

Liberian children receive hope, food from man with ties to Ellis County

BY BETHANY PETERSON Midlothian Mirror Managing Editor | Posted: Thursday, August 28, 2014 12:43 pm

In a destroyed airport in Liberia, a Grand Prairie man with ties to Ellis County felt like he had come home.

In 1999, Andy Perkins visited Liberia with International Gospel Outreach. The country was in another civil war.

“Everything was burned to the ground,” Perkins said.

“There was not a piece of motorized equipment anywhere. People had to push the stairs up to the plane and unload the luggage by hand.”

The hunger he saw on the trip convinced the to start Building Everyone's Success Together in West Africa, Inc. with food and education programs operating in Buchanan, Liberia's second largest city. The program began in 2004 and runs off donations from individuals and international aid groups.

But now the mission is falling under the Ebola shadow. Ebola cases have been reported in the northeast corner of the country, and the government has declared a state of emergency and has shut down the borders. More than 1,000 people have died this year from the disease with a 90 percent fatality rate, according to the World Health Organization website. The disease starts with a sudden fever, intense weakness and muscle pain, headache and sore throat. That's followed by vomiting, diarrhea, rash, impaired kidney and liver function and in some cases, internal and external bleeding, the website stated.

If Ebola reaches the feeding stations, it could wipe out all the children, Perkins said.

“I don't even want to think about it,” he said soberly. “We have tried to make contingency plans to deliver food if we have to shut down the stations, a little Meals-on-Wheels for them.”

The World Children's Fund helps pay for the feeding stations, according to the organization's website.

When the Fund completed an audit and site visits in 2013, the organization passed and received additional money, despite the Fund's original intent to cut funding.

“The auditor said it was the worst conditions she had seen in 25 years, and the best run program,” Perkins said.



BESTWA

Children line up outside of a BESTWA feeding station in Buchanan Liberia. The one meal they receive here is often the only food they get all day.

BESTWA has three feeding stations that feed about 200 children a day, Perkins said. They program members have also started education scholarships to provide uniforms, supplies and tuition for all education levels.

“This calendar year, BESTWA doubled the number of malnourished and starving children being fed (at feeding stations),” Perkins said. “We also put over 500 of them into school for the very first time.”

Liberia has some of the highest infant and child mortality rates in the world, 83 percent unemployment and high levels of petty street crime, Perkins said.

There are 37 doctors in the country for 4 million people, he said.

Kathryn Hess works with World Children's Fund and other non-profits and has visited organizations that help poverty stricken countries all over world. She visited BESTWA's activities in Liberia and has contributed to the program ever since, she said.

“BESTWA is making a lasting difference by saving the lives of about 900 children each day,” Hess said. “Food is a basic requirement to live. BESTWA is creating a path for the daily survival of these children.”

Perkins has been a member of Midlothian Bible Church for about a year though he lives in southern Grand Prairie, said fellow member Dan Baucum. Perkins is passionate about his mission but isn't pushy, Baucum said.

“He didn't say a whole lot about it for eight to nine months,” Baucum said. “Because he didn't want to push the ministry on anyone.”

But when Perkins was given a Sunday morning to address the congregation and share photos, there were lots of tears and sympathy, he said.

“They (the Perkins family) live in a double wide trailer and live off next to nothing,” Baucum said. “He is one of the most giving people I've ever met in my life.”

Starvation is a common problem in Liberia, he said, and children do what they can to help themselves. Perkins once saw a man abusing a young girl in an ally. When the man saw Perkins and ran off, the girl was angry at Perkins for chasing off a paying customer, he said.

“These children come to us with their hair turning tan and falling out,” Perkins said. “Their skin looks papery.”

Liberia is a rainforest country, so fruits and vegetables are not too hard to come by, he said, but protein and carbohydrates are harder to find.

“They couldn't grow anything during the wars, so they don't have a farming culture,” Perkins said.

Schooling is supposed to be free and compulsory, according to the Liberian constitution, but schools require students to provide their own supplies and obey a strict uniform code, he said. Most children don't

have parents or guardians who can afford the supplies, so the children don't go to school.

“For \$125, we can put a child in school for one year,” he said.

The program also supports college educations for six students, according to bestwa.org. College educations open up doors for employment and stability, Hess said.

“Education is a game changer. It is impossible to quantify the impacts that literacy and education will have in these children’s lives,” she said.

Operating in a country known for its government corruption means taking precautions on whom to trust, he said. Aid money is given directly to the Liberian BESTWA board members, who purchase supplies and pay tuitions.

“In Liberia, you have to have someone you can trust,” he said.

Perkins met Daniel Mellish, who is now the chairman of the Liberian board of directors, during his original trip. After he came back, Perkins began sending the young pastor \$25 a month to support his family. Mellish was instrumental in getting the organization started and finding other trustworthy workers.

“During the war, Daniel had \$300 of mission money in his house,” Perkins said. “But his family didn't eat for four days because he said he didn't have any money.”

BESTWA has 23 employees, Perkins said. He is the only employee in the U.S. The other employees are native Liberians working in Liberia. The organization does have a six-person board in the U.S. and a five-person board in Liberia.

Perkins runs the organization long distance, but tries to visit for two to four weeks at least twice a year, he said.

Feeding the children has had unintended consequences, Perkins said. He knows a woman in Liberia who is raising her four grandchildren.

“When we started feeding the children, now she can eat better,” he said.

The petty crime rate has also dropped significantly because children are receiving food from BESTWA, not stealing it, he said.