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Deaf Students Find Hope For Normalcy at Chilhowee

By Tom Minter

SEYMOUR, Tenn. (BP)--It took almost 18 years and a magazine article to bring Peter Mwitta, 33, of Tanzania to Harrison-Chilhowee Baptist Academy here and its college preparatory program for the deaf.

Mwitta, a native of Tarime--near Lake Victoria in Northern Tanzania was 15 and in his fourth year of school when illness took his hearing. His family was unable to help him financially in schooling. No training program to prepare him for a vocation nor professional guidance were available.

But the lad continued his struggle to learn. When Mwitta lost his hearing, Chilhowee --a high school owned-operated by the Tennessee Baptist Convention--had not even begun its deaf student college prep program, still one of few such high school programs in the country. The project was begun in 1971 as a pilot venture to incorporate college capable deaf high school students into class settings and experiences with the normally hearing.

Eighteen years of travel, searching, study and work brought Mwitta to Dar es Salaam, the Tanzanian capital. He discovered Chilhowee Academy in 1973, he said, in a European edition of Newsweek. At the time he was a trainee circulation assistant for Jenga magazine.

The article, he recalled, contained a positive statement about Chilhowee made by Michael Mwangi Ndurmo, a student from Kenya who entered the school's deaf program in 1972.

Mwitta's determination found a way through the National Development Corporation of Tanzania, which sent him to the United States to the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains, near Knoxville, to complete his school education. He entered the Academy in September 1975.

Like other deaf students in the school, Mwitta performs in the classroom on a par with hearing students--exams and all. To facilitate communications between hearing and non-hearing, a manual communications course is taught each term, with most faculty members and students participating.

"Coaches, teachers, students, dorm counselors--everyone has learned in one degree or another to communicate with our deaf students," says Academy President Hubert B. Smothers, himself a Chilhowee graduate. "It has been trying at times but always a heartwarming experience in orienting ourselves to the non-hearing world."

Chilhowee, founded in 1880 as a college preparatory school, came under the auspices of the Tennessee Baptist Convention in 1932. Smothers believes the school's college prep program for deaf students was the first of its kind in the country and was a primary reason for the magazine article that caught Mwitta's attention.

The program was begun under Smother's leadership and under the expert eye of William E. Davis, superintendent of the Tennessee School for the Deaf in Knoxville who was then also minister to the deaf for First Baptist Church, Knoxville.

Davis served as consultant and director until the Chilhowee venture was on its feet. He also taught the initial manual communications course at Chilhowee--the first such state-approved course on a high school level in Tennessee, Smothers notes.

Deaf students are integrated into the curriculum and classroom through interpreter-tutors and professional counseling. In turn, Smother says, normally hearing students are sensitized to the special need of non-hearing persons.

Since the program's beginning, 20 deaf students have been admitted. So far, 10 have been graduated. Of these, nine have entered the college of their choice. From the impetus of Chilhowee's program, Maryville (Tenn.) College and Dallas (Tex.) Baptist College have begun similar efforts for the deaf, Smothers says.

The Chilhowee president and his colleagues laud the achievements of the school's deaf students and graduates.

For example, Roy Blaylock, president of the Class of 1975, came to Chilhowee as a sophomore from Memphis, Tenn. He soon won a number of elected posts at the school.

As a junior, Blaylock represented the Academy at Tennessee Boys State and was later elected vice president of Boys Nation in Washington, S.C. This fall he entered a college of normally hearing students.

Another of five deaf graduates in June 1975 was John D. Bloskas, Jr., whose father is vice president for public relations, Southern Baptist Annuity Board, Dallas.

"I think it helped my son mature and get along with hearing people more. He liked the Chilhowee program real well," John, Sr., says. The younger Bloskas is enrolled at Dallas Baptist College, which provides classroom interpreters for the non-hearing.

One of Chilhowee's first deaf graduates was Gary Shoemaker of Satsuma, Ala., now a student at Mobile (Ala.) Baptist College and working with the deaf at Dauphine Way Baptist Church in Mobile.

The deaf graduates' successes point to an important aspect of the Chilhowee concept, Smothers contends. That is, Chilhowee deaf students participate in all phases of the school's life, including athletics, school newspaper, social events, clubs, chapel and others. Most worship at First Baptist Church, Knoxville, which has a ministry to the deaf.

Most students in the Chilhowee program have experienced dramatic, positive changes, registering jumps forward in reading ability and language skills, also in marked adjustment to the hearing world, Smothers cites.

"Where before deaf students thought primarily of attending only Gallaudet College in Washington, D.C., an excellent school for the deaf," he says, "now other avenues are open to our deaf graduates."

The school's program for the deaf is directed by Jim Barnes, dean of students, backed by three staff interpreter-tutors and counselors. A total communications approach is stressed, including utilization of any hearing ability, lip reading, finger spelling, signs and other visual aids.

Chilhowee does not compete with other schools for the deaf, but, rather, Smothers stresses the rarity of programs for college capable non-hearing students. He is pleased with the Chilhowee program's success, thus far.

For Mwitta, Blaylock, Bloskas, Shoemaker and other nonhearing students, the program has changed their lives. Their performance and that of others in the Chilhowee program are proof of its potential, Smothers believes.

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(BP) Photo mailed to Baptist state papers; others on request

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Kans.-Neb. Baptists Against
U. N. Action; Plan To Move

TOPEKA, Kan. (BP)--The Kansas-Nebraska Convention of Southern Baptists passed a resolution here disagreeing with the action of the United Nations General Assembly equating zionism to racism and adopted a proposal to start a building campaign for a state convention office building in Topeka.

The convention also adopted its first budget topping \$1 million and re-elected Luther Berry, pastor of Pleasantview Baptist Church, Derby, Kan., as president.

The zionism statement, disagreeing with the U. N. General Assembly's stance, requested Baptists in the two states "to communicate with their representatives in both houses of Congress to express concern about the matter."

The fund campaign would raise \$520,000 to erect the office building at a site just off Interstate 70 in West Topeka, which is already under contract. The land would cost \$51,000, which will be raised by sale of the two-state convention's present office building in Wichita, Kan.

The proposal, as accepted by the registered messengers, called for asking churches affiliated with the convention to pledge \$8.50 per resident member to be paid over the next three years.

A target date of Feb. 15, 1976, was set for receiving pledges and contributions from the churches. At that time, the executive committee of the convention's executive board will decide whether or not to continue with construction plans or postpone the action and restudy the situation.

The 1974 convention had previously voted to sell the building in Wichita and "look with favor to moving to Topeka." About two-thirds of the Wichita building was leased to other tenants.

The proposal to move is based on a demographic survey which revealed that 72 percent of the population in the two states, 85 percent of the Southern Baptist churches and 92 percent of the Southern Baptist membership live in a 150-mile radius of Topeka.

The total budget for 1976 was set at \$1,135,000, with \$756,200 of that amount to come from Kansas-Nebraska churches through the convention's state Cooperative Program unified budget. Twenty percent of the Cooperative Program figure will go to Southern Baptist Convention causes through the SBC's national Cooperative Program. The balance of the \$1.1 million budget will come from such sources as the SBC Home Mission and Sunday School Boards.

The 1976 convention will be Nov. 9-11, at First Baptist Church, Wichita, Kan.

Alabama Approves \$9.2 Million
Budget, Retirement Ministry

HUNTSVILLE, Ala. (BP)--Registered "messengers" to the 153rd annual meeting of the Alabama Baptist State Convention here approved a record budget of \$9.2 million, approved the establishment of a retirement home ministry and signed a \$1.7 million contract for a year-round conference center at its Shocco Springs Baptist Assembly property.

Messengers also passed a resolution urging more people to become sponsors of Vietnam refugees, commended churches, their members and associations who "have been instrumental in providing friendship, food, counsel and shelter." The convention also commended the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board for providing information concerning the resettlement of refugees.

Other business included election of Dan Ireland, pastor of Jackson Way Baptist Church, Huntsville, as convention president and a refusal by messengers to amend a bylaw that would have weakened the authority of trustees of Alabama Baptist agencies and institutions.

Additionally messengers heard reports from its two colleges and one university concerning record enrolments and were told that baptisms in convention churches were expected to exceed 30,000 for 1975.

Although there was some opposition, messengers approved a committee recommendation to inaugurate a retirement home ministry, to elect a board of trustees for the program and provide \$50,000 for the first year of operation.

Opposition was led primarily by Mrs. William Byrd, an executive board member, who claimed federal intervention would cripple such a program.

Amendment to the retirement ministry proposal placed the responsibility for funding the first year of operation on the convention's administration committee.

The 1976 operating budget includes a 35 percent allocation to Southern Baptist national causes through its Cooperative Program unified budget. And messengers gave approval for 51 percent, \$88,983 of its 1975 budget surplus to go to the national Cooperative Program.

A proposed bylaw change that would have affected the work of trustees of the Alabama convention agencies and institutions was required convention "sanction" for the sale, lease and rental of property before trustees of an agency or institution of the state convention could approve it. The proposed change would have

The convention announced plans for a massive Bicentennial climax to its 1976 annual meeting, Nov. 16-17, in Birmingham. An invitation to President Gerald Ford was extended by a committee of convention officials.

Ireland's election as president of the Alabama convention marks the first time a Huntsville pastor has been named to the post in 153 years, although Alabama Baptist work began in the Huntsville area.

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CORRECTION

In line one of paragraph four, in Baptist Press story of 11/18/75, headlined, "Michigan Baptists Urge Hunger Offering at SBC Meet," change "Baptist State Convention of Maryland" to read "Baptist State Convention of Michigan."

Thanks--Baptist Press