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Saving children, step by step

The Lowell Sun
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A mission team from Grace Community Church in Chelmsford went to Kenya this summer, where they helped build a fence (above) for the orphanage the church is helping to fund. From left are Andrew Ojemann, John Kariuki of Kenya, Jim Andreson, Carrie Andreson, Sarah Fletcher, John Feehrer, Leanne Winchester and Paul Winchester. (Not pictured) Michael Fletcher and David Ojemann.



A mission team from Grace Community Church in Chelmsford went to Kenya this summer, where they helped build a fence for the orphanage the church is helping to fund. (Courtesy Photo)

By Debbie Hovanasian

Sun Correspondent

CHELMSFORD -- They've bought the land -- a picturesque five-acre parcel on a hill overlooking Lake Naivasha in Kenya. They've built a barbed-wire fence to keep the wildlife out and the farm animals in. They've even dug a well.

What they need now is the orphanage.

To achieve their goal of building an orphanage for children in Kenya whose parents have died of AIDS, the nondenominational Grace Community Church is sponsoring its fourth annual road race -- the 5-mile Grace Race -- on Saturday, Oct. 20, beginning at 10 a.m.

Organizers hope for their largest turnout yet, with about 200 runners

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and walkers. They also encourage anyone not able to run or walk to sponsor a participant.

All proceeds will benefit the construction and staffing of a \$180,000 orphanage that will provide shelter, nourishment, nurturing, job training and education for up to 60 orphans. Grace Community Church is working in conjunction with its sister church, the Naivasha Kenya Assemblies of God, which is located just six miles from the orphanage site.

The land was purchased after the first Grace Race, held during a snowstorm in November 2004, raised \$7,300. The three road races have raised "about one-tenth of what we need," said Grace Race chairman John Feehrer of Westford, a computer engineer and elder of Grace Community Church.

"We still have a long way to go," he said. "This is a God-sized project."

Feehrer adds that helping 50 to 60 orphans "is just scratching the surface, but it is our way to help."

Feehrer's committee hopes to add significantly to the Grace Race total this year and welcomes help from other churches. He notes that Grace's former pastor, Mike Lynch, who helped found the project, has taken the cause to his new church in Littleton, Nashoba Grace Community Church.

Feehrer's committee also welcomes other churches to join Grace Community's Orphan Sponsorship Ministry, which collects funds quarterly to support AIDS orphans. Sponsors receive photos, letters and regular updates about their sponsored child, he said.

On mission trips to Kenya in 2003 and this summer, Feehrer saw first-hand how the sponsorships are making a difference in a country where children cannot go to school unless they can afford a uniform and where, according to UNICEF, 650,000 children have been orphaned by AIDS.

"The kids we are sponsoring are really doing well," said Feehrer, the father of four young children. "On the flip side of that, other kids with no support are struggling."

As a highlight of the trip, Feehrer and other mission members were able to meet the children they have been sponsoring. "It was a very touching moment," he said.

Meanwhile, building the fence that will protect the

orphanage gave the team a chance to connect with Kenyan church members.

"Working on the fence with our brothers and sisters from Kenya, there was a sense that there is a true partnership -- that God had brought us together for this very purpose," he said.

Feehrer was also moved by living, praying and worshipping with the Kenyans.

"It was an incredible trip. They don't complain about anything; it's not in their culture. And they are not distracted by material possessions, so their faith and trust in God is so much stronger than ours."

What struck Feehrer the most is the Kenyans' trust that God will provide.

"In Kenya, they truly believe that God will provide the funds to build," he said. "Through them, we have learned how to trust more in God."

Registration, pledge sheets and map available at <http://www.gracerace.net>. The race route begins at Grace Community Church, 275 Billerica Road, Chelmsford. For information on Orphan Ministry Sponsorship or fundraising for the orphanage project, call John Feehrer at (978) 256-2626.

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