

Rooted in hope

Seeds of Grace plants opportunity in Kenya

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It all started seven years ago when Florence Mubichi needed a ride to church.

A nurse from Meru, Kenya, Mubichi had just arrived at Benedictine University where she was working toward a master's degree in nursing administration. With no car at her disposal nor friends yet to help her, she called the office of Grace United Methodist Church and asked if someone could drive her to services.

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Julie Utter (left) and Annette Swanson founded Seeds of Grace, a nonprofit organization assisting children in Kenya with education, shelter and proper nutrition.

(Jonathan Miano/Staff Photographer)

Julie Utter had no trouble spotting Mubichi waiting on the sidewalk in front of her apartment at 8 o'clock that Sunday morning in full African dress. Their ride to church together was the beginning of a close friendship that ultimately inspired the creation of a non-profit, volunteer organization devoted to helping children and families in Kenya whose lives have been devastated by poverty and AIDS.

Seeds of Grace was launched in 2006 by Utter and Annette Swanson, also a member of Grace United Methodist Church, after returning from a 17-day mission trip to Kenya at the invitation of Mubichi. Eighteen people had traveled to the Meru area where they helped out at a local hospital, assisted in the construction of a home for a family orphaned by AIDS and worked on a farm.

Utter and Swanson said they were moved by the suffering they saw. People slept on dirt floors and cooked and cleaned with the rainwater that flowed off rusty rooftops. Children grieved over the loss of their parents to disease and poverty.

As executive directors of Seeds of Grace, Utter and Swanson are raising awareness and funds for three community-based groups in Kenya that work to provide better education, shelter and nutrition for that country's orphans and most vulnerable children.

"Florence sprinkled seeds of grace when she came," said Swanson, 42, of Naperville. "That was kind of how it happens sometimes. These seeds take off and sprout quickly and others don't. It pulled different people together at different times. We wanted to offer that opportunity to other people."

About 35 million people live in Kenya and half live in poverty, according to Seeds of Grace statistics. Some 1.4 million are living with HIV/AIDS and 1.6 million are orphans. Despite living with these hardships, community leaders there have demonstrated commitment, hope and faith as they continue to work to improve the lives of the people, Utter said.

"We are so inspired by what the organizations we're helping are doing over there," said Utter, 46, of Naperville. "It's not that hard to do this. We're just doing this little bit, but our dollars make a big difference over there. They go a long way. We don't realize how simple it is to make a big difference in people's lives. It's just doing something verses doing nothing."

The organization has raised \$23,436 thus far, allocating funds for necessities like food, shelter, backpacks, school uniforms, counseling, mentoring, vocational services, scholarships and a new home that was built for a family affected by AIDS. By far, its most successful fundraiser has been the sale of Kenyan jewelry. These items, most priced less than \$35, include beaded necklaces, earrings and bracelets handmade by women in Kenya. Utter and Swanson have held jewelry parties for private

gatherings, raising more than \$18,000. That money provides support, guidance and vocational training for women who have lost their husbands to AIDS.

Seeds of Grace has become a full-time pursuit for Utter and Swanson, both previously stay-at-home moms. The organization has an 11-member board and publishes an annual newsletter. Its representatives make themselves available to speak at club, business, church and school meetings. They currently are working to secure corporate sponsorships and write grant proposals so they may continue to support mentoring programs, literacy projects and ultimately help build a counseling center in Meru. That facility would provide a rescue center for orphans, offer support, counseling and vocational education and train community peer educators and counselors.

Utter and Swanson hope to lead another mission trip to Kenya sometime this year to see the progress that has been made and to offer some hands-on assistance. Change is slow, but they hope Seeds of Grace will be able to continue to gradually help better the lives of the people in Meru.

"We are just the hands that are helping," Utter said. "There is such a great need over there. You can't fix everything. You can't change everything in the world. We thought we can work in this one community because we have good friends there and we know what they are doing there and we can make a difference there even if it's one child at a time."

For more information about the Seeds of Grace organization, call Julie Utter at 630-842-7120 or Annette Swanson at 630-841-2148 or visit www.seedsofgracesite.org. Checks may be made to Seeds of Grace and sent to P.O. Box 9534, Naperville, IL 60564.