

## Stanwich Mission Team in Kenya at a Time of Turmoil and Violence

*Editor's Note: When a dozen members of Stanwich's mission to Kenya left just after Christmas, they did not know they would be in that country at a time of turmoil following a controversial presidential election. The following article, reprinted from the Greenwich Time newspaper, recounts some of their experiences. The article was written by Staff Correspondent Meredith Blake. As the photos show, the unrest did not deter the Stanwich team members from doing their work—and having fun in the process.*

Secluded in a remote area three hours outside of Nairobi, Stanwich Congregational Church missionaries received e-mails from the American Embassy warning them of the danger and violence enveloping Kenya.

"We heard how bad things were...I was very, very nervous," said Lydee Hummel of New Canaan, who was one of the missionaries on the trip.

The group—including Greenwich residents Lindsay Gabriel, Mark McDivitt, and the Rev. Charles Davis and his sons Jordan and Christian—left for Kenya a few days after Christmas for a week-long trip to an orphanage for children whose parents died of AIDS. They were joined by Stamford residents Alexandra, Jared, Danielle and Jeff Kohlberger, in addition to Hummel and her son Gordon Cohen, also of New Canaan.

They arrived in Nairobi on Saturday, Dec. 29, as the votes were being counted in the hotly contested election for president.

"We were watching the election results (on TV) and were not allowed to leave the compound," Hummel recalled.

James Njaaga, the founder of the orphanage, said it would be safer to stay in and avoid downtown.

They left Nairobi early the next day, before the election results were tallied. Packed into a large safari truck, they set out for the three-hour trip to a small town outside of Nakuru, in the middle of the country. They found out the results of the election on a Blackberry.

The head of Kenya's election commission announced that incumbent President Mwai Kibaki had narrowly defeated opposition leader Raila Odinga, even though other members of the commission said the balloting had been rigged. Later, the head of the commission said he had been pressured by Kibaki's people, and

that he didn't know who had won.

Violence erupted in Nairobi, hundreds were killed, and thousands fled the country.

But the (Stanwich) team did not know the extent of the violence in Nairobi. As they were driving east, people were lining the streets, celebrating Kibaki's win.

"We were overwhelmed by the people in the streets...They were very positive, giving us high-fives. It seemed to us that they were satisfied," Hummel said.

But they started to receive messages from the American Embassy and hearing reports of the violence.

"We were told to stay in place and make sure to take all precautions," Hummel said.

They heard about the dozens of people seeking shelter in a church who died when protesters set it on fire, Hummel said.

"It was scary," she said, "but I didn't realize the full impact of how dire the situation was until I read (the newspaper) when I came home."

Nolan, principal at the Grace Christian School in Stamford and leader of the trip, said that despite the problems, the group was never in danger.

When they reached Njaaga's Child Hope Home and Farm, they were greeted with a large welcome and lots of hugs, Nolan recalled.

"The children were excited to see us," she said.

While staying at the orphanage, the team was largely cut-off from the events unfolding in Nairobi.

The group spent the days engaging the 79 orphans, who range in age from two to 19 years old, in a variety of activities such as soccer and computer instruction. They ate meals together and helped with other daily chores. There was little talk among the missionaries about the election, according to Nolan.

Hummel did notice that there was a shortage of fuel, food and other supplies in the region, but the group was not really affected by it.

Staying at the orphanage, housed on a rundown tea plantation, the missionaries focused on the children. The food was very basic and some of the children were without shoes, and even slept two to a bed, Hummel said. *(continued—next page)*



**Left Above:** Lydee Hummel reads to one of the children at the Home. **Right above:** Lindsay Gabriel presents a shirt to a young man.

"It was tough...it gave us all a tremendous gratitude for what our lives are like," she said.

As the week came to a close, the group was anxious about whether they would have problems getting home, according to Thomas Elliott, communications coordinator at the church.

In the hotel where Hummel and her son Gordon stayed on their last night, there was a large police presence and the public park across the street was completely empty.

"We were concerned about what we would see, but it was business as usual. There were police checks but that was normal," said Nolan.

They had no problems leaving the country.

"It makes me sad for the people," said Hummel of all of the violence and bloodshed following the election.

"The whole experience was really powerful," she added.



**More Kenya Photos:** Above top, Rev. Chuck Davis baptizes Danielle Kohlberger, one of the missionaries, at Lake Nakuru. Above bottom, Mark McDivitt's birthday was on December 31 and the children helped him celebrate with a good dousing. Right, from top to bottom: Alexandra Kohlberger gets a genuine African hair styling. Jordan Davis conducts an open-air dance class; Danielle Kohlberger holds a nail-painting session; and Mission Leader Anne Nolan works with the children of the Home.

Thanks to Danielle Kohlberger for the pictures.