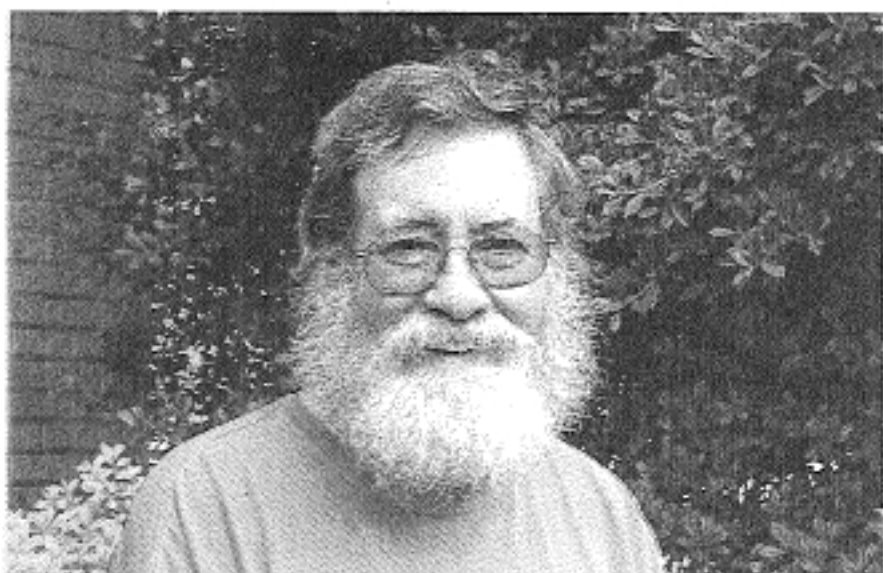


PROFILE

Feeding for a lifetime



John Willingham's Hearts for Kenya ministry brings farming techniques to hungry African families

A film crew from Mutual of Omaha was in town this week to interview people who have had "aha moments" of inspiration in their lives. As president of Hearts for Kenya, John Willingham, 62, has had plenty of them. His segment, which will focus on the ministry's assistance to farmers, will be shown at ahamoments.com.

Born in Columbus, Ga., Willingham grew up in Texas and Tennessee. His interest in helping the poor was influenced by the civil rights movement in the 1950s and '60s. After earning three degrees in agriculture at the University of Tennessee, he felt called to agricultural missionary work.

"There was an opening in Ivory Coast, but by then my wife, Alice, and I had three children," he said. "The mission board said the kids would go to a boarding school in Paris, and we could see them in the summer and at Christmas. We didn't want that separation."

Instead, he spent the next 36 years as a youth minister, first at St. Matthews Baptist Church and later at St. Matthews Episcopal Church. In 1989, he led the first of several mission trips to Denmark, then added a trip to Greece to assist an orphanage.

"I became interested in Africa after getting to know missionaries Ken and Beth Perkins," he said. "I was looking for a new place to go, and they had just come here from Kenya."

In 1997, Willingham went to see Kenya for himself, and ended up in a town called Oyugis, near Lake Victoria. The residents showed him a church they wanted to rebuild; it was leaning and had a large hole in one wall.

"That's what started Hearts for Kenya (heartsforkenya.org). For the next few years, I did construction work there. It was a good way to build relationships with the people," he said. "But with my background in agriculture, I kept looking at their fields. Their corn had small ears and lots of weeds, and they tried to cultivate everything with hoes because that was all they had."

Discussions with the Kenyan government revealed that people in that area could not feed themselves on what they produced. Willingham used what he heard to formulate two goals for Hearts for Kenya.

The first was to enable the people of Oyugis to feed themselves (he pointed out that better nutrition is essential for AIDS patients, many of whom in Kenya are chil-



MARY ALAN WOODWARD
Profile

dren, if they are to tolerate strong medication). The other goal was to establish a co-op through which farmers could sell their excess crops and earn money for clothing, higher education and other needs.

Generous donors enabled Hearts for Kenya to buy eight bulls, four plows, hybrid seed and fertilizer. Today, families in Oyugis produce enough food to eat, and there are 100 farmers selling their corn through the co-op. A five-year plan aims to have 200 farmers enrolled.

"We also take care of about 20 schools in that area. None has any feeding program, although almost half of the students may be orphans. We've begun teaching agriculture to the higher grades, and they're growing crops on school property so they can feed the students," Willingham said. "For me, the greatest reward of Hearts for Kenya is knowing that these people can feed themselves now - that they aren't starving or dependent on someone else to come feed them."

He added that he has never met friendlier people than Kenyans, including "Mama Sarah," President Obama's grandmother, a "sweet lady" whose grandson often phones her. In some parts of the country, white people are still rare; youngsters love to touch Willingham's bushy beard and rub his arms "to see if the white will rub off."

Last month, Hearts for Kenya took Presentation Academy pupils on the annual two-week mission trip. They met Mama Sarah, and gave her a teapot from Hadley Pottery.

"Everybody who goes on our trips has a good heart, but sometimes they want to make Kenyans into Americans. That's not a good thing to do. Kenya is very tribal, and you have to be very aware of the community of people you're involved with," he said. "Our goal isn't so much to do certain projects, but to build relationships with the Kenyan people. I want you to know somebody - a family, their history, what makes them what they are."

He tells prospective participants about his experiences with poverty in the Deep South, and how being hungry in Kenya is different.

"Alice and I ate a lot of beans to put our kids through college, but we never worried where our next meal was coming from. In Oyugis, people were going for days between meals. There was no hope for them, no place to go, no way to earn money," he said. "These days, I see hope in the eyes of the farmers. There's something they're living for now."

Q&A WITH JOHN WILLINGHAM

FAVORITE BOOKS: Novels by Stephen King and Dean Koontz.

FAVORITE MOVIE: "The Silence of the Lambs." When I was 17, I met Charles Manson, and since then I've had some interest in serial killers.

FAVORITE TV SHOW: Baseball games. I'm a Cubs fan, so I'm a very patient person.

Hobby: Golf.

OBSESSION: My grandchildren: Lindsey, 6, and Molly, 1; a third grandchild is on the way.

BEST THING ABOUT LOUISVILLE: It's where my grandchildren live. Alice and I moved here in 1986 and love living in the Highlands.

PERSONAL HEROES: Ken and Beth Perkins, the missionaries who inspired us to start Hearts for Kenya. Ken is now writing a book about persecution.

WHEN I WAS A CHILD, I WANTED TO GROW UP TO BE: Probably a fireman or a policeman, but when I was in my 20s, I wanted to be a professional golfer.