

THE GROVE OBSERVER

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Maureen Ahern: One Woman on a Mission



Maureen was hosted by Grove Rotarian Bob Daggett, left, who took her to visit Rotary Clubs in Oklahoma, Kansas and Missouri. At right is member Jack Moseley.

It's a long way from Little St. Simon Island in Georgia, to the Valley of a Thousand Hills, South Africa. Grove Rotarians listened intently as the guest speaker with the Boston accent Wednesday told of her calling to South Africa four years ago, to the Valley of a Thousand Hills, where 1,000 people die each day of AIDS.

Maureen Ahern in 2004 was a hotel manager on the island of Little St. Simon, Georgia when she learned of the desperation of this rural area an hour's drive from Durban, a region infected by AIDS where there is hardly anyone alive between 18 and 45 years of age.

It was only natural that she would come to the rescue of many infants and children, orphaned and living in mud houses with no furniture, electricity, running water or floors. Without uniforms or shoes they were not allowed to go to school. The average household is run by a grandmother, or gogo, with between six and 16 children.

In high school she was voted "most likely to start her own orphanage" and joined VISTA, the Domestic Peace Corp, and initiated Program Project Explore for children in the Appalachian

Mountains of Kentucky. Later she became a foster parent caring for 10 foster infants while raising her own two children.

And four years ago she founded Our Journey, Inc., to provide uniforms and educational supplies for children so they may attend school; provide pre-school and after-school programs; sponsor opportunities for local people to receive formal, early childhood educations, provide blankets and clothing for families; and facilitate volunteer efforts to build houses and community centers.

She spends six months at a time in South Africa now, and six months in the U.S. raising money for her mission. While visiting Colorado recently, she had gone to church with a friend and spoke to the congregation about her work. Visiting that day was a man from Los Angeles who owns 11 radio stations there and after he heard her speak he went out to his car, got his checkbook, and wrote Maureen a check for \$18,000 dollars to buy 900 blankets for the children.

The Valley of a Thousand Hills continues to have the highest AIDS infection rate in South Africa. Locals believe that if you have sex with a virgin, you yourself will be cured of AIDS, so rape is rampant there.

Grove Rotary last year sent two sewing machines to her, where they quickly put to use sewing school uniforms so the children could attend school. Maureen helps distribute food, has a garden project for vegetable growing, launched after school programs, scholarship funds, a Cap and Hat program, and a blanket program for the winter months. The children have no clothing and shoes are worn until there are no soles in them, but they wear them to school anyway.

She doesn't have the funding Oprah does, but she is making a huge difference. Her web site is www.ourjourneyinc.org.

Those wishing to make donations can send them to Our Journey, Inc., Fred G. Mills, CPA, LLC, 15617 Highway 17, Townsend, GA 31331.