

Plan to feed starving kids grows

Minnesotan Andrew Youn is using MBA techniques to attack chronic hunger in Africa. Donors are betting \$800,000 his approach will work.

By [Kay Miller](#), Star Tribune

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Andrew Youn

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There's a map of East Africa in Andrew Youn's head. He envisions prosperous green fields spreading in concentric circles from Bungoma, Kenya, where he founded the nonprofit One Acre Fund. He imagines generations of children who no longer starve during the "hunger season" but have surplus food and money enough to go to school.

Youn, 28, could have parlayed his Yale degree and Northwestern University MBA into a six-figure corporate job. Instead, the Falcon Heights man is using an innovative micro-loan approach to alleviate chronic hunger in East Africa. He started in Kenya, where hunger kills more children than AIDS, malaria or any other disease.

Working with the poor and disenfranchised has been a passion for Youn since he was a student at St. Paul Academy and Summit School who cared for kids in St. Paul's Frogtown and tutored third-graders in Minneapolis' Glenwood Lyndale housing project.

He was back in Minnesota in mid-March as part of a four-city tour that included San Francisco, Chicago and New York to raise money for his project. He has been featured in BusinessWeek Online and Glamour magazine.

But he would much rather the attention be focused on intergenerational solutions to hunger.

"While I was in business school I skipped some classes and went to Kenya for 10 days to set up a pilot project with 40 farmers," Youn said. That was March 2006. One of his early difficulties was getting Kenyans to realize that he wasn't there with a food give-away program, but to teach them the power of self-sufficiency.

To understand the culture, he worked beside farmers in their fields and slept in their mud huts on dirt floors, surrounded by children, chickens and broken pottery. But he was intrigued by the few farmers who managed to get higher crop yields and owned a cow or a few goats. What set them apart from their starving neighbors was access to good seed, fertilizer, education and markets.

So Youn incorporated those elements into a sophisticated business model that has won five prestigious entrepreneurial awards totaling \$400,000 in the past year. With another \$400,000 in private donations, he is expanding the project to 350 families.

"This could change the lives of tens of thousands of people," said Sean Glass, who co-founded the Yale Entrepreneurial Society and was on the panel that awarded Youn's team first prize in its social business competition. "They blew us away. We talked about it: 'Wow, this makes us feel like we're not doing much with our lives.' "

Most Kenyan farmers are women who till 1-acre plots -- about the size of a football field -- using heavy hand-held hoes to plant maize and beans. A woman might harvest three bags of stunted, mealy maize to last her family all year. Her next crop would be planted with withered grain that fell to the ground during harvest.

"Right now their soils are so depleted that it is easy to make a really big difference in their harvest using basic fertilizer," Youn said.

With \$7,000 of his own money Youn hired Kenyan field directors to work with women's cooperatives. He loaned the co-ops small amounts of premium seed and fertilizer. Field managers showed the women how to properly space seed, instead of scattering it.

In just two growing seasons the farmers in Youn's pilot project more than quadrupled their harvests and increased their incomes from about \$150 a year to \$450. The women repaid their loans in a 50/50 split. Youn funneled that money back into the fund to help more families.

Youn is experimenting with having farmers devote one-tenth of an acre to high-profit passion fruit and pineapple crops. Those would be sold in markets in Uganda and Europe.

Youn's goal: to reach 5,000 families in three years.

"When Andrew says 5,000 families he's mentally multiplying that times five or six kids -- 25,000 or 30,000 children," says Barry Merkin, entrepreneurship professor at Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management. Even in the rarefied, high-achieving

world of Kellogg, Youn is special, Merkin said. There was a buzz about him that caused fellow students, alumni and foundations to rally around his project.

Merkin remembers the day that Youn came into his office. Here was this soft-spoken, modest, almost frail young man. Youn didn't mention that he had turned down Harvard Business School to attend Kellogg because it offered a nonprofit entrepreneurial track.

"He had this plan he was sure was going to eradicate hunger for African children," Merkin said. It seemed unrealistically, almost naively ambitious. "But his calm, quiet confidence and passion were something to support."

Youn kept appearing at Merkin's door as he refined his plan. When results from the pilot were wildly successful, Youn described them in the pragmatic metrics of business: cash outlays, crop yields, income, child mortality, school attendance, even kids' heights. And with stories.

It was a demanding bunch at Kellogg, the best and the brightest. Hard sells. But they rallied around Youn's vision.

"At graduation there was this spontaneous outpouring," Merkin said. More than 100 of Youn's classmates each pledged \$20 a month indefinitely to the One Acre Fund, the money to be automatically deducted from their credit cards. More surprisingly, the current graduating class -- many of whom know Youn only by reputation -- is doing the same thing.

Youn didn't stay for his own graduation ceremony last June. He was moving to Bungoma, a Kenyan town surrounded by hundreds of impoverished farm villages.

During one of his infrequent trips home Youn spoke to a Kellogg alumni group. Two men started whispering in the back. At first Merkin found it rude. But at the end the two said they were so moved that they were pledging \$100,000 for each of Youn's next three operating years.

"When you see a little child starving to death, your heart breaks. You know you have to do something."

Youn is sitting on the sofa of his parents' unpretentious Falcon Heights rambler. He wears wrinkled slacks, an old T-shirt and a worn zip-up sweater. He tucks his stockinged feet under him and talks about visiting Gertude and her six children during hunger season.

At 7 a.m. the entire family rose to hoe the field by hand until noon, when the blazing sun made it too hot to work. Then they ate their sole meal of the day -- a thin gruel made from a cup of corn flour cooked in water. "I watched each child drink a single cup of that after they had worked in the field the entire morning," Youn said.

Youn credits his Korean immigrant parents for instilling in him the desire to help people who have less than he. Choong-Sihn and Heekyung Youn came with very little to the University of Minnesota for graduate school. They sacrificed, often working two jobs, to assure Andrew and his brother, Paul, the best education and American prosperity.

"He's so stingy with himself and so generous with other people," said his father, Choong-Sihn Youn. "We had to drag him to the department store to buy him shoes" after Andrew patched holey sneakers with duct tape.

His son was making \$90,000 at Mercer Management Consulting in Boston before graduate school, so Choong-Sihn Youn initially was dismayed when he chose nonprofit work in Africa. Then the Youns visited Kenya. They met children who now have enough to eat. When Andrew came to town, the women farmers broke into songs of gratitude.

Recently Youn visited Caro, a farmer in her field, where she is growing passion fruit. The vines start small. But Caro hand-watered them. Now they are 9 feet tall. "It was raining," Youn recalled. "I said, 'What are you doing, Caro?' She said, 'I'm just looking at the plants.' "

When Youn first arrived in Kenya he had to sell farmers on his ideas. Now women come by foot, some from 100 kilometers away, to meet Youn. And to have their lives changed.

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