

Missionary couple works to support Tanzania from Toledo

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TOLEDO—Don Stiles was headed to Tanzania to climb Mount Kilimanjaro the first time he met Archbishop Paul R. Ruzoka of Tabora on a flight from Amsterdam to Dar es Salaam.

They ended up talking for nine hours on that flight, and when they landed the archbishop — then the bishop of Kigoma, Tanzania — invited the Toledo native to come and visit him in his diocese.

Though they were not able to connect again in person on that trip, the chance encounter laid the groundwork for a friendship that eventually led Mr. Stiles and his wife, Gisela, to sell their home in Colorado Springs and move to Tabora, Tanzania, in December 2009 to help the archbishop build a Catholic university.

The Stiles got to know the archbishop and the priests and sisters of Tabora well during the nine months they spent there, as Mr. Stiles worked to gain government approval for the archdiocese to use the land it had earmarked for a university.

Unfortunately their work was cut short by malaria last year — four bouts of it for each of them, the last of which nearly killed Mrs. Stiles. Following the advice of their doctor, they decided to leave Tanzania to recuperate.

Their search for a new home led them to Toledo, the hometown Mr. Stiles had left behind more than 50 years ago when he was drafted into the Army in 1956.

Now parishioners of Toledo St. Patrick of Heatherdowns, the couple recounted the long journey that brought them to Toledo and to the Catholic faith.

After a tour of duty in France, Mr. Stiles left the Army and eventually returned to Europe to work in France and Germany, where he met his wife of 41 years in 1967. The couple owned a farm in France until 1998, when they sold everything to embark on a trip around the world.

After two years of travel, they finally settled down in Colorado Springs, where Mrs. Stiles began a business specializing in interior design for model homes.

Ten years later, the Stiles were preparing to sell the business and retire when they decided to move to Tanzania.

“We sold everything,” Mrs. Stiles chuckles. “We sold the house fully furnished — we just left.”

Though they were not Catholic when they moved to Tabora, their experience in Tanzania had a profound spiritual impact on the couple.

Mrs. Stiles recalls how the priests and



sisters accepted and embraced them so warmly as members of the community. “We were included in this Catholic family, and we felt so welcome and so at home, that we said, well, when we get back to the United States, we want to look into becoming Catholic,” she says.

When they bought their home in south Toledo in October 2010, Mrs. Stiles says they received “such a lovely letter of welcome” from Father Dennis Walsh, pastor of St. Patrick of Heatherdowns, that they decided to visit the nearby parish.

They entered the RCIA program at St. Patrick and were received into the church at the Easter vigil last spring.

The Stiles remain in contact with the Archbishop of Tabora, and established



Chronicle photo by Laurie Stevens Bertke
Don and Gisela Stiles

Archbishop Paul R. Ruzoka of Tabora visits with albino children who live in an orphanage sponsored by the Missionaries of Charity in Tabora, Tanzania.

Photo courtesy of Gisela Stiles

a nonprofit charity — the Universal Initiative Foundation — to raise money for projects in Tanzania and elsewhere.

While the university remains high on their list of priorities, their main focus now is on a far more devastating problem in Tanzania: the targeted mutilation and killing of persons with albinism, a rare condition that results in a lack of pigmentation in the hair, skin and eyes.

“These albinos — there’s about 120,000 of them in Tanzania — they’re being slaughtered for their body parts,” says Mr. Stiles, who explains that witch doctors “grind them up and make potions” that they claim have magical powers.

Another myth that has taken hold in the

country is the idea that having sex with an albino woman can cure AIDS, he adds.

Since 2007, there have been 66 confirmed attacks and 57 albinos have been murdered in Tanzania, which has one of the largest populations of albinos in the world, according to an ABC News report.

So many children and adults with albinism have been kidnapped, mutilated and killed for their body parts that it is no longer safe for them to be out alone.

The Missionaries of Charity operate a small orphanage in Tabora that shelters some of these children, “but they’re limited, and they’re full,” says Mr. Stiles.

The goal is to help the archdiocese raise enough money to build a sanctuary that would provide shelter and education to hundreds of children with albinism.

Mr. Stiles says about \$500,000 is needed to begin building a facility for the youngest children. He estimates it will cost about \$5 million total for a facility that would accommodate children of all ages along with staff for the sanctuary, which will house both black and albino children.

Mrs. Stiles says this is the project dearest to their hearts as they begin to network both locally and internationally to drum up support for Tabora. “There’s a pressing need for this, and these children need to be protected,” she says.

For more information on the work of the Universal Initiative Foundation, contact Don and Gisela Stiles at 419-491-1203 or uif501c3@gmail.com.

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