

# Texas minister helps bring abuser in Kenya to justice

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When [Calvary Baptist Church](#) in Waco commissioned Chris Pillsbury to serve in Kenya a year and a half ago, he expected to help women market fair-trade handcrafts, work with a humanitarian medical program and maybe start a children's choir.



Chris Pillsbury (3rd from left), a graduate of the Baylor School of Music and Truett Theological Seminary, traveled to Kenya to serve with two medical doctors, John Ott (2nd from right) and Stephen Sokol. He never suspected he and Sokol would become involved in gathering evidence for a prolonged investigation that would lead to Ott's conviction for child sex abuse. He never anticipated collecting evidence and victims' statements that would [help convict](#) a former American medical doctor now serving 20 years in prison for engaging in sexual conduct with 14 Kenyan minors.

"One thing I've learned is that God cares about the least of these," Pillsbury said. "There is a lot of tragedy going on all over the world, but God cared enough about 14 young men in Kenya to send me over there."

As a graduate student at [Baylor University](#) and [Truett Theological Seminary](#), he attended a spiritual retreat where he met John Ott, a physician from the Pacific Northwest who worked in medical missions in Kenya.

Pillsbury shared Ott's interest in Kenya, having traveled there on choir tours. Later, he founded [Kenya Vision Handcrafts](#), a fair-trade company to empower women, and the Baylor Men's Choir sold bracelets made by the Kenyan women as a fund-raiser.

When Pillsbury graduated in December 2011 with a dual degree from [Baylor School of Music](#) and Truett Seminary, he did not immediately find a full-time church ministry position.

"Because of generous scholarships from Baylor and my parents' contribution to my living expenses, I had no stateside obligations upon graduation. So, I contacted Dr. Ott to explore the possibility of spending some time volunteering with his organization in Kenya," he said.

### **An offer of sponsorship**

To his surprise, Ott responded promptly, telling him if he could get to Kenya, his organization would take care of the rest. After praying about the invitation and receiving the blessing of Calvary Baptist, Pillsbury sold most of his belongings in a garage sale, bought a plane ticket to Kenya and went to work with the [Madaktari I Kenya](#) nongovernmental organization in Kendu Bay, a small town on the shore of Lake Victoria.

"I was supposed to work as a community outreach volunteer with the NGO and administer funds of the organization that supported young men who were on scholarship at various high schools and universities," he recalled. "I also had a dream of starting a children's choir."

All his dreams came crashing down about three weeks after his arrival,

when Stephen Sokol, a medical doctor from Maine who worked with Ott, said, “Chris, I need to talk to you.”

### **A disturbing discovery**

Sokol told him a young man had confided that Ott had been abusing boys, giving them school supplies and scholarships in exchange for sexual favors. When Sokol and Pillsbury went to Ott’s office to confront him, Pillsbury discretely recorded their conversation on his smartphone.

“Dr. Ott was evasive and noncommittal in his answers and soon became sarcastic, defensive and uncooperative,” he recalled.



Chris Pillsbury soon after he arrived in Kenya. Subsequently, Pillsbury and Sokol went to Ott’s home, where several young men lived with him. The young men described long-term sexual abuse by Ott, and Pillsbury recorded their stories.

After a sleepless night, Sokol and Pillsbury awoke the next morning to find Ott had fled. When they reported what they knew to an elected Kenyan official who had been supportive of the NGO previously, they received no cooperation.

“Similarly, hospital administrators and others who knew of the abuse

wanted to avoid the shame of being identified with such a socially unacceptable incident," Pillsbury said.

### **Interviewed by the FBI**

So, he and Sokol visited the U.S. consulate and the American embassy in Nairobi, where they met two FBI agents who interviewed them for four hours and listened to all the recorded evidence they had collected. Since Ott was an American citizen, the case was transferred to the FBI field office in Washington, D.C.

"For the next month, I functioned as an intermediary between the FBI and the young men who had been victims of Dr. Ott's abuse in Kenya," Pillsbury said.

Authorities suspected Ott had crossed the border into Tanzania—a suspicion confirmed when Ott began to send "creepy" text messages to his victims inviting them to join him at a small rural hospital where he was practicing medicine, Pillsbury said.

The FBI and its criminal division's office of international affairs worked closely with personnel at the U.S. embassy in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection National Targeting Center and local authorities in Tanzania and Kenya to apprehend Ott.

### **Abuser apprehended by authorities**

By Dec. 11, 2012, he was on a plane headed for Washington, D.C. Evidence presented in court subsequently showed Ott engaged in illicit sexual conduct with at least 14 minors in Muhuru Bay, Sori and Kendu Bay, Kenya, between January 2004 and September 2012. His victims ranged in age from 9 to 17 years old when the sexual contact started.

In May 2013, Ott pleaded guilty to one count of engaging in illicit sexual

conduct in a foreign place. On Dec. 4, 2013, he was sentenced in U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia to serve 20 years in prison. His license to practice medicine also was revoked. Upon completion of his prison term, he will be required to register as a sex offender and placed on supervised release for the rest of his life.

The U.S. Department of Justice pursued the case as part of [Project Safe Childhood](#), a nationwide initiative launched in May 2006 to combat child sexual exploitation and abuse.

### **‘Cesspool’ of details**

Pillsbury acknowledged he struggled with the burden of knowing the details of abuse Ott’s victims described.

“During this investigation and the subsequent months, I had many difficult moments as I learned additional details of the abuse Dr. Ott inflicted on so many innocent young Kenyan men. Such anecdotes haunted me for days after I heard them,” he said. “Once I thought I had heard all the stories, I’d hear another story that proved the cesspool of Dr. Ott’s actions knew no depth.”

Through it all, he drew strength from the knowledge friends at Calvary Baptist were praying for him, he noted. Last August, he began service as minister of music at [First Baptist Church in Clifton](#).

Sokol and his family worked through the NGO he had helped start in Kenya to assist the victimized young men complete their education and obtain medical care. “Chris was most helpful in helping me organize this,” he noted.

Pillsbury admitted his academic training had prepared him for ministry, missions and music—not what he confronted in Kenya. “It definitely falls into the category of ‘things they didn’t teach you in seminary,’” he noted.

## **Training served him well**

Even so, looking back, he believes principles he learned at Truett Seminary served him well even when he was working in areas far outside his expertise where he felt uncomfortable.

“The foundation I received at Truett Seminary in leadership, ethics and social justice gave me tools to process information and take action,” he said. “I felt like God empowered the steps I was taking.”

Pillsbury wonders if he “stumbled into an Esther situation,” a reference to the Old Testament story of the Hebrew woman whose access to the king allowed her to intercede for her people and who was told she entered the kingdom “for such a time as this.”

“It wasn’t what I had in mind for my time in Kenya,” Pillsbury said. “But I’m grateful that I was able to be a part of what God wanted done.”