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Kenya Calling

Baylor student starts nonprofit organization to help Kenyan kids By Meg Cullar

Lots of Baylor students go on mission trips. And lots of them come back changed. But not many of them commit to make a change for others—and then actually do it. Jenne Blackburn did just that.



During a Baylor-sponsored mission trip to Kenya in 2006, the students met Pastor Boniface Mwalimu and went with him on his daily trek into the slums of Nairobi.

"You wake up at 4 a.m. to meet Pastor Boniface at a gas station and get on a bus," Blackburn explained. "You drive into Nairobi and literally wake up the kids on the street. They are sleeping in trash bags in the cracks of buildings. The kids know where to meet Boniface, and he brings them breakfast of milk and bread and preaches the word of God to them."

Sometimes, Blackburn said, Boniface finds children dead in the morning—the victims of the glue they are addicted to sniffing to curb their hunger—or he finds them with injuries from police beatings. "In Swahili, the word for these children means 'trash,'" Boniface told Baylor students when he spoke in Chapel in January. "I tell them, 'You are not trash. You are created in the image of God, and you can become something good.'"

When Blackburn returned from that first trip to Kenya, she could not shake the sadness she felt for the slum children. A member of Baylor's volleyball team, she couldn't concentrate

during summer practice. "I told the coach I had to go home to California," she said. "I always think back to that day when I was sitting on my mom's bed crying," she said. "She was supportive, but told me how much time and energy it was going to take. I said, 'This is something we have to do.' Right after that I started thinking of ways to make money."

When Blackburn first met Boniface, he was living in a tin hut on land outside of the city that had been given to him through a missionary. Now, Boniface, his wife, their three children, two street children they have adopted, and a stream of other street children they are rescuing live in a two-story frame house built with funds raised by Omega Kids, a nonprofit organization started by Blackburn when she was a Baylor sophomore.

So far, Omega Kids has raised more than \$30,000 for Boniface's ministry. Blackburn started with making and marketing a recording of the slum children singing. Other groups have taken up the cause, including a class of ten-year-olds in Massachusetts who make and sell ornaments. But most of the money has been raised by two Christian concerts Omega Kids has sponsored the past two springs on the Baylor campus. A third one is scheduled for April 22, the eve of Diadeloso. Blackburn is quick to point out that the concerts have involved the volunteer efforts of many Baylor students, including her roommates, a marketing expert, and many fraternity and sorority members.

Becky Kennedy, Baylor associate chaplain and director for missions, said that Blackburn, a communication studies major, has found a calling that fits her gifts. "Jenne is a great communicator and a great motivator," Kennedy said. "She inspires people, and she is a visionary." But what really makes the difference, she said, is that, "I think God's spirit is on her, and people are drawn to that."

Blackburn said, "I think I was called to do it. For some reason, I felt like this is what I am supposed to do. I've never felt more excitement and passion about anything."

While Blackburn is sure that her work with Omega Kids will continue after she graduates in May, she's not sure what form it will take. She took great satisfaction in seeing Boniface speak in Chapel. "He spoke on the stage where two concerts have raised money for his mission," she said. "It was meaningful to have him come here and tell his story to the freshmen as I'm leaving."

And Boniface offered the younger students some advice that Blackburn has modeled. "Whatever calling you have in your heart, pursue it," he said. "What God is calling you to do, do it."