

# THE LEAVEN

WWW.THELEAVEN.COM | NEWSPAPER OF THE ARCHDIOCESE OF KANSAS CITY IN KANSAS | VOL. 33, NO. 8 SEPTEMBER 23, 2011

## A little brother at last

### 'Pagan baby' inspires couple to build a school in Uganda

By Jill Ragar Esfeld  
Special to The Leaven

KANSAS CITY, Kan. — In 1953, Nancy Berrigan (nee Kovich) was an only child, who longed for a little brother or sister.

As a second-grader at St. John the Baptist School in Kansas City, Kan., she was thrilled when the Sisters who taught there said she could "adopt" a baby for five dollars.

The adoption was actually a sponsorship arranged through the Pontifical Association of the Holy Childhood. A \$5 donation allowed students to help support an infant — or "pagan baby" — in a Catholic mission area.

"So I saved up my little nickels and dimes and, when I turned it in, I thought Sister was actually going to give me a baby," she said.

Instead, Berrigan received an "adoption certificate" in acknowledgement of her donation.

"I was devastated," she recalled. "Mom said I cried and cried."

To this day, Berrigan remembers her feeling of betrayal — and her family remembers how long she whined about her missing baby.

"She said she was going to give me a baby, and she gave me a piece of paper!" was all Berrigan could say.

#### Finding Brother John

Berrigan went on to Bishop Ward High School in Kansas City, Kan., and then Creighton Nursing School in Omaha, Neb., where she met her husband Paul.

The couple eventually settled in St. Fabian Parish in Farmington Hills, Mich., where



Rich Sambol, Bishop Ward High School class of '64, leads some young Ugandans in a dance.

Paul and Nancy Berrigan break ground on a new science and learning center at John Paul School in Uganda. The couple was instrumental in building the school (below) and have recruited some Bishop Ward classmates to help support the school financially.

they raised two daughters.

On Mission Sunday in 2005, when Msgr. John Kauta from Uganda, East Africa, visited St. Fabian Church to speak about the needs of the poor in his country, the opening lines of his homily hit a nerve.

"How many of you know about pagan babies?" he asked.

Berrigan said she almost fell out of her pew.

"Well, boy, my hand shot right up there because I knew all about pagan babies," Berrigan said with a laugh.

As luck would have it, Berrigan's parents were there as well. On hearing the celebrant's opening words, her



father just smiled and shook his head as if to say, "Oh, boy." But no one expected what happened next.

Msgr. Kauta opened his

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# Ward alumni help support Ugandan school

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arms wide, looked out over the congregation as if directly at Berrigan, and said, "Mama, I'm home!"

His words confused her, but she felt an immediate connection nevertheless. Shocked and deeply moved, she turned to her father and said, "Dad, that's my brother! I've been looking for him all these years. I finally found my pagan baby brother!"

"He said he actually was a product of the pagan baby campaign," she said.

As a child, Msgr. Kauta was helped by the Pontifical Association of the Holy Childhood. Eventually, he converted to Catholicism, and later decided to become a priest.

"So he really touched me just by that — he had my attention," Berrigan said.

"He went on to tell us all about the needs of the people [in his country]," she added. "He was really dynamic, and so Paul and I both were touched by him."

The couple was so moved by his presentation that, after Mass, they stopped to introduce themselves to the priest and asked to meet with him.

Little did they know that meeting would eventually lead them to Uganda, East Africa, where they would build a Catholic school in remote Chelekura — a place that, up until that moment, Berrigan didn't even know existed.

## Building a school

At their meeting, Msgr. Kauta told the Berrigans of the great need for schools in Uganda and how inexpensively one could be built.

"Can you really build a school for this amount of money?" Berrigan's husband asked.

It would be a very basic school with mud walls, Msgr. Kauta answered. But then he quoted the couple a different figure — the amount required to build a "really wonderful" school.

Both felt a strong calling to help.

"So we built a really wonderful school," said Berrigan. "And it's just growing. We've come a long way since 2005 when we first met him."

Indeed, the Berrigans raised funds to build a school, dormitory and science center in Chelekura, which has no electricity or running water, but hundreds of children eager to learn.

They named the school John Paul Secondary School after their fathers — John Kovich and Paul Berrigan Sr. — to honor how hard their parents worked to put them through Catholic schools.

"Our first trip [to Chelekura] was in 2007, when we went for the dedication of the school," said Berrigan.

Today Berrigan is convinced she was led by the Holy Spirit to meet Msgr. Kauta. She believes he really is her pagan baby brother.

"Yes, I think he is," she said. "Because now he is my brother, that's what I call him — Brother John."

Two years after the school was com-



Students wait for class to begin at John Paul Secondary School. With the help of the Berrigans and the Bishop Ward's class of '64, the school is a top-notch facility in Chelekura, Uganda.

Nancy receives a warm welcome from the children at John Paul School during a recent visit.

pleted, when funds were needed to expand the school's facilities, Berrigan was blessed again to receive the help of some old friends.

## Recruiting the class of '64

Vicki Wewers has been a close friend to Berrigan since the two graduated from Ward and went off to nursing school together.

They've stayed in touch through phone conversations and traditional Christmas letters.

The Berrigans are avid travelers and often recount trips in their Christmas correspondence. But the year they wrote that they'd "built a school in East Africa," Wewers was more than a little surprised.

"I was, like, 'What? That's just crazy; I'm going to have to talk to her about that,'" she said.

Wewers did talk to Berrigan in 2009, when Bishop Ward's class of '64 had its 45th reunion.

Several alumni had gathered for breakfast when Wewers asked Berrigan about the school.

"Cathy [Stone] and I both were rolling on the floor when she told the funny story about the pagan baby," recalled Wewers.

It didn't take long for Bishop Ward alumni to decide they wanted to help the Berrigans continue their mission.

Wewers, with the help of former classmates Bob Wewers, Stone and Rich Sambol, drafted a letter to fellow alumni saying, "We have some extraordinary people in our class who have done the most won-



derful thing in Africa."

The response was immediate and generous. The Berrigans received enough donations from their classmates to help fund a school library.

"They put all the money they got from Ward toward the library," said Wewers. "They're going to put a dedication plaque up there thanking the Bishop Ward class of '64."

Sambol, whose history with Berrigan goes all the way back to kindergarten, went beyond donating: He accompanied the Berrigans on a trip to Chelekura.

"The kids were something else," he said. "They're poor — there's no question about that — but they really have an eagerness to learn, and they're so friendly."

"They want to slap hands and they smile at you and some of them stare at you — but those eyes, those big brown eyes, kind of go right through to your soul."

## Celebrating friends and faith

The Berrigans came back to Kansas City recently for a special celebration. Members of Bishop Ward's class of '64

If you'd like to learn more about the school Paul and Nancy Berrigan built in Uganda, or make a donation, visit their website: <http://www.johnpaulschool.com>.

were all turning 65, so they threw themselves a birthday party.

The occasion gave Berrigan a chance to personally thank her classmates for their contributions and to reflect on growing up Catholic in Kansas City, Kan.

"Sometimes, when you're in school, you don't realize the impact that things you are instilled with will have on you later in life," she said. "But believe me; I know now what it means to have faith."

When things get tough, Berrigan says she turns to the Holy Spirit.

"All I have to do is say, 'You've got to guide me, you've got to lead me,'" she said. "And you know what? If you can trust and not be afraid, it works."

"And I love the fact that Bishop Ward is still instilling those same beliefs in its students today."