

PHILANTHROPY

Gift of hospital to Kenyan children

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

By TIM KAMUZU BANDA

For years, he made us all laugh as he warmed our hearts with his life-saving missions on 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 the logistics is 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 US\$125,000 (Sh9.8 million) towards the project. He is also receiving support from his former colleagues at actress Cameron Diaz and Manchester United striker Cristiano Ronaldo.

This project is being undertaken through an initiative called Shoe4Africa 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 big break came when he featured in the film *Top Gun* alongside Tom Cruise. Another film with Forest Whitaker (known for acting Idi Amin) paved the way for Edwards joining ER in the premier in 1994.

He stayed in the hospital series, screened on KTN 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 2002, Edwards desire to

US TV drama award winner Anthony Edwards (right) at a press conference in Nairobi yesterday. He is with Shoe4Africa organiser Toby Tanser. Photo/CHRIS OMOLLO

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 46.

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 30 countries in 310 days. Kenya was one of the 30 countries that 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 four.

When he returned to America, he met former athlete and founder of Shoe4Africa project. Edwards decided to embrace the project and is today its chairman.

Shoe4Africa 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, Shoe4Africa has organised six signature-racing events in Kenya and Tanzania and has distributed tens of thousand of pairs of running shoes.

This Saturday Shoe4Africa will host the first ever women's only peace run in Kibera. The organisers 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 slums will form a yellow ribbon that will show the world that peace

has truly returned to Kenya," says Toby Tanser, a former athlete and founder of Shoe4Africa. After the race, there will be a football match that will feature the best women's team from Kibera playing against a celebrity team made up of the PM, Anthony Edwards, Lorna Kiplagat, and Paul Tergat among others.

World half-marathon champion Lorna Kiplagat has been one of the ambassadors of the Shoe4Africa project and says: "I am very delighted that all these good things are happening in Kenya, and I just want to tell our friends that we truly appreciate." Lorna now runs for Holland.

Edwards is still active on the big screen. Last year he appeared as SFPD inspector Bill Armstrong in David Fincher's *Zodiac*, about the Zodiac Killer, the notorious serial killer who terrorised San Francisco in the 1960s and 1970s.

Early this year, Edwards reprised his role of Dr Greene for the November 13 episode of ER's 15th and final season.

"Maybe when we build the hospital, Edwards can help us make an ER series on it," jokes Tenser.

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