

# 3V Kids Helping Kids – in Kenya

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Many of today's kids have overflowing schedules. But some Three Village students are finding time to combine their music lessons with helping homeless children to survive.

The young people perform in concerts that raise money for the Jerusha Mwiraria Hope Children's Home in Meru, Kenya. The shows are organized by Jack Licitra, a private music teacher — and performing musician — who gives lessons throughout the Three Village area.

Several years ago, Licitra wanted to teach his students how to sing and play music collaboratively in a band, in front of an audience. At the same time, he was

invited to play at a fundraising concert for Hope Children's Fund. The Long Island-based nonprofit group was established by retired educator and Port Jefferson resident Larry Hohler to help Kenyan street children orphaned by AIDS. The group's approach to filling the children's basic needs — building a house for them to live in, classrooms and a vocational training center — inspired Licitra to pitch in through music.

"I said to myself, 'This is as grassroots as it gets,'" said Licitra. "They weren't trying to save a whole continent, just get these kids off the street, through school and into the workplace."

"And I thought, this could be one simple way to link my students to service, using music to help the world." Licitra responded by creating Kids Helping



Photo by Scott Matovich Sr.

From left, Scott Matovich, Jack Licitra, John Davis, Alle Wallace, Miranda Bottachiari and Alexa Sauro, Kids Helping Kids, on Crane Neck beach in warmer weather.

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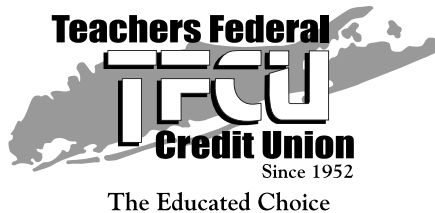
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Kids. The program offers group classes in recording, songwriting and performance. Students get hands-on "gig" experience at five concerts a year. All of the money raised at the concerts is donated to the HCF. A recent concert, held last month at the Setauket Neighborhood House, raised \$900. Licitra said concerts usually raise between \$900 and \$1,200. Money has been used to buy a cow so the Kenyan children can have milk, he said, and to teach them job-related skills and computer literacy. Many of the local musicians' families sponsor individual children at the Jerusha Mwiraria home, donating money to cover their living expenses.

Twenty-four young musicians are involved, 19 of them Three Village students. And though the youngest bandmate is a first-grader and the eldest is in college, under Licitra's direction they learn to make music as a team.

Nick Russell is a Stony Brook University sophomore who plays ukulele and guitar in the "Kids Helping Kids" ensemble. Russell says the age difference between him and his musical colleagues doesn't get in the way of the music.

**'One person can make a huge change and start a chain reaction.'**

— ALEXA SAURO

"Music brings people together," he said. "You take it as it comes, you look out for each other and help each other."

Ninth-grader Alexa Sauro, a student at P.J. Gelinas Junior High School, studies guitar, voice and piano with Licitra. "He's always trying to get us to relax when we perform," Sauro said. "If we make a mistake, it's no big deal." As for helping the kids at the Kenya school: "To know that something I love is helping people across the world makes me feel great," she said. "One person can make a huge change and start a chain reaction." Sauro and some of her bandmates sang and played a song Licitra wrote, "A Gift of Faith," in a music video that can be viewed on YouTube and the HCF website.

"It's been a wonderful experience for her," said Chris Sauro, Alexa's mother. "To start this kind of volunteerism so young is fabulous." The band "puts in a lot of their own time and hard work to make all this happen," she added. "But they do it because they really care about helping the other children. Alexa's father and I are so proud of her for being involved in this."

Licitra said music became "a calling" in his life during his own high school years, when his father died. It's a healing force that can help young people overcome their challenges, he said. "To perform music gives you a feeling of accomplishment and connection. It gives kids a way to feel more naturally at ease, in school or wherever they are."

The next concert will be held this spring. To learn more, email Licitra at [jackswaterfall@aol.com](mailto:jackswaterfall@aol.com) or visit the HCF website at [www.hopechildrensfund.org](http://www.hopechildrensfund.org).

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