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Orphans of Hope

by Emily Colin

Thursday, November 1, 2007

"I've learned a lot about peace. You think you're open-minded, until you meet children who have forgiven the people who murdered their parents." That's Sarah Elizabeth Hipp, tour manager for the Mizero Children of Rwanda (www.mizerochildren.org), talking. Founded and led by the celebrated Rwandan musician Jean-Paul Samputu, Mizero is a group of 12 children, orphaned by the 1994 Rwandan genocide, who are touring the United States and Canada, spreading a message of peace through drumming, dance and song. The proceeds from their tour will go toward giving them and their peers — more than 1 million fellow Rwandan orphans who have lost their parents through genocide or from AIDS — a safe place to live and to go to school.



Their tour, which began on Oct. 15 and will conclude in mid-December, incorporates more than 25 stops, from Knoxville to Atlanta to California to Canada. Wilmington wasn't on their original itinerary — until fate intervened in the guise of Wilmington Yoga's Kristin Cooper Gulak, Lorri Resetar and Grant Pace.

The three were in Black Mountain, N.C., attending the LEAF festival, when they saw Mizero perform and heard the troupe's story: One of the tour's major sponsors had fallen through, and the children and their adult chaperones were in desperate need of many things, including money, lodging, transportation and clothes. It was their first trip to the U.S., and they arrived with only their musical instruments, the clothes on their backs and the determination to succeed. In their native language, "Mizero" means hope, and that's just what the troupe was determined to hold on to.

Staff photo by Dana Hawley
Tracy Wilkes, executive director of DREAMS, helps Letitia Benegusenga of Rwanda try on a coat in Belk at Mayfaire on Tuesday, Oct. 30. The new clothes will help keep her and 11 other orphans from Rwanda warm on their trip for the next month and a half throughout North America and Canada.

The children — six boys and six girls, aged 9 through 15 — won their hearts, and Cooper, Resetar and Pace promised to lend a hand. In short order, Cooper Gulak arranged for an Oct. 30 fundraising performance at Wilmington Yoga Center, Pace offered his Wrightsville Beach cottage and secured transportation (two passenger vans and a cargo van), and Resetar volunteered to go on tour with the group. Things were looking up — and that was before Mark Griffis, philanthropist and co-founder of Step Up Wilmington, came on the scene.

When Griffis heard about the Mizero orphans' plight, he vowed to do whatever he could to help ... beginning with outfitting the children for the trip ahead. He convinced Boseman's Sporting Goods to donate sneakers and persuaded Belk at Mayfaire to deeply discount coats, shoes, sweaters and other essentials. Next, he recruited community members to act as escorts on the Oct. 30 shopping spree.

To put everyone at ease, Griffis hosted breakfast at the Causeway Café for the children, their chaperones and the designated shopping assistants. Clad in gray T-shirts that proclaimed "Africa Needs Help," the 12 children — few of whom speak English — eschewed orange juice for hot tea and tasted waffles for the first time. The room buzzed with the sound of the troupe's native dialect — Kinyarwanda — and their translators' attempts to describe the taste of syrup: "It's like honey."



On the bus en route from breakfast to Belk, Griffis revealed a

Staff photo by Dana Hawley

surprise: He and partner Dave Robertson plan to pay for all of the children's elementary and high school education expenses. For these orphans, most of whom cannot afford school fees or uniforms, this was a promise beyond their wildest dreams. The bus erupted in cheers, hugs and laughter. The children and their chaperones leapt up from their seats, spontaneously dancing and clapping. They hugged each other. They hugged Griffis. And then they burst into song. One of the English-speaking chaperones translated: "They are singing, 'When you pray to God, He answers us. ... We have hope for the future.'"

Moments after Mark Griffis of "Step Up Wilmington" offered to pay for the 12 orphans from Rwanda to go through school until they have diplomas, happiness erupted throughout the bus that took the kids to buy clothes at Belk at Mayfaire and have breakfast at Causeway Cafe.

The bus pulled up in front of Belk, and the children piled off, their faces lit with joy. Then the shopping spree began. With 12 children, only two of whom spoke any English, and two available translators, the experience was a challenge. The orphans had never been in a department store or ridden an escalator, and they had certainly never needed winter coats. American sizes were a mystery to them, and the sheer profusion of choices threatened to undo matters completely. Everyone rose to the occasion, and when all was said and done, the boys looked suave in their matching leather jackets, and the girls were resplendent in their new performance outfits — red tops with elegant black pants. They will wear these outfits when they perform at the United Nations, before they return to Rwanda once more.

In many ways, the orphans of Mizero are just children — but in another, they are more than that: They are ambassadors of hope and exemplify the belief that anything is possible. "They've just been through this really enormous, life-changing experience," Hipp says. "Many of them went days without food. Now they're singing for peace."