

# Making Hope *happen*

## How One Man is Revolutionizing Western Kenya

Photos / Courtesy of Walter Dean

**I**n Western Kenya, a number of newborn baby girls are named Walter—and even more boys. Walter Dean of Alpharetta, Georgia cannot hope to meet all his namesakes, but he can ensure they have lives full of opportunity and hope, like children born in the United States.

“You take some of these people that brag about how successful they are in the U.S.—‘I’m a self-made man,’ and all this kind of stuff,” Walter says, a man with expressive eyebrows and an infectious smile. “It’s real easy to do that in a country that’s stable; we don’t have a war, we have moderate climates, we have a tax base from taxpayers that gives us clean water and roadways

and airports... We didn’t create all that—it started long before our generation, and we’re very fortunate to live in this country. There’s nothing wrong with people who are born in Kenya... They’re just as smart as you are, but they don’t have the opportunities around them like we do.”

Walter is the founder of Habitat Aid Initiative, a revolutionary nonprofit organization that has almost single-handedly turned over Western Kenya, plowing over societal issues to make them blossom into opportunities. Fueled by his central belief in living to benefit others, Walter has built media centers, libraries, health clinics, high schools and over 40 deep-water wells, each of which serves several thousand people.

Walter’s parents inundated

him with a world perspective growing up, and after graduating college in 1983, he saw international education and relations as his future path. At 21, Walter moved to a very poor area of Kenya near the edge of Uganda to teach high school history and English. He planned to stay for two years, but he contracted three serious diseases within a year: malaria, typhoid and a stomach parasite. Walter’s father flew over and guided his son by making one very important point—he could help one classroom at a time in Kenya, or he could return to America and use his experiences to help a far greater number of people.

“Once you go through an experience like that when you’re young, it’s burned into you,” Walter says. “I didn’t want to let

[my students] down... but I had to go to protect my health.”

Walter wanted to credential himself and return to Kenya, so he started graduate school night classes and, in the daytime, worked at a British industrial machinery company in Norcross. He had dreams of working with the government to mend world problems on a broad scale, but after he married in 1989, the State Department wasn’t hiring at that time. Walter felt dejected, but he was certain it was time to pursue another of his aspirations—a family.

In 1991, the overseas machinery company petitioned Walter to purchase the office he managed. At 30, Walter didn’t have much money but offered a deal they couldn’t pass up—he would pay them back the price of purchase in four years, and if he didn’t succeed, they could keep his payments and the business, too. “At that point, I decided I’m going to buy this machine business and make profits and then I can turn around and do what I want to do... I can be fulfilled in all areas of my life,” Walter says.

The company’s success was slow but sure, and all the time Walter was sending money to where he had taught in Kenya and thinking critically about how to stop the poverty cycle. He targeted

the water source first, installing borehole wells at primary schools to get children healthy so they could go to school.

**W**e’re helping others help themselves and giving them sustainability and ownership,” Walter says. “We’re just giving them bootstraps to pull themselves up... When we create a deep-water well, we create a water board around the people that are going to use it. They protect it, they own it, they have a structure around it and they operate it.”

Out of respect for Walter’s vision, many of his former students now manage wells, clinics and other projects. “They feel like the richest people in the world even though they’re still poor,” Walter says. “They’re instrumental in helping fellow countrymen, fellow community members, neighbors—if you live in a community that you feel like you’re effective in the lives of other people, it doesn’t matter how much money you have.” By including Habitat Aid Initiative in his employees’ job descriptions at the machinery company and reaching out to previous students, Walter’s nonprofit doesn’t need its own staff.

Four initiatives blaze the trail



for Walter’s campaign to provide Kenya with its own bootstraps: clean water, education, healthcare and food production. Students claim plots of land and grow food for others, as well as pursue an agricultural project that benefits the school. For Kenyan families, college isn’t an option for 99 percent of kids—after graduating high school, their mothers need help in the field. Men leave for up to a year at a time to find work, leaving mothers to care for children, farm, collect water and firewood and sometimes search for factory labor.

Not only does Walter push forward every day to mend western Kenya, but he is also working hard to promote an overhaul of young minds. Both of Walter’s children have accompanied him to Africa three times, and he takes groups of anyone 21 and over to Kenya every June. As leader of an Atlanta Boy Scout troop, Walter hopes to shift kids’ focus early. “We ask kids the wrong question, [‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’],” Walter says. “What I ask them is, ‘How are you going to change the world when you get older?’”

Janet Russell, a board member of Habitat Aid Initiative, first saw Walter in a local newspaper, introducing a plow he designed to the president of Mali. “I thought, ‘Oh I really need to meet this guy.’ So I live in Roswell and he was up in Alpharetta, and I picked up the phone and they put me right through to Walter, and he said, ‘Come on up, have lunch; I’ll show it to you!’ He’s just a terrific person. I’m old enough that I’ve seen a lot of flim-flam men out there... but he’s not like that at all.”

Although Walter is a Christian, Habitat Aid isn’t a faith-based organization; he believes leading by example is more effective than preaching beliefs. “The only thing Jesus did was go around and heal the sick and



## FEATURES

uplift the poor and the weak and downtrodden,” Walter says. “That’s all Christianity’s about; it’s about making the lives of others easier and uplifting them.” And Habitat Aid certainly does. By installing and running a clinic for the last seven years, the organization brings modern healthcare to the poor to buy them enough time to get to big cities. They’ve served the community by treating everything from waterborne diseases to malaria.

Janet traveled to western Kenya with Habitat Aid after the clinic facilitated 17 births in its first year. The significance of these numbers wasn’t lost on Janet, a mother and grandmother, because she knew most Kenyan women deliver on dirt floors or hemorrhage while waiting for buses to city hospitals. Walter prepared for the clinic’s opening by picking up gifts for each new mother from Atlanta-area hospitals. “We acknowledged each woman as they came on the porch in the hospital,” Janet says. “And she presented her baby and we gave her this little goodie bag... and you would have thought we gave them a bag of gold.”

**T**he spectrum of people who care enough to engage in an issue is full of individuals with different strengths, but it’s difficult nowadays to make a difference firsthand unless working with the government or an international relief organization.

“You can’t get your head right unless you travel there,” Walter says. “See how you put these elements together, and it’s a recipe for sustainability and for upward development within the community... I’ll show you what our projects are, and then what’s your initiative for their habitat now



that you’ve seen this?”

Clean water. Healthcare. Education. Food production. As a future-minded individual, Walter doesn’t only want to mend current problems in Kenya but also prevent them from re-occurring. He plans to achieve this in part with his new invention, the Terratool—a plow that discs farm soil, creates rows and puts seed and fertilizer straight into the earth. It’s the final piece to the puzzle he’s been trying to put together his entire life, and with help from his machinery company’s engineers and a recent trademark, he’s finally made it possible. Walter wanted to help mothers working in fields so they no longer worry about having enough children to help, enabling them to go to college.

If a mother gets an animal to pull the low-cost Terratool, she can plow a field twice as large in half the time. “It’s more than just a plow—it’s a microeconomic tool that will allow a subsistence-farming, impoverished community to lift itself up out of that situation, and that reverses the poverty cycle,” Walter says. Most families

in Kenya grow just enough food to subsist, but growing more would allow them to farm commercially.

Walter believes the solution to Kenya’s current situation is education, so his goal is tackling the obstacles blocking a child’s way. Janet witnessed the project’s benefits firsthand while spending time with the region’s female students. “One wanted to be a news broadcaster, one wanted to be an accountant, one wanted to be a doctor,” she says. “Such amazing aspirations for girls that live in villages without running water. And it’s because of the school.”

Through Walter Dean’s Habitat Aid Initiative, Kenya is helping Kenya, putting the region on track to a better, well-deserved tomorrow. “I couldn’t walk away from it,” Walter says. “I lived with these people, watched their children die, watched them get sick, I got sick, and I thought, ‘How in the hell are these people gonna survive without some help?’” ■

*Title: Khwisero School Well. Opposite Page: delivery at Munyanza Health Clinic. Top Right: Mothers and their children at Munyanza Health Clinic.*

countless reassurances from Carlos, there was a turning point where he was able to keep his balance with his improved core muscles and eyesight. He was able to ride by himself.

“Seeing his family there was one of the more special moments I had,” Carlos says. “Them seeing his progress, his son seeing his dad up there riding the horse alone, they were so proud of him.”

Being able to get on a horse, sit tall and ride independently might seem simple, but in the process of working through physical and mental injuries, it is a moment of triumph made possible by the bonds and hard work of horses and volunteers alike.

Horses and Warriors, another alternative therapy program based out of the Calvin Center in Hampton, Georgia utilizes only veteran volunteers to assist with equine therapies.

“They have been in combat, so they are able to relate to these men and women and listen to them talk, and they don’t judge, they don’t question. They listen and understand,” says Sara Reams, volunteer director for Horses and Warriors. “It allows the rider to open up and express their concerns and worries in a way they couldn’t with someone who had never been in the military.”

This philosophy is based on sharing a military mindset, making the participants more comfortable.

Proving this philosophy, a former Staff Sergeant and drill instructor in the Army recently participated in Horses and Warriors. He was severely injured in Iraq, and in a coma for several months. After he awoke, his physical disabilities limited the use of one whole side of his body, forcing him to leave the life of militarized structure and strength behind.

One afternoon on a therapeutic trail ride, he broke down, spilling his fears and anxieties to his veteran mentors. He expressed his fear that if he were to meet any of the former soldiers that had known him as a drill sergeant, they would think less of him now because he was injured, broken.

“If he had told that to a volunteer who had never been a veteran, they could never have reassured him the way that these veterans did,” Sara says. “Because a lot of them had been in the Army, they had known a drill sergeant.

*“There’s a lot of good things that we do and see... I feel that I’m doing something positive.”*

They were able to listen to what his concern was, and to tell him that they still admired him and to reassure him that his friends would still admire him too.”

His bond with the horses and veteran volunteers allowed this man, and many others like him, to get their lives back and to move forward with a new attitude, an attitude that volunteers like Carlos have embodied.

“These volunteers are so ready to give back; they are looking for something to do,” Sara says. “They will tell you, they get as much out of it as they give to others, so it works both ways.”

Juan Cruz, 44, is another veteran that devoted his post-military life to volunteering, helping rehabilitate his brother and sister veterans while utilizing the time as a continued means of therapy for himself. After serving a collective 23 years in the Army, reaching the rank of Staff Sergeant, he began going to Horses for Heroes in 2012 for recreational therapy. Suffering

from PTSD and anxiety, Juan learned that horses reflected his emotions, and was able to use that as a calming mechanism.

This sense of calm is a feeling Juan wanted to be sure other veterans felt going through the program. He went to the Horses and Warriors program at the Calvin Center in September 2012 to receive the formal equine therapy volunteer training they offer, allowing him to assist the veteran clients until they reach a point where they are confident on their own.

Juan also speaks and presents at Veterans Associations and clubs throughout Atlanta, spreading his story of the benefits of equine therapy and how working and volunteering with horses changed his life. His goal - try to get more veterans

participating in the program, both as a means for therapy and as volunteers. Try to get as many flyers posted on the walls of VA offices so that men like Carlos, expecting just another day of medication and doctors, can have the chance to change not only their own lives, but the lives of many others like them.

“There’s a lot of good things that we do and see,” Juan says. “I feel good, I feel that I’m doing something positive.” ■



*Photo courtesy of / Juan Cruz  
Juan enjoys a therapeutic ride*