIRGINIA - Division of Consumer Affairs, P.O. Box 526, Richmond, Virginia 22304. Registration with these governmental agencies does not imply endorsement, approval, or recommendation by the state.

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# More Laughter than Tears

By Kieran O'Dowd, Cranford, N.J.

*Editor's Note: Kieran O'Dowd was a volunteer at Nyumbani from July to October 2004. News on Nyumbani asked him to share why he went to Africa and what he brought home.*

When I was planning to volunteer in Africa, I was looking for an organization I could truly help. I wanted to make a difference in the lives of children, and Nyumbani, with its 94



children orphaned by HIV/AIDS, seemed the ideal place to do so. I spent months preparing — organizing a fundraiser, securing donations from health care and school supply

companies, planning fun and healthy activities, and thinking of different ways to teach young minds eager to learn.

Upon my arrival at Nyumbani, however, the realization soon struck that I, too, was about to learn. One of the

most important lessons was that, despite what these children and the people in Kenya have faced, they are some of the warmest, friendliest people you could ever meet; they welcome volunteers with open arms. At the orphanage, for example, at any given moment, you have two children on each arm, three on each leg, one hugging you, and one less than an inch from your face looking into your eyes and grinning ear to ear. They often approach you saying only, “Come,” which means they have something to share. Even away from the orphanage, in Kibera, one of Kenya’s poorest slums, the spirits of the people there somehow shine through the poverty, sickness, and deplorable living conditions. Arms extend out to you and ebullient voices yell, “How are you?” You can’t help wonder how the smiles can surface above the pain. At the same time, a visit there leaves you questioning why problems at home seem so significant in light of what is happening elsewhere.

At the orphanage, the life story of one child may be grimmer than the next, but what they have in common is that their challenges have strengthened them in a way only hardship can. It also has drawn them together, and it’s touching to see the care they show for each other.

For example, on a visit with Samuel, who is now at home with God, I was amazed at the caring nature of the rest of the kids in his cottage. He always had five or more of his “family” ready to help him in any way they knew how. When Samuel’s body became too weak to contain his tremendous spirit, it was this family that carried his casket, sang at his funeral, and were the last to leave his grave, not yet ready to say goodbye to a brother that died too young.

Now that I’m back home thousands of miles from my Kenyan friends, I remember the life more than the death, the laughter more than the tears, the singing and dancing more than the debilitating illness, and the hope more than the pain. I miss all the happy faces that became such an important and inspiring part of my life, and I thank them for touching me with their love, courage, and faith. They will remain forever special, always in my heart and in my thoughts.



## Nyumbani-USA

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