Six Big Canoe Residents Journey to Kenya to Witness Children's Hope After Despair

by Barbara Myers Mason, APR

Leading with confidence: Emily, chair of the "Winners" group, skillfully presides over a meeting alongside a Zoe Empowers facilitator who translates her team's achievements and milestones for the Big Canoe Chapel visitors.

Tall and proud, Emily, the chair of the "Winners" group, led the colorfully clad, smiling children in dancing and singing to welcome their American visitors. Then, she presided over a meeting in which the visitors learned about the group's accomplishments during the past two years. A serious, attractive 20-year-old, whose mother was murdered and whose father is paralyzed from a stroke, Emily dropped out of school and took responsibility for her three siblings, ensuring they had food to eat and were being educated. In addition, she adopted an orphan into her family. Emily owns a hair salon, farms, and has invested in livestock. Her 11-year-old sister brims with confidence and dreams of becoming a medical doctor. The Winners team presented gifts to their guests – a hand-woven basked filled with bananas and bags of peas - before serving cauldrons filled with vegetable soup, chicken, rice, mashed potatoes, watermelon and bananas to their visitors and their 101 member team.

The Zoe Empowers program is truly working.

(August 21, 2025 – Big Canoe, GA) Armed with index cards filled with Swahili translations, six Big Canoe residents, members of the Big Canoe Chapel, recently spent several days in poverty-prone pockets of Kenya to witness and support a program geared toward orphans that has a 95 percent success rate of eliminating hunger. Known as Zoe Empowers, the not-for-profit organization has designed a three-year program that comes alongside orphaned households led by teenagers to teach them business skills to support themselves and their siblings. Zoe's

Joy in Maua: Big Canoe Chapel mission team members Bob Crouch, Melissa Hollingsworth, and Dock Hollingsworth experience the vibrant energy and heartfelt hospitality of the local children after church at St. Joseph's M.C.K.

mission works – equipping vulnerable youth with solutions to overcome extreme poverty – for good.

The Big Canoe team was joined by 10 other missionaries from South Carolina, North

Carolina and Pennsylvania as they visited first, second- and third-year programs, in addition to a graduation ceremony. The faces of the teenagers told the story better than words can. Students who had just begun the program looked on in despair and shed tears as they told stories of their many challenges – deceased parents, relatives who forced them from their homes, the need to leave school to support their siblings, lack of work and income, being sexually assaulted, and most of all being hungry.

Dock Hollingsworth, senior chaplain of Big Canoe Chapel and a member of the mission team, said, “This is the healthiest and most inspiring model for missions that I’ve encountered.”

Faces of Hope and Trust

Amazingly, the second- and third-year students had faces of hope and trust as they had become proficient in a business, learned important life skills, and owned livestock – chickens, goats and cows. Several were able to buy motorbikes, a common form of transportation in Kenya.

Shared joy and bright futures: With hunger behind them, these youth are now free to chase big dreams—including the 11-year-old (second from right) who aspires to become a physician.

Some had even adopted a homeless child into their families. They were proud that they were able to pay for their younger siblings to attend school. Real joy and feelings of accomplishment were evident as the team members recounted their achievements. And graduation from the

A vision for the future: "Life started changing when I joined the group," shares Hannington, a local barber and chair of the Victorious group, seen here speaking with trip leader Randy Wiersma. Having overcome the heavy burden of childhood hunger, Hannington’s ultimate goal is to expand his home and care for even more children in need.

program was an arena-filled celebration of dancing and testimonials.

“These youth have talent and motivation, but they lack opportunity,” said Randy Wiersma, chair of the Big Canoe Chapel Board of Trustees who led the trip. “Zoe Empowers provides that opportunity through training and micro-grants.” Wiersma currently serves as the vice-chair of the non-profit organization, which has achieved the top rating from Charity Navigator.

Through coursework and apprenticeships, the group members become welders, mechanics, carpenters, convenience store, boutique, salon and restaurant owners, barbers, seamstresses, or sell specialty food items like French fries, boiled eggs, and bananas.

Designed by African Social Workers

Zoe's model was designed by Rwandan social workers to empower vulnerable children to not just survive, but to permanently pull themselves out of extreme poverty. The program is locally based, employs indigenous staff and resources, and groups 60 to 100 children, about 25 households, into mutually supportive working groups. The groups complete the three-year journey to enable them to help themselves move permanently from poverty and exploitation to productivity and enterprise. The organization is supported by a nimble US - based team.

Smiles of success: Author and mission team member Barbara Myers Mason shares a bright moment—and a quick selfie—with one of the many inspiring new entrepreneurs celebrating their graduation from the Zoe Empowers program.

Bob Crouch, a member of the mission team who received this year's Big Canoe President's Service Award, said, "Observing the transformation of hopeless children struggling with hunger and overwhelmed with caring for siblings into self-confident, joyous, self-sufficient entrepreneurs was truly inspirational."

The households, headed by the oldest remaining sibling in the family, receive support from a trained Zoe facilitator who manages 10 to 12 groups, and a volunteer village mentor recruited by group members. Each group selects a name and elects its own chair, secretary, treasurer and pastor. The leadership team is responsible for setting the agenda; however, a prescribed curriculum contributes to each group's success. In addition, a "table bank" allows members to invest in each other's businesses. Zoe is comprehensive, empowering the children in eight areas of need including food security, health and hygiene, education, vocational and business training, gender equality, housing, and child rights.

Impacting Vulnerable Children

The organization, founded in 2004 as a relief organization, transitioned in 2007 to a program that empowers children to become self-sufficient. Currently enrolling nearly 80,000 children in 11 countries in Africa and India, the model has impacted more than 230,000 vulnerable youth. Relying on individual and church contributions to fund the program, the Zoe Empowers website outlines many ways to offer support.

Funding a group costs $9,000 a year for three years – a responsibility taken on by the Big Canoe Chapel Missions Committee. For more information about Zoe Empowers, email Big Canoe resident Randy Wiersma at wiersma.randy@gmail.com.

Hearts and hands for Kenya: Members of the Big Canoe Chapel who journeyed to witness the impact of Zoe Empowers included Barbara and Bill Mason, Melissa and Dock Hollingsworth, and Bob Crouch. (Not pictured: Trip leader Randy Wiersma.)