

## For AIDS orphans, school is a lifeline

By Julie Bourbon

Kibera technically doesn't exist. Although more than 800,000 people live there, the government of Kenya does not officially acknowledge their presence. And so, in this Nairobi slum, the people make do without electricity, without running water, with raw sewage running through the streets, living in tentative shacks, with HIV/AIDS a plague upon them.

In Kenya, if AIDS doesn't kill you, it gets you some other way, perhaps by relegating you to the ranks of the more than 11 million AIDS orphans in Sub-Saharan Africa. Kibera is teeming with them, children left parentless, or with one parent dead and the other dying. If they're lucky, extended family will take them in, but their schooling - assuming they're in school in the first place - may be disrupted or brought to a sudden end. Primary school is subsidized by the state, but secondary school is not, and for families living on less than \$1 per day, in absolute poverty, continued education is a dream, and maybe not even that. A year of high school costs about \$800, but it might as well be a million.

There are more than 10,000 children of secondary school age in Kibera; three-quarters of them are not in school at all. Last fall, though, 56 young people registered at St. Aloysius Gonzaga High School, housed in a shack at the edge of Kibera and reachable by a footbridge crossing an open sewer. Opened in January 2004, it is the first Jesuit school of its kind in Africa, probably the only one of its kind, period. This year, the school had 70 places for freshmen and received 150 applications.



Fr. Terry Charlton

It was not his plan to start a high school, says Fr. Terry Charlton, but he couldn't say no when approached by the director of the Hands of Love Society (HOLS), an offshoot of the Christian Life Community for which Charlton is national chaplain. HOLS members had sponsored 12 students attending a local school until the costs became prohibitive and they decided to open their own in January 2004. After four years, St. Al's expects to reach a capacity of 420 students.

"It will be small enough that you can have face recognition and meet special needs," said Charlton (AOR), including counseling and general social support. He called the school's program "education for life," that will equip students to engage in ethical decision-making.

The curriculum is rigorous and follows the British educational system in that



The rooftops of Kibera, a slum of 800,000 in Nairobi.

exams and curriculum are content driven not skills and aptitude driven. Students take multiple classes in math, physics, chemistry, English grammar and literature, business studies, agriculture, history, geography, Christian religious education and Swahili, which for most of them is one of three languages they speak, including English and their first tribal language.

All of their students, Charlton said, are at least "broadly Christian," and the country as a whole is about 46 percent Christian and 23 percent Catholic.

In order to be accepted at St. Al's, students must live in Kibera and receive a home visit by members of the school's staff to confirm that they are destitute and have lost one or both parents to AIDS. None of the students, to Charlton's knowledge, are HIV-positive, although all are AIDS affected.

Students attend classes for 10 months out of the year, all but one day each week. The school feeds them breakfast six days a week and lunch five, which costs about \$40 per student per week. Books and uniforms are free. The student body breaks down to about 60 percent girls, 40 percent boys. Charlton explained that the acceptance policy at first favored girls "because girls are disadvantaged" even more so than boys in Kibera, but they've found that by accepting only the best students, the 60/40 split has remained constant.

The teachers at St. Al's worked on a voluntary basis the first year; this year, they are being paid about 75 percent what they would receive at a government-sponsored school, "and the government scale is not

extravagant by any means," said Charlton. There are currently eight full-time instructors and two part-time. As the student body grows, so will the faculty.

Charlton, who transcribed from the Chicago Province in 1993, originally went to Africa in 1990 because the Church was growing there, he said, and he had an expertise in theology and spirituality. When the idea of going was presented, "I spontaneously said 'Well, I can do that,' and I had never thought of being a missionary," he said with a laugh, noting that the Jesuits have only been in Kenya since the late 1970s; it was the last place they went in Africa. He started out teaching systematic theology at Hekima College in Nairobi.

His time there is split among his commitment to St. Al's, and his job as ecclesiastical assistant for the Christian Life Communities in Kenya and director of the CLC Zaidi Centre for Ignatian Spirituality at Loyola House, of which he is the superior. Every three years he takes three months to return to the United States, but it's hardly all vacation time. Charlton has been traveling about seeking the \$800,000 it will take to build the new structure St. Al's is planning for the growing school. The Chicago Province has been especially generous to the school, providing start-up funds.

Because the school keeps growing every year and the senior class will soon be looking for the next step beyond high school, Charlton has begun investigating their options. Government universities are significantly subsidized in Kenya, but even with subsidies and loans, a student might still be called upon to pay \$500 for lodging

and books. "We really have to look at that," he said. "You can't do much with a secondary education, there as here."

But they will find a way, of this he is certain. "We certainly have a desire to help our students go forward. Otherwise, we're doing them an injustice."

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