

A Big Heart For the World

Florida pastor William Ilnisky rallied his small Florida church to make a difference in the lives of African children who were orphaned by the AIDS epidemic.

Newsweek magazine doesn't normally bring Florida pastor William Ilnisky to tears. But in February 1999 when he read a cover story on the 10 million African children orphaned by AIDS, he suddenly began to weep—and hardly stopped for two weeks.

"I found myself totally incapable of thinking about anything other than that," Ilnisky says. "I spent most of that time crying and asking God what to do about it."

Ilnisky believes his unusual reaction was God's way of speaking to him, and the result was Sekelela (translated "rejoice") Africa's Orphans, a ministry that provides health care, food and the gospel to thousands of orphans in Zambia.

Back in 1999, he says he felt like "a teaspoon in an ocean," given the enormity of the AIDS epidemic. Roughly 6,000 people were dying daily in sub-Saharan Africa, with another 11,000 infected each day. But as he shared his burden with his 150-member congregation, Lighthouse Christian Center International in West Palm Beach, a plan unfolded.

Longtime member and church staffer Delane Bailey, 36, dreamed when she was a girl that she would some day set up clinics in Africa. A native of Jamaica, she moved to the United States in 1983 to study biology. But as the years rolled by she "got involved doing so many other things that were not Africa."

Trained as a missionary through the Vineyard School of Missions in El Paso, Texas, Bailey had done midwifery and primary care in Third World nations, including Mexico and the Philippines. She helped build an orphanage in Uganda, and in

Florida she assisted people with HIV-AIDS and their families.

"I thought it would never happen," she says of her childhood dream. But as Ilnisky shared from the Newsweek article, Bailey says that "the vision came back alive to me, what we could do and some of the things we could implement. And right away I began working with the pastor to try to make contacts."

Once an Assemblies of God (AG) missionary, Ilnisky, 70, began corresponding with another AG missionary based in Zambia, and a year after Ilnisky first shared his burden, a small team made a trip to Zambia.

It was June 2000, and nearly 20 percent of the Zambian adult population was reportedly HIV-positive. The U.S. team had been told that many children no longer showed emotion because they had been so hardened by death. Ilnisky says children as young as 10 were heads of households, carrying younger siblings on their backs.

But Ilnisky says as the team began to lay hands on them that "all of a sudden the loudest wailing and crying began to come out of these children. When the the children crying, they were in absolute shock because these children did not cry. We watched in that moment as God began to do inner began to heal the wounds."

Bailey encouraged the children to pray for other orphans around the world. She showed them a globe that Ilnisky's wife, intercessory prayer leader Esther Ilnisky, had designed to teach children about the 10/40 Window, a region believed to be the least impacted by the gospel.

"Those kids began to weep," Bailey says. "First they wept for themselves, and began to weep for the other children that were in similar situations."

"There's no way for us, even if we fill their stomachs, to heal their broken hearts," Ilnisky adds, "or to heal the scars

of both Mother and Dad dying of AIDS, and them being ostracized because their parents have died of AIDS, and the village kicks them out, or their family throws them out to the street, and there's no one to care for them. That's true to thousands upon thousands of orphaned children in Zambia. And somehow God has to come on the scene and heal."

In addition to providing health care, Sekelela is developing manuals to train Zambian nationals to minister to their neighbors and hopes to fight the rampant malnutrition by mixing the main staple, mashed corn, with soy to give it more protein. And in what may seem like an unusual touch, Bailey has started a beauty shop.

"We did hair washing, we clipped their nails, we washed their feet, we trimmed hair, we gave the children baths and did little things like that," Bailey says. "We did this in each compound that we went to, then we ended the evening with worship and evangelism. The whole focus was to restore the image of God to Zambians."

Teams travel to Zambia annually. When she is in the United States, Bailey—who is Sekelela's executive director—makes future plans.

In April 2003, the organization will partner with the Texas-based international humanitarian ministry Heart for the World and California-based worship leader Tommy Walker to host a Heal Our Land tour that will feature practical ministry during the day and evangelistic crusades at night. Bailey also is fine-tuning a project that will link U.S. children with Zambians by asking the American youth to purchase \$5 bowls of food that will feed a Zambian child for a week.

Ilnisky still feels like his efforts are like a teaspoon in an ocean, but he has watched God open incredible doors. When a Zambian contact called saying 100 acres of farmland were available for \$25,000, Ilnisky told him Sekelela would provide

the money, though he didn't know how. Within two weeks, every dollar had come in.

After Bailey was featured in the local newspaper for the work she was doing with Sekelela, a woman came to visit her and left a check for \$10,000. On another occasion a man Ilnisky had known for years sent him a check for \$30,000. Another stranger walked in their offices and handed them a check for \$19,000, exceeding their \$12,000 budget for medicine and food. Sekelela also has received thousands of clothing items and \$700,000 worth of medical supplies.

"It's been absolutely miraculous," Ilnisky says. "It's been that way ever since we started this project."

These ordinary people from Florida have found that a teaspoon of hope goes a long way in Africa. On each visit, Bailey, a worship leader at Lighthouse, leads the children in singing inspirational songs she wrote. They are recorded on a CD titled Sekelela (Rejoice) Africa's Orphans that helps fund the ministry.

There is hardly a Zambian family that AIDS hasn't touched. Ilnisky says the young professionals are dying "like flies"—with life expectancy at 37 years—leaving the nation with an uncertain future. "In some parts of 's no such thing as a week that goes by that somebody—some neighbor, some friend, somebody you worked with—hasn't died from AIDS," he says.

Yet he and Bailey see past the dark clouds. "The children," Ilnisky says without hesitation, "are our only hope."

Adds Bailey: "The kids—these little, sometimes suffering kids—just have enough strength to turn their heads up and look at you've just washed their to communicate: 'Thank you. Thank you for caring,'" Bailey says. "I think that's some of the motivating force that keeps me going. And recognizing that God has raised us up for such a time as this. And if we don't do

it, who will?"

Adrienne S. Gaines *is former associate editor of Charisma and Ministry Today magazines. She wrote a cover story on Africa's AIDS crisis in March 2001.*

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