

## Spotlight on

# Maureen Ahern

A Mother to the Children of the World

by Kathi Williams

In the past year, you may have read a story in The Brunswick News or The Golden Isles Magazine or some other local publication about a lady from Shellman Bluff who frequently travels to Africa to care for babies with HIV and AIDS. This extraordinary woman is Maureen Ahern -- a woman who was voted by her high school senior class "Most likely to start her own orphanage". I thought Maureen would be a perfect fit as a Spotlight in this Mother's Day edition because she has not only raised two children of her own and been a foster mother to ten other babies, but continues to nurture and care for children in Africa with her own hands and through her non-profit agency, Our Journey, Inc.

Maureen was born in Boston, where she lived, attended school, married and raised her children there, except for a short period spent in Arkansas while her husband was in the military. In 1989, she moved to Marietta, Georgia. While visiting St. Simons Island with her sister, she discovered and fell in love with this area. Two weeks later, Maureen was employed at The Lodge on Little St. Simons as their bookkeeper. Three years later, she became the manager at The Lodge, it was there she stayed until 2003, when she resigned to pursue a dream of working in an orphanage.

Maureen has always worked with children. When she was 16, Maureen used to take five buses to go work at a home for "wayward children". Although she says she knew it used to drive her mother crazy, Maureen loved being able

to help these children who had no homes. She says that her mother never complained or told her to stop going though. When she was 18, Maureen was in VISTA, the "Domestic Peace Corps", and initiated Program Project Explore for children in the Appalachian mountains of Kentucky.

Later in her life, when her daughter, Kristine, and son, Jimmy, were still young, she decided to be a foster mother for babies adopted through the Florence Crittendon League. As a foster mother, she was given a baby as young as two days old to care for until a permanent adoptive family was found for placement, usually before the child's first birthday. Maureen would never know how long she would be caring for the foster child in her care. It could be weeks or months. She took pictures and kept detailed journals of these babies for their new families.

When a permanent family was found for the baby, Maureen would be called in the morning to bring the baby out to the caseworker so that the baby could be taken to his or her new family, and she would be given a new baby to take home from that meeting. She was never given full names for the babies and would not be given any information about the adoptive placements, so she couldn't follow up with the child later. She did this with ten different babies. When asked if parting from the babies was hard for her, Maureen said, "Surprisingly, it wasn't really. I was more excited than sad, because I knew the kind of family that the baby had been



Maureen with grandchildren, Connor and Ella

found -- that these were really good families because of the screening. And I was excited that I got a new baby to bring home." She also considered her home a "real home" and a much better alternative than an orphanage or state-funded foster home.

When Maureen resigned from The Lodge on Little St. Simons, she began what started as "her journey" to find an opportunity to work in an orphanage overseas. Initially, she wanted to go to Rumania, but instead found an opportunity in South Africa. As she worked as a consultant in the hospitality/resort industry to make ends meet and find a way to finance her trip, Maureen met Dick Gordon of Woodlawn Park, Colorado, who became a good friend. One day, she says, he made a comment to her about how she was making this trip "all about her." She said she was really offended by this, because she was trying to go help others, and she didn't understand what he meant by that comment. When Maureen asked Gordon what he meant, he explained that she

should open the experience up to others who have the same dream and who also want to help. He suggested she start a non-profit organization. Maureen relates that she told Gordon, "I can't do that. I don't know how." That's when Gordon stepped in with his expertise and Maureen's journey transformed into "Our Journey, Inc.", a non-profit organization with a mission of taking care of AIDS infected children worldwide.

In 2004, Maureen commenced her volunteer efforts with The Valley Out-Reach Project and the children in the orphanage in The Valley of a Thousand Hills. Since then, she has become involved with the Zimile Organization, a Building Community Self Reliance Organization started by a woman named Rosetta two years ago. Maureen also makes regular trips out to "Gogos" (Zulu for "grandmothers") caring for homeless children with a woman named Mildred, from another organization, roughly translated, as "Our Hope". They supply food, blankets and medical supplies. After her "rounds,"

Maureen holds an after school program for approximately 100 children, teaching them English, crafts and other useful tools for their everyday lives. Maureen truly has become a mother to the children of the world.

Maureen will head back to Africa on July 15. She says it is getting harder to leave here, as she loves to spend time with grandson, Connor, and granddaughter, Ella, while she is home in Georgia. Maureen knows, however, that the children of Africa still need her help. She is impressed each year by the response to her work and the requests she has for presentations about Our Journey, Inc. by churches, schools and community groups. She is pleased to see that teachers and leaders are getting kids involved in projects like hers, and that when she reaches out to other people, they too reach out to more, so the message spreads. If you'd like to learn more or find your own way to make a difference, visit [www.ourjourneyinc.org](http://www.ourjourneyinc.org).

Maureen's answers to the Coastal Illustrated Mother's Day Questionnaire:

1. Keep your honesty. No one can take it away from you, but you can give it away, and once it's gone, you've lost it.
2. I got my best Mother's Day present ever, yesterday, from my daughter. It's a plate that says "Like Mother, Like Daughter . . . The Nicest Compliment There Is."
3. My mother was an amazing woman. We had nothing, but we thought we were rich! At the end of the month, she would pull out a blanket and make a picnic of hotdogs and chips for my sister and me because we had been "so good all month". We thought this was such a treat! Now, looking back, we realize, it was because she had no money left at the end of the month, but we never knew that then.com. You won't be disappointed!

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