



**Dorris and Michael Fortson of Temple helped start a baby rescue center called Neema House in East Africa.**



# Love in action

## Temple couple builds beacon of hope at Neema House

Story by FRED AFFLERBACH

Photos by JULIE NABOURS

and contributed by The Fortsons

**A**n African proverb maintains it takes a village to raise a child. But what if the village itself needs rescuing? What if the village has no clean water, no opportunity for employment, no schools, no way to break the chains of poverty that have shackled generations. In the East African republic of Tanzania, one of every 16 children is an orphaned child, according to UNICEF. Three million orphans live in Tanzania today.

So who saves these children when the proverbial village can't?

A retired couple from Temple, Michael and Dorris Fortson, have built a beacon of hope and love at a baby rescue center called Neema House. Neema House sits on a hillside on the outskirts of Arusha, a Tanzanian city of 400,000 known as the gateway to Mount Kilimanjaro. Paid staff and volunteers work around the clock bathing, feeding, holding and reading to about 48 orphans, all under age 4. Six new babies have moved into Neema House in just the last three months, five of them under five pounds. Neema House co-founder and executive director Michael Fortson said since he first visited Tanzania in the 1960s, problems with urban poverty and the AIDS virus have ravaged families, leaving many mothers to feel they have one choice — abandon their babies.

"People do abandon babies in America, but not like they do in Tanzania," Fortson, 73, said. "It's such a frequent thing in Tanzania you cannot imagine. We've had roadside babies. Babies left in hotels. Babies left on front porches. Babies left in gravel pits. Babies left in latrines. Babies left at the

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Dorris Fortson, center, visits with the mother and grandmother of a set of triplets, two girls and one boy. The boy, Frankie (not pictured) was taken in by Neema House because of a disability and will be raised by volunteers and staff.





A Masai family in Arusha, Tanzania.



Dorris Fortson holds one of the many children who live at Neema House.

bus station.” The smallest baby Neema House saved so far weighed 1.65 pounds. Last February, a 2-month-old baby girl weighing five pounds named Emron moved into Neema House. Her mother died from complications of the AIDS virus.

#### NEEMA: THE SWAHILI WORD FOR GRACE

Before her recent trip to Neema House, Dr. Sue Hamby of Temple had visited Africa twice. A typical tourist, she went on a safari. But in March, as a Neema House board of directors member, she immersed herself into the daily life of 48 African babies, crying, screaming and laughing under one roof. Hamby held one special child, named after her late son, Rusty. “These kids are just so precious. You see them and think, how could anybody throw these beautiful babies away,” Hamby said. “I was there. You play with them. You hold ’em. You love ’em. You walk with them. I loved it that they were singing. The nannies were singing. It was just a place of love.”

Neema House was born out of the





Volunteers from Billings, Mont., spent three weeks at Neema House. Third from right is Dorris Fortson and third from left is her daughter, Kim.

important thing that you can do is have body contact with that baby. Every one of them is a beautiful baby. You don't really know until you're there."

#### **DORRIS FORTSON — ABANDONED DAUGHTER, ORPHAN MOM, CHILDREN'S AUTHOR**

In 1940s Oklahoma, a single mom and waitress dropped off three daughters at Tipton Orphans' Home on the Red River — one of them, Dorris Fortson. Before moving into the orphanage, the family stayed for a while in a chicken coop. Her older sister was assigned the chore of killing rats. Upon high school graduation, Dorris enrolled at Abilene Christian University and met her future husband, Michael. The Fortson's both worked at Stephen F. Austin University in Nacogdoches and are now retired. A mother of four and grandmother of eight biological children, Dorris can't hold

Neema House aspires to have their children move in with a family member by age two or three. In the four years since Neema House opened, 20 of their rescued babies have returned to family members and 19 have been adopted.

back the tears when she describes Neema House.

"For someone who was raised motherless, it's been a great privilege to do this, to give back. Life can start out kind of rough for people sometimes, but you let God have the hard things in life," Dorris said. "I go in there and think which one do I get to pick up first. I just love it, being able to hold them and love them. It's hard to think about the ones

left in the front yard, all night, still has its umbilical cord attached, a newborn, naked lying in the grass and just to be able to pick him up and love him. The hospital calls us and says this baby won't make it unless someone comes and gets it. We don't just go out and pick up babies, we're a registered organization. So the hospital or police will call us when a baby has been found or the mother has died," Dorris said. "We have 40 full-time



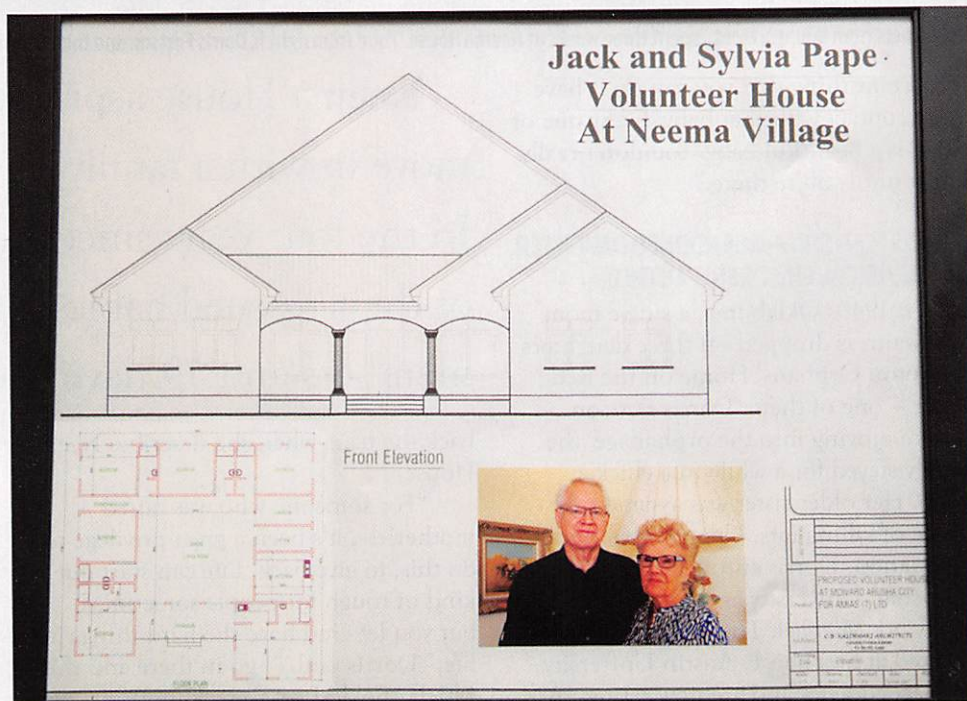


**Dorris Fortson looks over illustrations for her new children's book at her home office in Temple.**

prayers and hard work of the Fortsons, in 2012. The Fortsons first lived in Tanzania for six years in the 1960s, and 70s as newlyweds and missionaries. They loved the people and culture and returned several times afterward. In 2012, they rented a 3,000 square-foot house, large enough to handle dozens of babies. The couple relied on their own savings and donations to pay rent and fund a nursing staff of African women who live on-site. A few American workers are also paid, but individual benefactors pay their salary.

The Fortsons' daughter, Rebekah Johnson, was born in Tanzania in 1966 when her parents worked as missionaries there. A trained emergency medical technician, she lives at Neema House full time working as head nurse. "It's important because we save the lives of these children," she said. "I walk through these rooms and they're just full of babies. These babies live because the most

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**Friends and family members of Jack and Sylvia Pape, Neema House volunteers, raised enough money to build a new Volunteer House. Construction begins in June.**





The Fortsons brought home this ebony wood carving of a woman pounding corn on one of their first visits in the 1960s.

employees. We're doing this by the grace of God."

Fellow board member Hamby says the best way to describe Dorris is love in action. "I have never known anyone who is so loving and giving," Hamby said. "Dorris and Michael are making a difference in the world. She is the Mother Teresa of Africa. They call her Mama Neema. They call her Beebee (grandmother)."

Dorris has written six children's

books, the latest published by Guardian Angel Publishing. "The Baked Potato Boy," is the true story of Elliott, a baby abandoned at an African hospital weighing less than two pounds. After gaining health and weight at Neema House, a local family adopted him. (All book royalties are paid directly to Neema House.)

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At home in Temple, Dorris Fortson sends thank-you notes to all the people who have helped Neema House.

Empowering mothers to own their own microbusiness is one of the goals at Neema House. Dorris Fortson, right, loans Jackie, center, a treadle sewing machine to start her sewing business. Once she earns enough money to purchase her own, this machine will be loaned to another entrepreneurial woman.







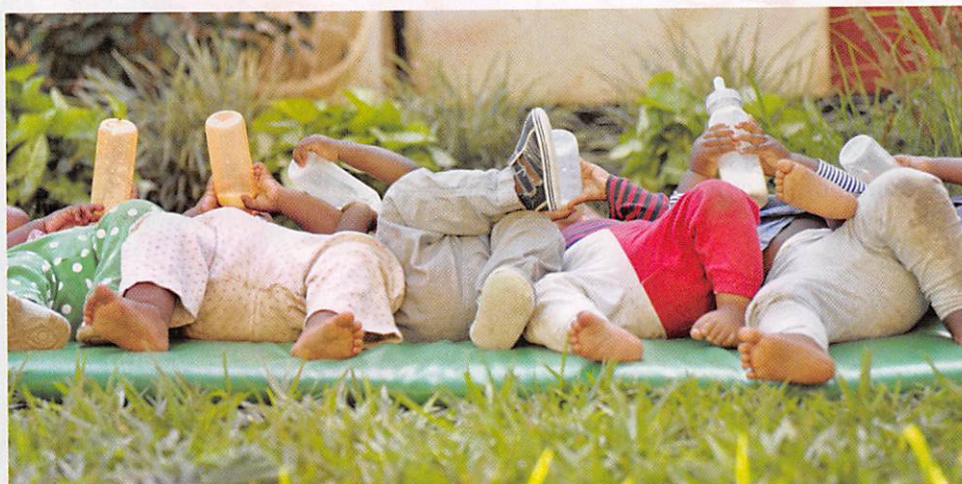
**Michael Fortson holds Frankie, a triplet with two sisters, who is being raised by the Neema House due to his disability.**

Tanzania, capital improvements at Neema House are hard won. On a recent trip, the Fortsons brought a wind generator in their suitcase, disassembled, of course. The trip before — an incubator. Michael Fortson, at home in Temple for a three-month sojourn, is building a shipping crate for the return trip. On his wish list: lawn mower, weed eaters, blower, floor jacks, a trampoline. Fortson said a cheap lawn mower there would cost \$1,000.

### FROM A HOUSE TO A VILLAGE

Folks at Neema House recognize their work saving abandoned babies is the result of a larger problem—no economic opportunity for Tanzanian women. So they have built a program called Mothers Against Poverty. Organizers would loan seed money to mothers who want to start a small business such as a hairdresser. They will be coached and mentored and, when they can afford it, will repay the loan so it can be used to help another candidate. By empowering women to take control of their lives, Neema Village aspires to make a long-term difference.

The Fortsons and their staff of volunteers and paid workers are also busy



**Babies drink bottles while lying on a mat on the grounds of Neema House.**

building Neema Village on a 9.8-acre site recently purchased. Already under construction — built by hand one cinder block at a time — is the Montana Home for widows. Other additions that have been funded but wait construction will move the rescue center toward being self-sufficient. Here's a glance at some of the buildings scheduled for construction in 2016:

- Sixty-bed baby home
- Home for volunteers

- Laundry, shop and storage
- Mothering center
- School and church building

According to the Neema House website, adoptions in Tanzania in which babies are taken out of the country is rare because the adoptive parents must remain in the country three years, be married, and at least 25 years old.

To learn more about Neema House and Neema Village, go to [www.neemavillage.org](http://www.neemavillage.org).



**7. Certification**

Name: Sue Hamby, PhD

Date:

Title: Volunteer Grant Writer and Secretary of the Board of Directors

I certify that the information provided in this application and supporting documentation is true and complete to the best of my knowledge.

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Sue Hamby, PhD