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## From the archives: Rev. Daniel Kenney says he 'spent the first half of my life raising hell,' and 'second half trying to lower heaven'

By Michael Kelly World-Herald staff writer  
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Pictured in the 1988 Creighton Prep Yearbook, Daniel Kenney leads a prayer on retreat.

1988 CREIGHTON PREP YEARBOOK

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The Rev. Daniel Kenney is a Jesuit priest and recovering alcoholic.

"I spent the first half of my life raising hell, " he said. "I've spent the second half trying to lower heaven."

He tries to raise standards in Nairobi, Kenya, where he has served for six years. Kenney works to combat alcoholism and HIV/AIDS. He calls them the horses that pull the wagon of poverty.

Kenney is widely known in Omaha, where he taught at Creighton Prep. In 1968, he founded Operation Others. Today it provides food to about 1,200 families at Christmas.

A quarter-century ago, he started the Buford Foundation — named after a monkey. Not a real one, but a hand puppet.

Whether in East Africa or west Omaha, the priest never goes anywhere without Buford. Or, as he puts it, "I go wherever Buford goes."

People call him "the monkey priest." If he headed a diocese, he jokes, he would be "the baboon bishop."

The nonprofit Buford Foundation, run by a volunteer board, each summer sends 45 to 60 junior high children to camps in Wyoming. It's all paid for by donations. Even the campsites — one near the Grand Tetons — were gifts.

"Seeing that area, as beautiful as God ever made, we thought young people would discover their own beauty, " Kenney said. "They learn to ask new and better questions."

The priest saw old friends Saturday night at a \$50-per-plate dinner at Prep. The event raised money for the foundation and Operation Others.

Dan Kenney grew up in Milwaukee in a family ravaged by alcoholism. Eight aunts and uncles died of alcohol-related conditions. His two siblings became alcoholics, too.

In the Sunday Nation, an English-language newspaper in Kenya, Kenney was featured this year on a magazine cover. The headline: "Why I Hate the Bottle: Father Dan Kenney's Struggle Against Alcoholism."

Though he hasn't drunk alcohol for 25 years, he said, he suffered and hurt others when he drank.

In Kenya, he said, alcohol abuse is the "silent partner" in the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Kenney is founding trustee of the Raphaelites, dedicated to serving alcoholics and other addicts in East Africa. The priest will return to Kenya on Sept. 12 to oversee a rehabilitation center scheduled to open soon.

Amid all the suffering in villages and slums, he walks with Buford, making people smile.

The name "Buford" doesn't refer to anything special. But the origin of Buford was very special.

In 1968, a Marian High School senior, Kathy Gregory, was dying of cancer. She and the priest had talked about happy people being those who bring happiness to others.

One day she surprised him, saying she had figured out how to make a lot of people happy — she presented him a monkey puppet.

He has worn out 18 monkey puppets over the years, but still has the original that the young woman gave him two months before her death.

The two worst words, Kenney said, are "poor me." He has preached that over the years, even in Kenya. In Swahili, it is "maskini mihi."

Kathy Gregory inspired him. He often mentions her name when telling kids and adults they must overcome the "poor me" syndrome and find happiness in helping others.

He loves Kenya and his work there, even though it's discouraging. In a nation of 30 million, he said, between 2 million and 4 million are alcoholics and 500 die daily of AIDS.

"There are lonely times when I tend to think 'poor me.' Then I look at the monkey and I think, 'Kathy sure didn't give in to the poor-me syndrome.' "

#### MORE INFORMATION



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