

Voice of the Rocky Mountain Empire

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AfricaLifelines

A THREE-DAY SERIES BY BRUCE FINLEY / PHOTOS BY HELEN H. RICHARDSON

Orphaned by AIDS ...



Photos by **Helen H. Richardson** / The Denver Post

As the sun breaks in Idweli, Tanzania, 11-year-old orphan Francis Luka sweeps the grounds around an experimental children's center that was established by Americans and offers beds and meals to 58 village kids. Of the 1,300 people in Idweli, more than 200 are orphans.

embraced by strangers

Idweli, Tanzania

From the back of a lantern-lit schoolroom at a rural orphanage, Fodi Julius fixed his shining eyes on the blackboard. He was fighting exhaustion and trying to please his parents.

They died three years ago, leaving Fodi, 11, and his brother, Nhambo, 8, among Africa's 12.3 million children who've lost parents to AIDS.

Their mom and dad's final advice: Do well in school, because survival depends on it.

ORPHANS: Hope amid AIDS horror



Photos by **Helen H. Richardson** / The Denver Post

Fodi Julins, 11, carries a 16-foot pole to the children's center in Idweli, Tanzania, for a shelf to keep food away from rats. Fodi is one of 12.3 million African children who have lost parents to AIDS.

Before moving to the orphanage, Fodi and Nhambo rose each morning from their mats by a fire pit in their crumbling mud-brick hut. They straightened their smudged school uniforms. Their small fingers wove grass in place of lost buttons to fasten tattered shirts.

The boys set out barefoot and without breakfast down the dirt path to school. At lunch break, while others ate, they waited. Finally, when the teacher dismissed them for the day, Fodi and Nhambo wandered through farm fields, foraging for food.

"We'd get leaves," Fodi said. He weighs 48 pounds, half the weight of others his age.

He mixed those green leaves

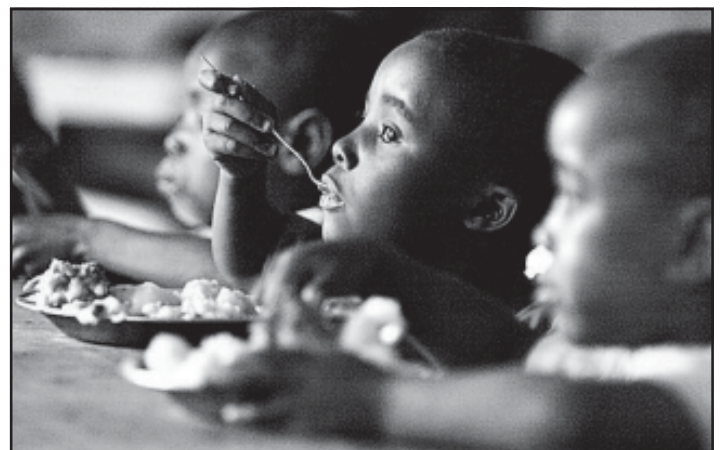
with water and urged Nhambo to eat, no matter how bad the leaves tasted or how sad he felt.

"I'd just tell him: 'She died. There's nothing we can do about it.' I'd tell him: 'Even if you cry, she's not coming back. So we should stop crying and do what we have to do.'"

But now, after three years on their own, Fodi and Nhambo have beds, meals and basic instruction at an experimental children's center where they live with 56 other orphans on the outskirts of this dusty, Swahili-speaking village.

Americans half a world away in Colorado and Oregon set up the center — stepping in where governments and big charities had done nothing.

As the world grows more



Regular meals at the Idweli children's center are a far cry from the diet of grass and leaves that some orphans survived on before the center took them in. Denverite Vic Dukay helped set up the center, which provides services that governments have ignored.

intertwined, African villagers mired in disease, poverty and conflict — and those who want to help them — are discovering

new ways to connect, bypassing Africa's corruption-crippled governments and Western bureaucrats.

Television, radio and reports from migrant sons and daughters have whetted village appetites for better living conditions. The recent arrival of cellphones and e-mail in rural hubs encourages direct links with Americans.

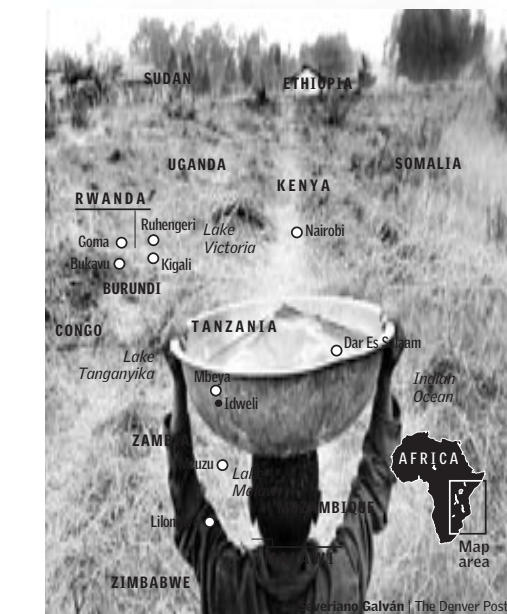
Help began with an e-mail

Here at Idweli, whose 1,300 people include more than 200 orphans, the children's center where Fodi now finds full plates of rice and potatoes began with a simple e-mail.

Godfrey Mahenge, a student from Idweli studying medicine in Tanzania's capital, Dar es Salaam, five years ago vowed to do something to help orphans back home. He'd told elders of his plans. They'd dismissed him as a dreamer.

Mahenge drowned five years ago while swimming in the ocean. But his girlfriend, Neema Mgana, kept sending e-mail queries to groups outside Africa. One e-mail reached Barry Childs, 61, a corporate executive turned philanthropist in Oregon who'd formed the group Africa Bridge to try to help villagers.

Instead of dismissing the message as just another African e-mail scam, Childs



Veneranga Ganga, 13, kisses Anna Sanga, 1. Both girls in Bolongwa, Tanzania, are HIV-positive and lost their parents to AIDS. "One day I will die, and you must get along," Veneranda's mother told her.



asked for details. He paid for Mgana to visit him.

Childs enlisted Vic Dukay, 49, a former aviation-business owner in Denver with experience running AIDS projects, to work with him at Idweli. Their first visits in 2002 focused on listening to children and village elders.

"You want to be useful," said Dukay, a heavyset, jovial man prone to overworking himself. Orphaned at age 15, he was later

moved to tears as he sat with kids unsure where they'd find their next meal and who habitually raised their hands before speaking.

"It took me back instantly to when I was 15," he said. "That look in the eye, body language, speech, that low, soft voice, wanting to be in the back of the room away from everybody, not wanting to be seen. You look in their eyes. Have you ever seen anybody really sad? I can see sadness in somebody's eyes. ... Probably from looking at myself."

Dukay and Childs guided construction of the center, five ochre-hued buildings with cement-and-stone foundations. Village men did the work.

There's no electricity or running water.

This year, the Rockefeller Foundation awarded Dukay a grant to assess whether the children's center is meeting village needs. He led an evaluation team, including psychologists and social workers, on his 10th visit to Idweli this fall — feeling "more alive than I've ever felt," he said.

Staving off extremists

Sustaining this children's center, and possibly replicating it elsewhere, is more than a humanitarian effort, Dukay said. Security analysts worry that Africa's millions of desperate AIDS orphans will join jobless urban



ABOVE: Denver philanthropist Vic Dukay, center, and teacher Elia Mahenge play with AIDS orphan Joshua Shaban, 6, outside the children's center Dukay helped establish in Idweli, Tanzania. Dukay led a team, including psychologists and social workers, to the center this fall to evaluate how village needs are being met.

RIGHT: Boys who have lost their parents to AIDS in Idweli play soccer on a dirt field near the children's center. They wear donated shoes and clothes provided by project supporters in the U.S.





Leah, 5, covers up in the dorm at the children's center in Idweli. The Lundy Foundation and Africa Bridge groups have spent about \$300,000 for the construction of the five-building center, which keeps a roof over 58 children whose parents have died from AIDS. However, the center lacks electricity and running water.

masses adrift and vulnerable to extremists who could lure them into violence.

"Where best to recruit?" Dukay said. "Out here in the hinterlands where there is no security."

He watched Fodi in donated white sneakers playing soccer, fighting hard for the ball against bigger players, despite his physical weakness after three years of eating very little. Nhambo, solitary and silent, played a bit, too.

Any chore, Fodi volunteered. He hauled a 16-foot-long bamboo pole for a mile to help cooks who were building a shelf.

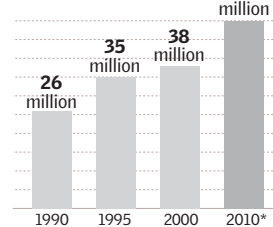
Life's better now than before, Fodi said, recalling how taunts from children with parents tormented him.

"I'd leave, go sit someplace alone. Very bad to hear. I thought: 'This will happen many times in my life. People



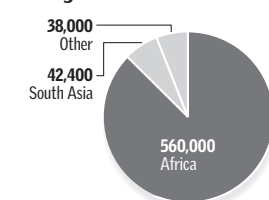
At Ndulamo, Tanzania, Shida Mahenge, 16, raises her sisters Rehema, 12, and Ona, 14, right, after their parents died of AIDS.

Orphans in Sub-Saharan Africa

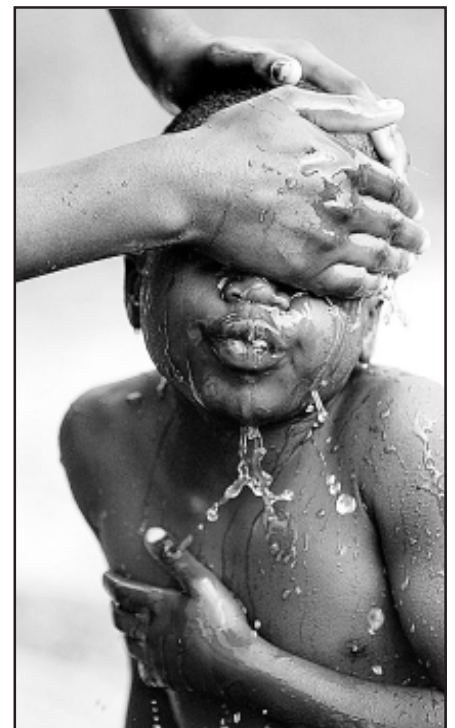


*Projected
Source: United Nations data;
Denver Post research
Severiano Galván | The Denver Post

New HIV infections among children under 15



Source: Unicef.org
Severiano Galván | The Denver Post



Hilida Pendo, 9, washes before breakfast with help from older orphan Loze Gaspa, 14, at the children's center in Idweli, Tanzania. Orphans look after other orphans in Africa, where about 6,300 people die of AIDS each day.

will always be telling me I am an orphan.”

Far more typical across Africa today are orphaned children who raise other children with no help. Village elders are overwhelmed. Nearby at the village of Ndulamo, three teenage girls — Shida Mahenge, 16, and her sisters, Ona, 14, and Rehema, 12 — huddled together at sunset. When they beg for food from neighbors, “people cannot give,” Shida said.

For five years after AIDS killed their father and then their mother, Shida served as surrogate parent and caretaker, insisting that Ona and Rehema stay in school.

“I’m always telling them they need to behave and to listen to their teacher and when they don’t understand, to ask questions,” she said.

She deals with food. Working to earn money means enduring harassment from boys and men unaccustomed to working with a girl. First, Shida broke rock into gravel that villagers sell to road crews for maintenance.

“Very hard work. You have to carry the rocks. It takes a long time with the hammer to break the rocks into small stones. Now, I work carrying timber. I think it might be better.”

But this night they had no food or wood to burn and stay warm. The girls huddled silently in the cold, blue darkness. They were hungry, barely able to think about their dreams of attending a vocational school.

“We like to pray,” Shida said. “We have a very hard life now. We pray to God to help us, so that we will not get sick. ... We need help to survive.”

HIV adds to struggles

Helping children such as this can be difficult because many are infected with HIV, the virus causing AIDS. Doctors are scarce, about one per 50,000 people in rural Tanzania, let



Elia Mahenge, 21, teaches English by lantern light at the experimental children's center in Idweli. Orphans usually fall behind in schoolwork. While some villagers benefit from jobs at the center, others are bewildered because children there often live better than those who still have both parents.

alone anti-retroviral drugs for villagers.

At a German-run clinic nearby in Bolongwa, Dr. Rainer Brandl was amazed to see a tiny, bloated girl, her feet swollen, staggering in from a farm.

When he tested Veneranda Ganga, 13, he found she was HIV-positive with virtually no immunities. Doubting she'd survive, Brandl put her on anti-retrovirals.

Veneranda gained strength. She began helping around the hospital, cradling an abandoned 1-year-old girl. She told nurses she'd been sick for years, after her father died of AIDS. Later, her mother died, too, when Veneranda was 5. Before dying, she said, her mother told her: “You must listen to other people. One day I will die, and you must get along.”

Each day Veneranda retrieved water, washed dishes and took care of her brother and an aunt's two young children. This year, she grew too weak to work. “I told my uncle, I better go to the hospital.”

Frustrated and deluged with sick children, Brandl works on

a shoestring, unable to pay and keep staff. United Nations and U.S. aid often funds workshops for doctors and social workers in cities, drawing them away from urgent work in villages, he said.

“Nobody wants to work out here,” he said

Orphans start to cope

At the Idweli children's center, regular meals, chores and classes let orphans begin coming to terms with their plight.

Vaileti Bonifasi, 14, who was 2 when her parents died, said she'd been sneaking away to visit their graves, praying a bit, talking and crying.

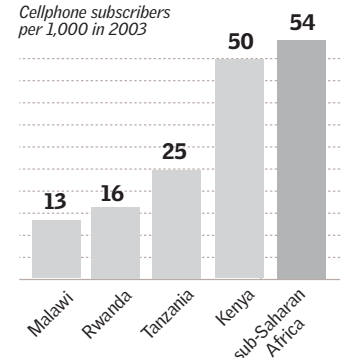
“I was walking back home from school thinking: ‘How can I not even know what my mother looked like?’” Vaileti said. “I thought about it all the way home. And I was lying on my bed. When I got up, the ghost of my mother came to me. She was speaking to me. But I couldn't understand her.”

Godfrey Mahenge's younger brother Elia, 21, told Vaileti she should ask her brother Fred at the family house by the graves

Africa's cellphone explosion

In 1990 cellphones in Africa were nonexistent. This year cellphones began to reach rural hubs, encouraging direct links abroad.

Cellphone subscribers
per 1,000 in 2003



Source: United Nations data;
Denver Post research

Severiano Galván | The Denver Post

if he had a photo of their mother. When they arrived, they found Fred standing with his wife, Gloria, and their baby.

“There's no picture” of their mother, Fred said. Instead, Fred produced a wrinkled, laminated driver's license showing their father, who died in 1994. Vaileti clutched it but still wanted a photo of her mother.

“I need to compare it with the face of the ghost,” she said.

Involving the villagers

The cost of the project at Idweli, including construction and support for daily operations, has been about \$300,000. Now Dukay's evaluation is focused on perceptions of villagers and the children.

"Are there any concerns?" Dukay asked recently in the meeting hall, addressing village elders. "If there are any problems in what we are doing, I would like to know directly."

Some villagers benefit — such as Florence Doset, 39, a mother of two who teaches at the center. She earns \$50 a month.

"Because of these children, we have money," she said. "So we're happy."

Others are bewildered. Orphans at the center suddenly enjoy better living conditions and food than other children living with their parents. Project supporters have begun to give small "microcredit" loans to villagers.

Fodi is now studying as his parents advised, but the habit of worrying about Nhambo is ingrained. He recently warned Elia that Nhambo's mind wanders in school.

But Fodi also was beginning to think about himself. In the classroom where he sat recently in the early evening, he summoned the last energy he had to hold his head up. Three lanterns cast a golden light just bright enough to illuminate the blackboard. Elia was teaching English, writing sentences — "You sing a song" — for students to copy.

This was extra instruction to give the orphans a better chance at school. Twenty boys, mostly older, were taking advantage.

And Fodi was especially determined.

He wanted to be ready for competitive tests that determine who qualifies for college.

"I want to be a teacher," Fodi said. "Then I can help other people."

THE SERIES

Cellphones, e-mails and migrants are connecting rural Africa with urban America, creating new possibilities for action to address Africa's pressing problems. Private groups in Colorado and elsewhere are reaching the villages where two-thirds of Africans live. "Africa Lifelines," a three-day Denver Post series explores these efforts.



Today: A Coloradan works in a Tanzanian village where the spread of AIDS is leaving growing numbers of children parentless. Also, a Denver FBI agent cultivates African police as partners against terrorism.

Monday: Efforts by Colorado-based Water for People to drill wells in Malawi help thousands who search daily for safe water.

Tuesday: Colorado engineers assist Rwandan schoolgirls quavering from the horrors of war.

Some quoted material in these reports was translated from Swahili, Tambuka, Kinyarwanda and local dialects.

SERIES TEAM



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Bruce Finley covers international affairs and security for The Denver Post, which he joined in 1988. He has reported from more than 30 nations, including his third tour in Iraq with a U.S. combat unit earlier this year. This is Finley's fifth Africa assignment. He grew up in Colorado, Graduated from Stanford University in 1984 and earned master's degrees in international relations as a Fulbright scholar in Britain and in journalism at Northwestern University. Finley can be reached at 303-820-1700 or bfinley@denverpost.com.



Series photographer:

Helen H. Richardson previously traveled to Thailand and Indonesia to cover the South Asian tsunami and to Rome for the funeral of Pope John Paul II, among other over-seas assignments for The Post, which she joined in 1993. Her freelance work has appeared in The New York Times and Christian Science Monitor. Richardson grew up in Aspen and graduated from Parsons School of Design in New York. Richardson can be reached at hrichardson@denverpost.com

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MORE ONLINE

Denver Post reporter Bruce Finley and photojournalist Helen H. Richardson narrate their African journey on The Post's website.

Find a variety of "Africa Lifelines" extras, including video, audio, photo galleries, interviews with Finley and Richardson, links to the aid organizations in the series and more on Africa.

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