

SEEING HOPE

Program offers hope inside prison walls, across the world

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Sitting in opposite corners of the room, a pair of incarcerated men unknowingly created an art project that fit together like pieces of a puzzle.

Gomez Saturino and Andres Cruz — who have since been released from Snake River Correctional Institution — were unlikely collaborators in any project. The pair had been invited by Yohannes Tesfay, the inmate art group leader for Visions of Hope, to participate in the program that helps raise money for Otino Waa Children’s Village in Uganda.

Dale Russell — who along with his wife, Sandy, founded Visions of Hope — said Tesfay recognized Saturino and Cruz’s artistic abilities, but didn’t know there was a bit of bad blood between them. Not wanting to jeopardize the program, Russell said Tesfay told the men they needed to leave their differences outside the room and focus on their artwork. The result — each independently worked on portraits of a beautiful and majestic tiger, which were joined together to create a unique piece of artwork. And, Russell said, helped in creating a mutual respect between the former rivals.

Tesfay, who is 20 years into a life sentence for aggravated murder, continues to reach 9,000 miles across the Atlantic Ocean to touch the lives of orphaned kids. His leadership, Russell said, is integral in maintaining a solid program within Oregon Department of Corrections rules.

An unlikely connection between incarcerated inmates and orphans in Uganda has given hope to both, Sandy Russell said. The art program adds a sense of purpose, providing an outlet for prisoners to give back to others. And, the kids, Russell said, give and receive encouragement through correspondence and reports from the organization.

Inside reaching out

Visions of Hope was created in 2009 after a group of inmates at Snake River approached the Russells about using their art as a fundraiser for Otino Waa, which means “Our Children” in the Luo dialect.

The Russells, who reside in Bend, first visited the Ontario prison to share about the children’s village in 2008. Small donations for Otino Waa had been trickling in from inmates and the Russells were intrigued.

“I thought, ‘We need to go see what’s happening at Snake River,’” Dale recalled.

“We didn’t really want to go in. It was with more than a little trepidation that we first went,” Sandy admitted.

Now, the couple visits five Oregon prisons each quarter — including Two Rivers Correctional Institution in Umatilla and Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution in Pendleton. During chapel services, they provide updates about Visions of Hope and the children in Uganda. In addition to the art program, inmates can sponsor kids at Otino Waa for \$5 a month.

“That is a sacrifice for them, but



Each side of this piece of artwork was independently created by a pair of inmate artists, who didn’t know what the other was working on, at Snake River Correctional Institution in Ontario.

Contributed by Dale Russell



Contributed photo by Dale Russell

Residents of Otino Waa Children’s Village in Uganda are all smiles.



Staff photo by Tammy Malgesini

Jose Avila-Flores shares about what it means to him to support kids at the Otino Waa Children’s Village during a recent chapel service at Two Rivers Correctional Institution in Umatilla.

Otino Waa Children’s Village

Founders Bob and Carol Higgins of Bend (Carol grew up on a wheat ranch in Helix) initially went to northern Uganda as missionaries to train pastors. While there, they saw a need for clean water and got involved with developing natural springs. In 2002, they became aware of 78 orphans who were being targeted by a rebel group. With the help of local leaders, they were able to rescue the children and began to care for their basic needs.

A year later, it became apparent the children needed longterm care and Otino Waa Children’s Village was created just outside Lira. Today, nearly 300 children call Otino Waa home. The village features 35 homes that houses eight children each. A widow from the community serves as “house mom” in the newly created family units.

A nonprofit faith-based organization, the mission is to help meet the spiritual and physical needs of the children and provide educational and vocational training. The goal is to raise leaders to help make Uganda a healthier place to live.

For more information, visit www.otinowaa.org.

affordable,” Dale Russell said.

The nonprofit organization finds donors interested in encouraging inmates by matching their donation. The inmates, Russell said, are often astounded that anyone would consider that a worthy investment. Currently, there are 88 Oregon inmates from eight facilities who are reaching beyond prison walls and razor wire to help support 105 kids through the sponsorship program.

Jose Avila-Flores, 28, who has been incarcerated for nearly nine years, smiles brightly when sharing about what it means to him to sponsor Emmanuel, a resident of the children’s village.

“They say I’m providing a blessing to the kids,” he said during a recent chapel service at Two Rivers. “I’m the one getting blessed.”

Barely an adult when he was first incarcerated for attempted aggravated murder, Avila-Flores said he has experienced hardships in life. But, just like the kids at Otino Waa, he has been provided an opportunity for redemption and hope.

“They inspire you to grow to be a better person,” Avila-Flores said. “You just want to let them know that someone cares and wants to help.”

Working collaboratively with prison officials, inmates with restrictions regarding contact with children aren’t eligible for the sponsorship program, Sandy Russell said. Additional safeguards include correspondence being read by Visions of Hope board members to ensure all communications are appropriate. Russell said only one incident has resulted in alerting a corrections facility to address a letter written by an inmate.

Hope through art

Currently, artwork for Visions of Hope is created primarily by inmates at Snake River and Warner Creek Correctional Facility in Lakeview. In addition, female inmates at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville contribute mostly fiber arts, including crocheted items and quilts, as well as jewelry. Another facility may add wood or metal art into the mix in the future, Dale Russell said.

Recognizing the limited resources of inmates, Visions of Hope purchases quality art supplies for program participants. Their artwork is available for purchase on the internet, at art walks, festivals and community presentations. Money from inmate art sales has generated nearly \$60,000 for Otino Waa.

Artwork bought through Visions of Hope, Russell said, directly touches the lives of at least three people. He said it offers encouragement to the inmate artist, supports a child at Otino Waa and provides enjoyment for the purchaser.

The Russells are hoping to expand the art program into additional facilities, but need local volunteers who are committed to helping with the project. For more information or to purchase artwork, visit www.visions-hope.org.

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Contributed by Dale Russell

A piece of artwork by an inmate at Snake River Correctional Institution in Ontario depicts a family unit of children and a widowed house-mother at the Otino Waa Children’s Village in Uganda.



Contributed by Dale Russell

A piece of artwork by an inmate at Snake River Correctional Institution in Ontario depicts a resident of Otino Waa Children’s Village in Uganda.