

NEWS

NATIONAL FRATERNITY
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IN THE UNITED STATES

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SECULAR FRANCISCAN FROM WAUSAU, WI HONORED **Franciscan Peace Award Goes to African Water Project Leader**

Don Ryder, a Secular Franciscan who spearheaded a life-saving water project during a drought in Africa, received the National Peace Award from the U.S. Secular Franciscan Order during its annual chapter held Oct. 20-25 in Albuquerque, NM.

Ryder, who is director of organizational development and safety for the city of **Wausau, WI**, co-leads the water project with Romey Wagner, also of Wausau. They raise funds and coordinate the digging of wells to provide clean, fresh water for Maasai tribes in Kenya.

"The multi-year drought was devastating herds of cattle and the people whose livelihood depended on the livestock," noted Ken Beattie, SFO, minister of Wisconsin's La Verna Secular Franciscan Region who nominated Ryder for the award. "The women had to travel up to 15 miles one way to find water in a dirty stream or water hole, and the men likewise had to drive their cattle for miles to find water. It was very disruptive to tribal and family life, and contributed to disease and death. The water wells have allowed the people to be stationary and have a safer community. And the woman, especially, have been saved from rape and murder while traveling by foot to a distant source of water."

Peace Award Chair Deacon Tom Bello, SFO (of **McLean, VA**) added: "As Franciscans we all are called to be instruments of peace, so likewise we want to recognize and support individuals whose work impacts and contributes to peace and justice in their communities or their nation or around the world."

The award comes with a St. Francis trophy and a \$2,000 prize.

Ryder said he was humbled by the honor, but that it really belonged to everyone involved in the project. The first well, he said, cost \$65,000. They had to dig down 400 feet to find fresh water. Powered by a diesel engine, the well is now providing clean water for between 4,000 and 5,000 Maasai and 100,000 head of cattle, he said.

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A second well was dug and went on line this month, powered by a huge windmill, he said. It cost about \$45,000. The well is already providing running water for a school, and they are in the process of laying pipe to a dispensary. "Our hope is that once the dispensary has running water, it will be upgraded to a hospital," Ryder said.

Ryder and his wife, Yvonne, have a long history of working with the poor and marginalized, Deacon Bello said. Before moving to Wisconsin, they volunteered at an operation that ran a soup kitchen, temporary shelter and clinics. Then in Wisconsin, they volunteered with church groups that visited Jamaica to help with construction projects and food and clothing. While in Jamaica, Ryder met a missionary priest from Kenya, who suggested that he might want to visit his home country. That led to volunteering to help build a church and repair homes in Kenya, working with the Catholic diocese. While there he had the opportunity to visit a Maasai village. After returning to the United States, Ryder received an email from the Vatican describing the worsening drought. He emailed a contact in Kenya, who confirmed that the Maasai were particularly hard hit.

The thought kept coming to him that he should do something, he said, but he would dismiss it, thinking, who am I, what can I do? Finally, after praying about it for several days, he opened the Bible and his finger fell to a passage in the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus says, "I was thirsty and you gave me drink."

"Okay, God, I'll see what I can do, but I'm putting it in your hands," he recalled saying. "This is your project. I expect you to open the doors."

He told his parish priest about it, who said the parish would help. He told Secular Franciscans, and they jumped on board. His co-leader, Romey Wagner, stepped up. Soon they were getting speaking engagements to schools, churches, Rotary Clubs. A young couple donated \$2,000. School children collected coins. Donations started pouring in from coast to coast, he said.

And the future? "As my co-leader likes to say, we'll always be digging a new well."

He added that anyone interested in donating to the Kenyan water project may do so through the Community Foundation of North Central Wisconsin (www.cfoncw.org). His fraternity, St. James Fraternity in Wausau, also maintains a fund for the project.

The annual Peace Award was revived in 2007 after a lapse of several years. The 2007 award recognized the work of Dr. Tony Lazzara, an American physician and Secular Franciscan who operates a clinic and shelter for ailing children in Peru. The 2008 award honored Marie Dennis, a Secular Franciscan who directs the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns and who is immersed in advocating on behalf of people marginalized by society, poverty, abuse, war, violence, and human trafficking.

Other previous recipients included, among others, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

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