

Nairobi street kids find refuge at center

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Baptist student missions and education team members talked excitedly as they drove out of the heart of Nairobi to the suburbs. Streets became muddy from the new rains and the bus bounced up and down, dodging as many potholes as it could.

But the real excitement came when the bus pulled onto the muddiest street of all. Out from the woods came little boys, chasing and jumping on the back of the bus. The boys' smiles spread to the travelers in the bus, and laughter was poured out in unison as the doors opened at the final destination—Toni La Maji Street Youth Rehabilitation Center.

Founded and funded by a Catholic priest from Italy, the center is in the Langata-Rongai area of Nairobi. Its mission is to get small boys off the streets and off drugs while getting them back into school. Currently 49 boys, from 9 to 16 years old, stay on-site in dorm-like facilities.

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Only open one month, the rehab center has successfully filled its rooms and is near full capacity of 63 boys. Director Richard Ngethe Gitau is in charge of helping create a file on these boys, many of who do not even know their

birthday.

All of the boys have different reasons for being on the streets. Most come from Kibera slum, the second largest in Africa, and deal with addictions to glue sniffing and bang—slang for marijuana. When mothers have so many children they cannot support them all; the boys are the first to get pushed out of the home.

Girls still are valued, as they can bring goods to the family during tribal wedding traditions practiced in most of Nairobi. But when the boys are pushed out, they are left to fend for themselves on the rough streets of the city, usually forming large groups of approximately 40 boys.

These groups help rehabilitation center workers to meet many boys because once they make friends with one boy, usually he will invite them to meet the rest. This method of introduction automatically gives the worker credit and an inside help.

The Baylor students sang songs and played games with the children all afternoon, the boys not growing tired one bit. “The best part was talking with the kids and getting to know their stories,” said Crystle Sullivan.

To take a break, the students told the biblical story of Jonah and the whale through illustrations and a translator. As a result of the story, three boys became Christians.

There are two other facilities in the area, one for girls and another for boys, and they try and help as many as they can. But there is more need than capacity.

Boys must meet criteria to be accepted at the center, the most important being that they want to change and go back to school where they could have previously seen the most scorn.

“Schools in Kenya are hard on the children,” said Eric Sundene, a missionary for Spoken For and Irving Bible Church who works with the boys. “And if they are having a hard time at home too, then the boys will become discouraged and not want to go to school.”

After a long day of play, the Baylor students had reason to celebrate. In addition to the three boys who decided to become Christians, so did two social workers at Toni La Maji Center.

When asked what spurred his conversation about Jesus Christ with social worker Patrick, sophomore Joel Mendez said, “ He just looked like he needed to be loved.”

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