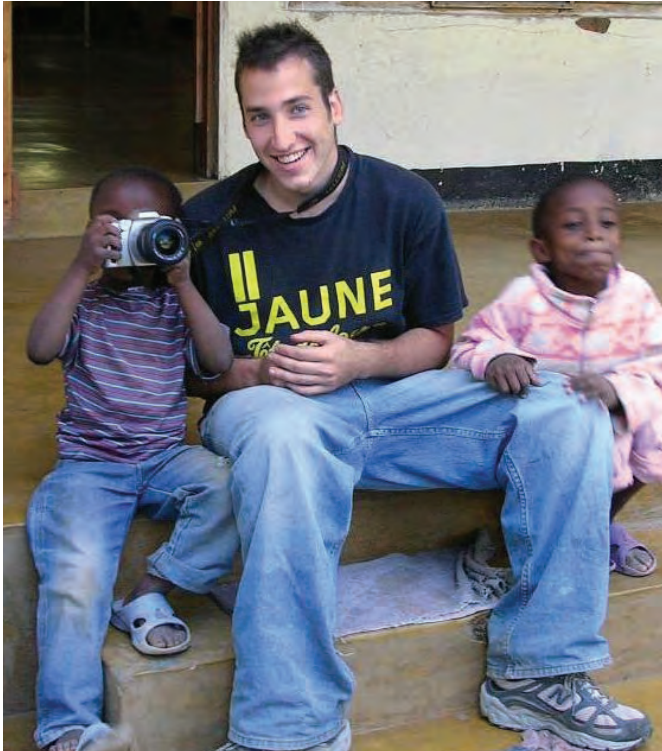


## Helping Children in Tanzania Becomes a Family Affair

Nearly 8,000 miles separate New York City and the East African nation of Tanzania, where three Westminster graduates have joined the struggle against poverty and disease in one of the poorest nations in the world. **Katherine Decelles '02**, **Chris Decelles '04** and **Derick Dirmaier '02** have all completed volunteer missions with the Tanzanian Community Development Alliance (TACODA), working at the TACODA Children's Home in Arusha, which houses 14 orphaned boys between 5 and 11 years of age. And, they have brought the spirit of volunteerism home with them to encourage more people to contribute their talents to TACODA.



*Chris Decelles '04 with children at the TACODA Children's Home.*

The Arusha region lies near the Kenyan border and Mount Kilimanjaro. While most visitors to Kilimanjaro International Airport are whisked away on safari tours or hiking expeditions, those who choose to explore the less traveled roads away from the main city will find small villages with mud hut dwellings, no larger than a Westminster dormitory room, that house large families. Businesses operate from lean-tos that line the road. Then there are the orphans.

More than one million orphaned children live in Tanzania; many of them find their only sustenance on the street. TACODA was founded to rescue abandoned and orphaned children from the streets of Arusha and give them a home.

The Westminster connection begins with Katherine Decelles and Jim Arden, who was Katherine's science teacher at the Greenwich Country Day School in Greenwich, Conn. Even as a young student, Katherine displayed qualities that her teacher remembers to this day. From an unusual knowledge of exotic automobiles to a fierce loyalty to her friends, Jim said that Katherine always thought out of the box. "She thought for herself what was appropriate to do and what she wanted to do," he said. "That took a lot of courage at that age."

The Jim Arden Foundation began to invest in TACODA, and subsequently assumed financial responsibilities of the TACODA program; including paying staff salaries, providing food, clothing and medical care, and assisting with the upgrading of the Children's Home.

### The First Visit

Jim had long encouraged Katherine to join him on a trip to Africa. It was not until 2005, one year after the TACODA Children's Home opened its doors, and the year she completed her studies at the Carroll School of

Management at Boston College, that she was able to finally make the journey.

"While I was at Westminster, I saw a lot of people with great opportunities and means, including myself," said Katherine. "I knew that wasn't the way it was everywhere else in the world. I struggled with the question of why I was given opportunities to go to a good high school, then college, and never be in need like a majority of the world's population."

The friendships she made on her first visit led her to return in 2006 with her brother Chris Decelles and their friend Derick Dirmaier. Together, they built fences, cleaned gardens, worked on repairs to the facility and even implemented an accounting system. Moreover, they observed a remarkable change in the children living at TACODA. In the year since Katherine's first visit, the sick, malnourished and often poorly behaved children had emerged as healthy, well-fed young boys who flourished at the home and at school.

Upon Katherine, Chris and Derick's return home, stories of their success inspired Mary Dupont and Robert Decelles, Chris and Katherine's parents, to volunteer for TACODA. The couple recently returned from a 10-day trip to Arusha, during which they helped facilitate TACODA's purchase and renovation of the children's new home, a former fish factory on 13 acres of land, and obtained duty-free import status for all the in-kind donations being sent to TACODA. Mary also coordinates fundraising and organizational activities state-side, and has taken on a leadership role with the Jim Arden Foundation.



*Katherine Decelles '02 receiving a going-away present.*

*“I knew that wasn’t the way it was everywhere else in the world. I struggled with the question of why I was given opportunities to go to a good high school, then college, and never be in need like a majority of the world’s population.”*

“TACODA has become a family affair,” says Mary. “Everyone is involved in one way or another, including Katherine and Chris’ brother David, who speaks about TACODA at Indiana University.”

Jim says that visits from volunteers like Katherine, Derick and Chris give the children another way to look at the world around them. The children have come to TACODA from impoverished communities that could not offer role models with different occupations. Once they leave TACODA at age 15, they will attend either secondary or vocational school, and eventually gain employment in occupations that are often filled by foreign workers — from nurses to post office and bank employees. “We give the children skills that will help them work within the infrastructure in the community,” says Jim.

Derick is credited with producing much of the content for TACODA’s Web site ([www.tacodachildren.org](http://www.tacodachildren.org)). He completed his undergraduate studies at Boston College, and worked in private banking in Boston before accepting a six-month to one-year position teaching English in Thailand. Chris is attending Boston College, and will graduate with a degree in history. And Katherine, who is now completing the CPA exam, is employed by KMPG, working with not-for-profit and higher-education clients. She returned to TACODA for a two-week stay in December. Additional information about TACODA is available at [www.tacodachildren.org](http://www.tacodachildren.org).



*Derick Dirmaier '02 with two children during his visit.*