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# DAILY NATION

16 HOURS AGO

## Celebrities unite to build biggest children's public hospital in Africa

Renowned athletes and celebrities, including football icon Cristiano Ronaldo, have donated money to build Africa's biggest children's public health facility in Kenya.



Mr Toby Tanser (left), founder of Shoe4Africa, when he visited a construction site where he is building a children's hospital at the Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital in Eldoret on June 10. PHOTO | JARED NYATAYA NATION MEDIA GROUP

In Summary

- World Footballer of the Year Cristiano Ronaldo is among athletes and celebrities whose donations are helping build a hospital at the Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital in Eldoret under the Shoe4Africa charity founded by Toby Tanser

**ARTHUR SITUMA**

When World Footballer of the Year Cristiano Ronaldo steps onto the spanking new turf at the 41,000-seat, \$270 million Arena Amazonia Stadium in Manaus for Portugal's must-win World Cup match against USA at 1am Monday morning, Eldoret will be watching with a keen interest.

To have any hopes of progressing to the second round, Portugal, hammered 4-0 by Germany in their Brazil 2014 World Cup opening match, must floor the Americans, 2-1 conquerors of Ghana in their opening fixture, convincingly.

Eldoret has a soft spot for Ronaldo who unselfishly dedicated part of his mega earnings to help build Africa's biggest children's hospital in the Uasin Gishu County capital.

Ronaldo is among a number of celebrities rallied by American athlete Toby Tanser to raise funds for the hospital in Eldoret which is due for completion in December.

Besides making a financial contribution, the Portugal star donated some of his playing boots and jerseys to be auctioned with the money going towards Tanser's Shoe4Africa charity that is constructing the hospital on land donated by the Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital in Eldoret town. It is expected that when the project is completed, Ronaldo will pay a visit.

Other stars who have boosted the kitty include US television superstar Anthony Edwards, who acted as Dr Mark Greene in the popular television medical series, "ER" and movie star Natalie Portman.

Edwards has since visited Eldoret to have a look at the hospital project, arriving at the Eldoret International Airport in 2008 in his private jet and spending a week in the town, before paying a courtesy call at the Nation Centre and addressing a press conference in Nairobi.

Ironically, the idea of the hospital was mooted rather inadvertently and through a dramatic twist of events.

## **CALAMITY STRIKES**

When Tanser first landed in Kenya 20 years ago, his dream was to train hard and win easy, just like the Kenyan runners.

It's hardly surprising, therefore, that after a few years of training in Kenya, the average runner authored a book *Train Hard, Win Easy -- The Kenyan Way*, which has been quite a hit among the running community.

But Tanser's sojourn wasn't exactly smooth. In fact it was far from rosy as, right upon arrival in 1995, calamity struck.

"I lost my bags and I didn't know where to go or what to do," he told *Lifestyle* in an interview in Eldoret.

"I told the taxi driver to take me to Ngong where I knew top runners train."

The following day, Tanser went out for a run in his casual clothes as all his running gear got lost with his luggage.

“People thought I was a crazy *mzungu*, but, fortunately, I came across the Kenyan team training, and it included people like (former world marathon record holder and five times world cross country champion) Paul Tergat.”

That was the beginning of Tanser’s association with Kenya’s elite athletes.

But his fledgling running career did not last long.

A one-of-a-kind, all-round philanthropist, the rugged looking, long-haired lean vegetarian -- who could easily pass for an ordinary *mzungu* back packer on a low-budget safari -- Tanser has uplifted the lives of thousands through his philanthropic projects in the Rift Valley.

The most significant is the Shoe4Africa Children’s Hospital that he is building in Eldoret town and which, upon completion in December, will be the biggest public children’s hospital in Africa.

It will have a capacity of 75 beds, several operation theatres and children’s playing areas complete with modern toys.

The hospital is being constructed at a cost of \$10 million (Sh860 million) and is expected to be officially opened on December 14.

The Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital director, Dr John Kibosia, said the Shoe4Africa Hospital is expected to have traffic of between 200 and 300 children daily upon completion.

## **MACHETE ATTACK**

Shoe4Africa might sound a weird name for a hospital, but it bears huge, life-changing significance to Tanser.

It happens that when on holiday in Zanzibar soon after his first visit to Kenya, Tanser was attacked by two men as he relaxed on the beach.

“I managed to block the machete with my hand but suffered deep cuts on my right hand and head,” Tanser recalls.

“I passed out and when I regained my consciousness, I found one of the thugs had taken one of my running shoes and was struggling to get the second.

“He even pleaded with me to let him have the second shoe.”

That’s how the Shoe4Africa Foundation was born.

It actually stands for “shoes for Africa”, a project Tanser launched as soon as he recovered from the life threatening injuries and started collecting used shoes in Europe and USA, sending them to needy people in Africa.

At each year's New York Marathon, Tanser, a director of the marathon, collects thousands of running shoes from the competitors and ships them to Africa to distribute to upcoming athletes and the needy alike.

Besides the Zanzibar shoe incident, Tanser was also concerned by the lack of medical care in Africa.

"After the attack in Zanzibar, I struggled to get to hospital but when I got to one, there was nothing, just water and a bucket that was used to wash the blood off my head.

"I asked the nurse how I was, and she told me 'you are in pretty bad shape'. I could not get proper treatment until 11 days later when I got to Europe," recalls Tanser, who says this inspired him to consider doing something for African medicare.

His motivation grew even bigger after the 2008 post-election violence when he visited affected homes, including the infamous church at Kiambaa where over 30 people were burnt to death, and was told of how children suffered for lack of proper medicare.

"I am a product of a working public health system ... if I was born in Kenya I would probably be dead by now. I understand how important public health is," said Tanser.

The 45-year-old Tanser believes he has "11 lives". As an 11-year-old, he took a bad fall and broke several limbs but recovered well.

Then came the Zanzibar attack that left him with a metal plate fitted in his skull on the right side of his head. And just last year, Tanser was involved in another, near-fatal accident on Fifth Street in New York.

While cycling home, a car took a wrong turn and, at high speed, hit Tanser, catapulting him 18 feet into the air.

The impact left him with a fractured skull and he had more metal plates fitted, this time on the left side of his head.

"I'm a walking medical experiment," jokes Tanser who, save for a few random dizzy spells, has recovered remarkably well to carry on with the construction work at the children's hospital.

## **MICRO-CONTRIBUTIONS**

The 10-million-dollar budget for the hospital has been entirely from Tanser's personal fund-raising efforts through the Shoe4Africa Foundation.

"I started off by asking 15 of my richest friends to make donations," explains Tanser. Then during his presidential campaigns, [US President] Barack Obama always said micro-contributions is the best way to fund-raise and so I adopted this approach."

Besides the contributions, Tanser came up with innovative fund-raising ways, including

running from Mombasa to Mt Kilimanjaro in a self-coined “from the sea to the stars” challenge.

With a friend, Rodney Cutler, a celebrity hairdresser in New York City, and a fellow board member of the New York Road Runners Club, Tanser ran a distance of 65 km a day to the peak of the Kilimanjaro.

He raised \$134,311 (Sh11.5 million) from the approximately 600 kilometres run.

Shoe4Africa’s fund- raising initiatives received a major boost with the arrival of top global celebrities who endorsed Tanser’s efforts.

“Ronaldo agreed to be our ambassador and Edwards donated all his professional fees from his final episode of the “ER” TV series to the Shoe4Africa initiative,” Tanser told *Lifestyle*.

Edwards flew to Kenya in his private jet in 2008 to support the hospital project.

Tanser has also been running an annual Shoe4Africa women’s peace race in Iten to sensitise local women on his health and peace initiatives besides developing young, talented women runners.

Once such race was also held in Nyamira County.

Among the biggest supporters of the races and Tanser’s projects is Lornah Kiplagat, the Kenyan-born Dutch multiple world road running and cross-country champion from whose base at the High Altitude Training Centre in Iten Tanser launched his ambitious hospital project.

The self-proclaimed “Eldoret’s greatest beggar” appeals to the government to help equip the hospital once it is ready, adding that he will hand it over to the government to operate after fulfilling his dream of having it up and running.

“We need about Sh250 million to buy equipment for the hospital. We are fortunate that the Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital will provide the doctors and nurses who will serve at the hospital,” says Tanser.

After the opening of the hospital on December 14, Tanser hopes to celebrate by wedding Chelimo, the daughter of former Eldoret North MP William Morogo arap Saina in Eldoret.

“New York is short of beautiful women and that’s why I had to get my wife from Uasin Gishu County,” jokes Tanser as we conclude our interview on location at what will be one of the biggest philanthropic gestures the North Rift has ever seen.