Philanthropy

Gift of hospital to Kenyan children

Award winning actor leads fellow stars to raise funds for 250-bed institution in Eldoret

By Tim Kamuzu Bandá

For years, he has made us all laugh as he warmed our hearts with his blistering monologues of the long-running hospital drama series, ER. Now, Dr Mark Green, whose real name is Anthony Edwards, is on a different mission — one that will touch the very hearts of Kenyans even deeper.

The award-winning American actor is spearheading a project that will see the construction of the biggest children's hospital in Africa. Though the 250-bed hospital to be built in Eldoret will cost a whopping Sh1 billion, Edwards is so confident about raising that figure that he says the logistics are already underway.

"Acting in the hospital drama series made me understand the challenges that children face medically and that is one of the reasons this project is dear to me," says the soft-spoken actor.

Warner Brothers

Perhaps his confidence stems from the support he has already received from fellow showbiz celebrities. He revealed that Steven Spielberg, the legendary film director, and Warner Brothers have already contributed $125,000 (Sh105 million) towards the project. He is also receiving support from his fellow colleagues at actors Cameron Diaz and Manchester United striker Christiano Ronaldo.

This project is being undertaken through an initiative called ShoeAfrica where Edwards is the chairman.

Born in California, USA, Anthony Edwards started acting while still in school, but his parents encouraged him to go to college. He joined the University of Southern California but by the time he was 19, he had received so many acting jobs that he decided to leave college.

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Although he did a number of roles, his break came when he featured in the film Top gun alongside Tom Cruise. Another film with Forest Whitaker (Oscars for acting Ilf Amiri) paved the way for Edwards joining ER in the premier in 1994.

He stayed in the hospital serials, screened on Ken for a number of years, for eight seasons, gaining international fame. He reportedly earned US$5 million for three seasons, making him the highest paid TV actor to date.

However, in 2005, Edwards desire to pursue directing and spend more time with his family saw him request to be written out of the series. His character died of brain cancer in what was very emotional for his fans.

"I had been in the series for eight years during which I did not spend as much time with my family as I had wanted, so leaving gave me an opportunity to see them more," says the star, now 64.

Edwards idea of spending time with his family other than moving to New York was to buy a jet and travel the world over with his family. Together with his family, he flew to 150 countries in 300 days. Kenya was one of the 30 countries he visited for four weeks. He fell in love with the country instantly. "The hospitality, the rich culture and the people are amazing," says the father of five.

When he returned to America, he met former athlete and founder of ShoeAfrica project. Edwards decided to embrace the project and is today its chairman.

ShoeAfrica was created in 1995 with the mission to help African communities through sports and education, creating unique health initiatives and promoting AIDS awareness. In its 13 years of existence, ShoeAfrica has organized six signature running events in Kenya and Tanzania and has distributed tens of thousands of pairs of running shoes.

This Saturday ShoeAfrica will host the first ever women's only peace run in Eldo- ree. The organizers say they expect 5,000 women to take part in the race, which will be flagged off by Prime Minister Raila Odinga. The race will celebrate a year since the end of the violence.

"Five thousand women running in the streets will form a yellow ribbon that will show the world that peace has truly returned to Kenya," says Toby Tanzer; a former athlete and founder of ShoeAfrica. After the race, there will be a football match that will feature the best women's team from Elders playing against a celebrity team made up of the PA, Anthony Edwards, Lorna Ekpakat, and Paul Tergat among others.

World half-marathon champion Lorna Ekpakat has been one of the ambassadors of the ShoeAfrica project and says: "I am very delighted that all these good things are happening in Kenya, and I just want to tell all my friends that we truly appreciate." Lorna now runs for Holland.

Edwards is active in the big screen. Last year, he appeared as SFPD Inspector Bill Armstrong in David Fincher's film, about the Zodiac Killer who terrorized San Francisco in the 1970s and 1980s.

Early this year, Edwards reprised his role of Dr Mark Green for the November 13 episode of ER's 10th and final season.

"Maybe we are building a hospital. Edwards can help us make an ER series on it," jokes Tanzer.

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