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Dr. Angelo D'Agostino: A Jesuit's Journey from Atwell's Avenue to Africa

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When **DR. ANGELO D'AGOSTINO**, a Jesuit priest, founded a children's home in Kenya in 1992 for three orphans who tested HIV-positive, he called it Nyumbani – home in Swahili. The orphans called him "Faza."

For Dr. D'Agostino, there was no place like home, whether in his native Rhode Island or his adopted homeland of Kenya. When he died of a cardiac arrest in a Nairobi hospital in 2006, he was 80 years young. His brother, Dr. Joseph D'Agostino of Fairfax, Va., later shared memories of their childhood to *The Washington Post*.

Their parents, Luigi and Julia D'Agostino, were Italian immigrants. Luigi was a construction worker who rebuilt an Atwell's Avenue barn in the Mount Pleasant section of Providence into a cottage for his six children. Angelo, who suffered from severe asthma, liked to build model airplanes and grow vegetables and flowers in the backyard.

His only regret about his adopted homeland of Kenya was that "he couldn't grow good tomatoes over there. Being a good Italian, that was important to him," his brother recalled in the *Post*.

Angelo graduated from La Salle Academy, St. Michael's College in Vermont, and Tufts University School of Medicine, class of 1949. He then interned for a year at Rhode Island Hospital, and completed a urology residency in Boston.

During the Korean conflict, Dr. D'Agostino joined the Air Force and served as chief of urology at Bolling Air Force Base in Washington, DC. After completing his service in 1955, he attended a Jesuit retreat, and found his second calling. He joined the Society of Jesus and was ordained a priest 11 years later, in 1966.

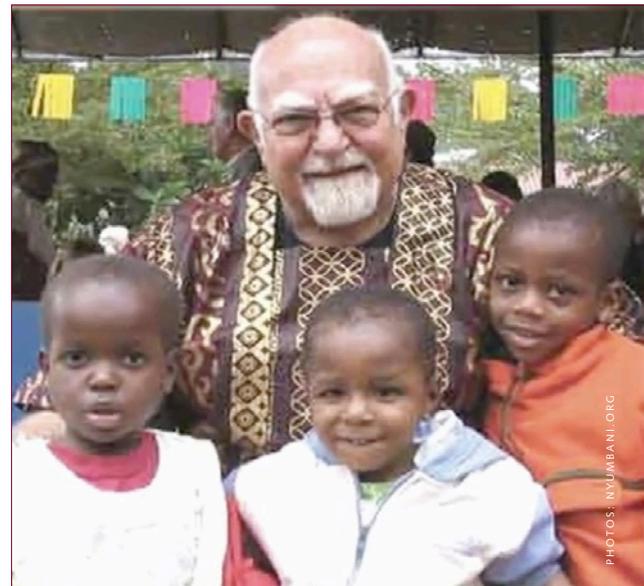
During this time, he switched his subspecialty, and studied psychiatry. For several years, he taught psychiatry at the George Washington University Hospital, and served as chief of its inpatient service.

His overseas pastoral work began in 1978, when the Jesuit order sent him to Thailand to set up refugee camps, and then later to coordinate the Jesuit Refugee Service Center in Africa based in Nairobi in 1981 for the thousands of refugees displaced from sub-Saharan Africa.

This visit to Kenya resonated with him and in his early 60s, he decided to make Kenya his home. Dr. D'Agostino opened a private practice in psychiatry and psychoanalysis in Nairobi in 1987, and saw patients 20 hours a week.

He also served on the board of an orphanage, and when the board did not take him up on his suggestion to open a separate facility for the throngs of children who tested HIV-positive, he did it himself. At that time, there were more than a million orphans in Nairobi, whose parents had died of AIDS.

Since its founding in 1992, Nyumbani has grown into a non-profit organization which supports the children's home, an



Father D'Ag, as Dr. Angelo D'Agostino was known to most, in Kenya at the Nyumbani home and village he founded for HIV-positive orphans.

advanced diagnostic laboratory, a community outreach program providing services to more than 2,000 HIV-positive children and their families, and a self-sustaining village where 1,000 orphans and elders form blended families.

In 2001, Nyumbani became the first place in Africa to import deeply discounted AIDS drugs under an Indian pharmaceutical company's program to make such drugs more affordable.

"I am sick and tired of doing funerals," Dr. D'Agostino told the *Post*, explaining why he was willing to defy national regulations and patent rules to buy cheaper generics. He also sued the Kenyan government for its policy of banning HIV-positive children from public schools and eventually won that suit in 2004.

He received numerous humanitarian awards during his lifetime and in 2009 was inducted into the R.I. Heritage Hall of Fame.

A thousand people, including the president of Kenya and a Vatican representative, attended his funeral in Kenya. At the burial, the Nyumbani orphans dropped fistfuls of dirt on his coffin – as they had done with him at the funerals of so many children who had died of AIDS – in a final farewell to their "Faza." ❖

