



by Jerry Hicks

Spreading hope, one bag at a time

This is a column about Africa, a big red bag and a remarkable woman from Laguna Beach. But let me start by introducing the supporting character.

The first time I met U.S. District Judge David O. Carter, in the 1980s, he was doing a waltz down the wide second floor hallway of the Orange County Courthouse. He was a deputy district attorney then. A colleague of his down the hall was coming to see how Carter's court hearing had gone. The waltz was to signal to his co-worker that their side had won. I would learn over the next two decades covering his career—as prosecutor, Superior Court judge and federal judge—that Carter, a highly decorated Marine who was wounded during the Vietnam War, does everything with passion.



Left: Mary Ellen and Judge David O. Carter in Malawi, Africa.
Right: Children of Malawi.

Carter was at his most passionate when he made one truly bonheaded blunder—running for Congress in 1985 against the firmly entrenched Republican incumbent, Robert K. Dornan. He believed not only that Dornan was bad for the country, but that local Democrats needed new leadership. On Election Day, Dornan stomped on Carter like he was nothing more than an annoying bug. But that's OK, Carter says now. It was just a few elections later that Democrat Loretta Sanchez did eliminate Dornan from

Congress. And Carter likes to joke with her, "I softened him up for you."

He will argue that run for Congress was probably the most important move he ever made—because it was during that campaign that he met his second wife, Mary Ellen. She signed up to walk precincts door-to-door with a friend, and discovered Carter was scheduled to walk with them.

"You get to know a person pretty well when you spend all day walking with him," Mary Ellen says.

They were married two years later.

TARGET: AFRICA

Which brings me to my lead character. With the judge busy working in court, it was Mary Ellen who played the major role of blending their two families together so well, Carter says. The judge had four children and she had two. Then they took in another young man to make their offspring total seven. Not that she wasn't busy enough; she was an educator who specialized in career counseling (and now is affiliated with Golden West College).

Now, with the children grown and spread all over the world pursuing their own careers, Mary Ellen has been more free to travel with the judge on his business trips. And does he ever keep a hectic schedule.

Though he sits on the bench in Orange County, Carter also has specialized in teaching other judges, so he is constantly being borrowed by the State Department, or Justice, or Treasury, for out-of-country judicial reform assignments. Carter doesn't get the glamour trips, like Paris or Rome. Where he's provided legal help are places like Bosnia, the Philippines and Africa. And in-country, Carter has also made a dozen-plus trips to Idaho, where they're desperately short of federal judges.

Mary Ellen joins him when her own schedule permits. Which brings us to the big red bag.

The judge's assignment last August was Malawi. In planning their trip, Mary Ellen learned through the Internet just how poor that African country really was. So she headed to Target to buy the biggest bag she

could find. Then she started aisle shopping at Costco, picking up items to fill her bag—pencils, notebooks, crayons, rulers and small medical supplies, such as Band-Aids, plastic gloves, thermometers, gauze and cotton balls.

She returned to the Internet to seek help on what she should do with it all. Her research led her to Jeff Holmes, who did mission work out of a Presbyterian church in San Diego County. Small world: Holmes used to be their children's youth minister. He gave her some critical advice: Don't just turn your stuff over to some official; it might end up on the black market. Take it to your destination yourself.

Just try to picture this: The judge is headed to Malawi to work. The Carters both have two full bags of luggage to last them for a 10-day stay. And now his wife wants to add this big red bag—so overloaded that it takes both of them to carry it. And she doesn't even know what she's going to do with it when she gets there—a place where she's never been. I know most husbands' shocked reaction: *Just send that bag to some social group. We won't have time for all this.* But Judge Carter just smiles.

"This really came as no surprise to me, because I know Mary Ellen," he says. "This just fits with who she is."

At customs in Johannesburg, the overloaded red bag fell apart at the seams and had to be patched up. And at customs in Malawi, Mary Ellen found herself facing big trouble: People don't bring in a bag like this, skeptical officials told her, unless they're working the black market. Fortunately, a Malawian woman she'd befriended on the plane helped smooth out their concerns and got her through customs there.

Their destination was a modern, Italian-owned villa at Mongochi, where official guests and their families always stayed. But first, Mary Ellen told their driver, "Take me to the nearest orphanage."

With no idea what to expect, the Carters were amazed at what unfolded. Dozens of orphan children eagerly surrounded them. The big red bag was like a great Christmas.

"A single sheet of paper was like a major gift for these children," the judge says. "And here was Mary Ellen turning over to them whole notebooks. The response was just incredible."

The children stood in awe as the judge

showed them on a map where California was, and how far it was from them. They leapt joyously when the bag was opened and these precious Costco-purchased items were passed out.

The drive through the countryside was shocking. The people lived in hovels, the worst of poverty conditions. AIDS and malaria are great killers in Malawi. The average life expectancy is under 37. Mary Ellen took a picture of a woman carrying her basket on her head, as was the custom. When she gave the woman the Malawian equivalent of \$3, to thank her, "You would have thought I had given her \$100,000. She and her daughter were just stunned."

The next stop was a well-worn medical center. The staff overwhelmed them with gratitude for the supplies. They politely requested even the torn red bag itself; they wanted it to transport AIDS children. Later, the Carters took the last of their goods to a Mongochi school, where the reaction was even more enthusiastic. The students, who had no desks and zero supplies, couldn't believe their good fortune. Mary Ellen made friends with the head of the school, Sarah Teppero. She now sends the school a box of goods every month—99 Cent stores are real bargain shops for supplies, Mary Ellen has learned.

Teppero has since written back that Mary Ellen hasn't just changed a school, she has changed a village. Thanks to these supplies, children who had never been to school were now attending, and many whose attendance had been poor were now coming with regularity.

Understand, Mary Ellen never set out to change a village. She was just one person with one red bag, thinking, "Well, maybe this will help somebody, since we're going there anyway."

"It is so humbling an experience," she says. "You think, 'What can I do? I'm just one person.' And then you see, . . . yes, one person *can* make a difference."

WRAP UP

Mary Ellen did not seek attention for herself or her African endeavor. She and the judge were both surprised I had learned about it, and sought them out. But they talked about it with an ease that tells you it has greatly enriched their lives. Now the judge is caught up in what his wife has started. Both vow to make this an ongoing commitment.

Mary Ellen says that a Margaret Mead quote has since become special to her: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

Federal judges, by necessity, must guard their personal lives, so I can't pass along a Carter contact. But if you'd like to send a similar package—one where you know that every single dollar of your effort will go directly to the children—use my e-mail at the bottom of this column. I'll reach them for you.

By the time you read this, the Carters will have made their second trip to Malawi—to a different village, this time with an even bigger, sturdier bag. Mary Ellen has forewarned the judge he will return home leaving everything behind, even his shoes. An added bonus: Some of the Carters' friends are now sending their own packages.

Maybe some of you can change a village of your own. OC

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