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Catching Up With: Bill Spoor

Jeff Rice - Jan 31, 2013 14

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Editor's Note: Penn State's football alumni have experienced a lot since their playing days and have hundreds of stories to tell. Each week, Lions247 will profile one of these former players and what they're up to today.



Bill and Elke Spoor, pictured here with their four daughters, are building a school for children in Uganda.

Bill Spoor was a couple of years out of Penn State when he went to an Amy Grant concert with his girlfriend. Sometime during the show, the couple had decided to join Grant and her involvement in Compassion, an international Christian ministry, and sponsor a child in Uganda.

A few years later, as part of his independent study in Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management, Spoor went to Africa for the first time. Soon after, he visited the child he was sponsoring, a young girl by the name of Doreen Niwamani.

During those visits, Spoor, who had played wide receiver and had been a holder for the Nittany Lions in the early 1990s, saw families without shoes. Or electricity. Or plumbing. Mothers gave birth in mud huts without any qualified assistance. He had expected a bit of a culture shock, but not to that extent.

"It was far more than I had ever thought," Spoor said.

More than 15 years later, Spoor and that girlfriend -- now his wife, Elke -- are working to build a school in that part of Uganda through an organization bearing the name of his alma mater. Happy Valley Uganda, established in 2008, is a non-profit organization that hopes to offer children in the Nyaruhanga village in southwest Uganda a Christian secondary boarding school education with the goal of getting them admitted to a university.

"We didn't want to just be sending money. We wanted to be a part of their lives and know them as people," Elke Spoor said. "We just

grew to have such a fondness for the area."

After Kellogg, Spoor worked at Merrill Lynch and Goldman Sachs. He and Elke continued to sponsor children through Compassion and continued to make regular visits to Uganda. During one such visit, Spoor saw a truckload of women and children, including an 18-month old child who had pneumonia and was close to death.

"I realized I wasn't doing enough," he said. "I thought, 'I'm just not having an organized impact.'"

The goal is a six-grade, tuition-free school, a six-classroom building and 24 ranch-style homes that will each accommodate 10 children and house parents. An athletic facility and a medical clinic are also in the works.

The Spoors accept money from 501(c)3 organizations and other professional foundations but not from private donors; they pay the overhead expenses for HVU themselves.

The project is coming along slowly but Spoor is confident of its prospects, mainly because of the people involved. The director of HVU, Amanda Kara, was a Sudanese refugee who spent eight years in Kenya before moving to the United States and becoming an academic All-American and all-conference athlete in track and cross country at the University of Alabama-Birmingham. A New York law firm has handled many of the legal issues pro bono.

"People have come out of the woodwork to help," Spoor said. "It's been interesting to watch God's plan at work. It's bigger than us."

There are challenges HVU deals with that would not exist if the Spoors were undertaking a similar project in the U.S. The school's architect, for example, has to oversee the construction so that no one walks away with the steel overnight. The village's people have little experience with -- or use for -- a cash economy.

"If I gave them 10,000 shillings, it's like, 'Great. If you had a chicken, it would help me a lot more,'" Spoor said.

The biggest challenge, though, might be finding more Stanleys. The Rev. Canon Stanley Byomugabi was raised in Nyaruhanga, educated in London, then returned to his village to use his education to help make things better there. The Spoors hope the boarding school produces the same kind of people, though they know they are all too rare.

"We implore those kids to come back and serve the community," Spoor said. "It's too easy not to go back. It's really hard there."

Until the school is complete, Happy Valley Uganda has an enrichment education program "where people basically take a knee and learn," Spoor says.

Meanwhile, support for the project continues to come from a variety of sources. Spoor, who didn't want to take money from friends or family and the subsequent responsibility "to make them proud," said he consistently turned down donation offers from one man until finally, the man said he had started his own foundation and would make a donation through it. He recently got a call from a supporter who wanted to put him in touch with Bob Goff, an attorney who founded the organization Restore International and helps combat slavery and prostitution in Uganda.

"It's amazing how many non-profit organizations there are working towards an impressive and honorable goal," Spoor said. "Some of us need to work together a little bit and we can maybe get even more done."

Only one of those non-profits shares a name with the place where Spoor went to school. He says Elke, who had grown up in California and gone to college in Boston, fell in love with Penn State's campus and thought Happy Valley was "the greatest name." She also saw the impact Penn State had on her husband.

"I think he personally grew so much when he was in college and has a great appreciation for what [Joe Paterno](#), the school and the community afforded him," Elke said. "He wanted to somehow use a name for that with the (boarding) school."

Spoor's hope is that the future students of HVU benefit from their experience at the school as much as he did from his time in the original Happy Valley.

"I thought if I could help create something as influential as Penn State was for me, that could be a great outcome," he said.

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