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Frank Bodani: Former Penn State players fighting to help 'ghosts of society'

By FRANK BODANI
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York, PA - One Nittany Lion just left for the other side of the world, a return trip to change his life yet again.

Another Nittany Lion will be going back soon enough.

It's about football giving back, in a way.

Certainly, going to play the game and earn a degree at Penn State is part of what made Justin Kurpeikis and Bill Spoor who they are today.

Kurpeikis was a standout defensive end at Penn State in 1999 and 2000 -- but never a true star.

He studied premed. He thought of becoming a doctor.

He married, had kids, found a job in medical sales.

He spends part of every week in operating rooms.

And so he learned about Operation Small Steps, a non-profit medical organization that holds two-week working clinics in Madagascar.



Former Penn State defensive end Justin Kurpeikis poses for a picture last year during a medical relief trip to Madagascar. Kurpeikis joined a non-profit organization called Operation Small Steps, which helps people in the island nation who suffer from orthopedic disabilities and other conditions. (Submitted)

Talk to Frank



York Daily Record/Sunday News reporter Frank Bodani talks Penn State football with readers every week throughout the season.

The next chat is at 8 p.m. Monday, July 23, at [The Nittany Nation blog](#).

Email Frank your Penn State questions at fbodani (at) ydr.com for inclusion in the weekly chats.

And follow Frank on Twitter at [@YDRPennState](#).

Orthopedic disabilities and diseases run rampant in the island nation off the coast of Africa.

A spot on the team opened up last year, and Kurpeikis took it.

The young people in Madagascar afflicted with club foot, rickets, and other conditions "won't get married, won't work a normal job, will be ghosts of society," Kurpeikis said. "Even if we help 10 people, it can make a huge difference."

Kurpeikis went along and assisted in surgeries and made daily trips to town for supplies.

He still remembers the 5-year-old girl who walked up to him with a toddler on her hip, begging for food.

"I still remember the look in that girl's eyes," he said. "It was desperation."

* * *

Bill Spoor earned only one football letter at Penn State.

He was never a starter, just a backup receiver and holder on field goals in the early 1990s.

But like Kurpeikis, something clicked for him in college. Was it because of Penn State? Because of football? Because of Joe Paterno harping on making an impact with your life?

In graduate school, Spoor and a friend signed up for a service trip to Uganda.

And the people they met never left his mind.

Later, Spoor and his wife began making trips to the same village -- one without electricity, running water and medical care.

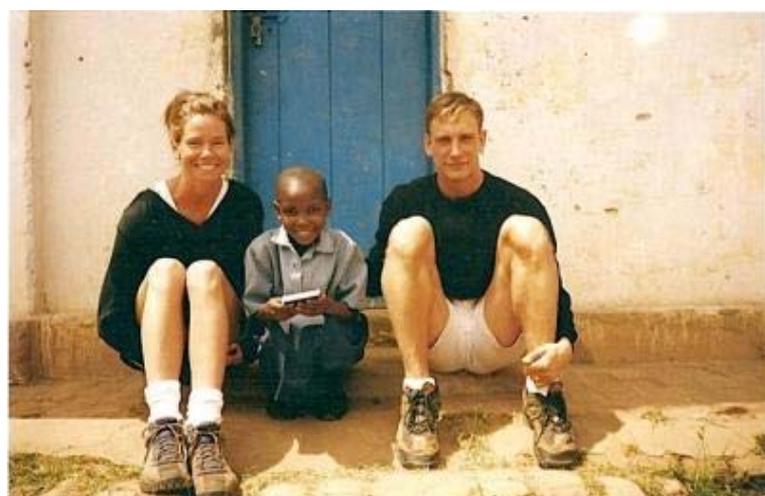
Many of the children are stricken with malaria and worms. They are orphaned by the AIDS epidemic.

In response, the Spoors started a non-profit organization called Happy Valley Uganda, which seeks to provide children with a Christian education and to "disrupt abject poverty" in the area.

They transport villagers for medical treatment and pay the costs. They are planning to build a school.

"You can't go to Africa with the CEO mentality and kick in the door," Spoor said. "You can't go in there and say, 'Do things this way.'"

"When you're in Africa, things move slowly. Sometimes they



Bill Spoor, who played football for Penn State in the early 1990s, started a foundation called Happy Valley Uganda with his wife, Elke. They travel to Africa yearly and are planning to build a school there. submitted (Submitted)

don't make a lot of sense the way they do things. You give them a lawnmower, and they wouldn't use it. They'd rather use a sickle to cut the grass. A lot of things are steeped in culture."

* * *

It's so difficult to find the drive, the time and the finances to help so far away when so much is swirling around them at home.

Spoor, for example, works for Goldman Sachs in New York City, raises a family and tends a farm in New Jersey.

He's quietly extending his grasp.

"We're all called to do something with our lives," Spoor said. "The one thing that attracted me to this is it's

something to do in an anonymous way."

The two former Nittany Lions aren't in this for popularity and names on buildings.

They agreed to talk about their work only to increase awareness and build donations -- to fund more help, more change.

They've seen some results.

They want others to know what that can feel like.

"The reason it changed me is it hit the reset button on my 'perspective meter,'" Kurpeikis said. "I don't have delusions of going out and saving the world, but I see how an organization can make an impact.

"I absolutely see how it makes an impact."

Frank Bodani covers Penn State football for the Daily Record/Sunday News. Reach him at 771-2104, fbodani@ydr.com or @YDRPennState.