

RUNNER'S

WORLD

Motivation: **Heroes of Running**

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The Humanitarian: Toby Tanser

A New York City running coach works to bring shoes, health care, and peace to Kenya.

By **Zoe Alsop**

Toby Tanser has always had Kenya at heart. Over the past 13 years, he has [donated thousands of shoes](#) (18,000 were delivered last summer alone), used women's races to turn a macho running culture on its head, and promoted once taboo HIV/AIDS testing. But perhaps the most extraordinary thing he did was to bring running back to a broken city last spring.

In the bloody aftermath of the December 2007 elections, runners disappeared from the streets of Iten, Kenya's high-altitude training mecca. They were replaced by throngs of tribal militiamen passing from door to door, and by the smoldering remains of torched cars, houses, and churches. Locals buried the dead furtively, breaking tradition that a corpse go into the ground at sunset. In March, Tanser visited the village of Kiambaa, where a church had been burned with 35 people inside. A woman there told him how she'd seen her baby burn to death. "I stood there thinking, What the hell am I doing donating shoes?" Tanser says. "Maybe I should be doing more."

That's exactly what he did, starting with a peace run. Two world champion marathoners presided over the race—each representing one of the tribes that were at the center of the conflict—Douglas Wakiihuri, a Kikuyu, and Luke Kibet, a Kalenjin, who had been stoned during a violent episode. The participants were all children—600 ran through the town at what was the first of several [Run for Peace](#) events throughout the region.

"The peace runs will help the communities come back to one, to get rid of tribalism," says Kenyan Sally Barsosio, a 10,000-meter world champion. "In sports we just want to be one family."

Tanser is a pale, long-haired vegetarian who has a penchant for cooking and the kitchen—a place most Kenyans deem womanly. But he is happy to play the role of the eccentric outsider. After all, it's helped him charm and inspire people into doing courageous things, like taking an HIV test, joining a running race, or challenging political violence.

The 40-year-old former elite Icelandic runner, who splits his time between New York City and Kenya, first traveled to Africa to train in 1995 and left barefoot. After he'd given away his luggage and dozens of running shoes, he unlaced his last pair for the cabby who drove him to the airport. He arrived shoeless in Stockholm, where a passing motorist offered him a ride and begged to send her own shoes to Kenya. [Shoe4Africa](#) was born.

Since then, many Shoe4Africa beneficiaries have gone on to become track stars, but the organization's primary purpose remains fulfilling a basic health need in a country where the majority of people live on a dollar a day. The organization also sponsors women's races, with the idea that strong, empowered women will raise healthy families.

But his newest challenge may be his toughest. Tanser wants to raise \$15 million to build the largest children's hospital in Africa in the Kenyan town of Eldoret. On a visit there this spring, he saw hospitalized patients sleeping four to a bed. He also saw an opportunity to continue to spread his message. "The thing about a hospital," Tanser says, "it's a place where peace is."

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