

Lawyer uses gift for wildlife photography to help underprivileged school children

■ PAT MURPHY

Ryan E. Alekman had been dabbling in wildlife photography for more than two decades, but it wasn't until 2022 when the Springfield lawyer attended a photo workshop in Kenya that he realized he might have a gift.

"I've never been formally trained, but I've been told I have a natural eye for it," the co-founder of Alekman DiTusa says. "I still don't feel terribly comfortable looking at myself that way, but over time enough people have told me that they like my pictures."

When a friend suggested he assemble his photos in a calendar, Alekman ran with the idea. But what to do with the proceeds from the 2023 Kenya wildlife calendar? The philanthropist in Alekman set about searching for a worthy cause, ultimately deciding on the Mara United School in Kenya, which had no direct access to fresh water. Students, he learned, had to make the long trek to the Mara River, carrying dirty river water back to the school in containers.

Between the sale of his 2023 calendar and a donation from his own pocket, Alekman was able to send \$1,500 to the school, which was used to connect the school to well water from a nearby town.

In 2023, he returned to Kenya to visit the school and learned from the students how his small donation had changed their lives, something that still brings tears to his eyes today.

"There were 40 or so kids there that day," he recalls. "They sang songs and gave me a gift. It's still emotional. I had these sixth- through eighth-grade kids taking the time to tell me what it meant to them that they had fresh water. It made a difference for them. A lot of the kids gave me hugs."

In what he calls a "mind-blowing" move, the school inscribed Alekman's name on the cistern that holds the well water.

The following year brought a 2024 Kenya wildlife calendar, this time raising \$3,500 in sales, which was used to provide electricity to the school.

The \$5,000 raised from the sale of Alekman's 2025 North America wildlife calendar allowed the school to purchase a tractor.

"I asked them what they wanted, and they said they wanted a small tractor to grow fruits and vegetables [to] teach the kids about agriculture," he says, adding that the proceeds also paid the tuition for those families who could not afford the fees.

Alekman is busy planning the 2026 calendar, which he says will include photos from a trip to Brazil in August and photos from an upcoming trip to Botswana and South Africa.

"I'm not sure what the school is going to use the 2026 calendar proceeds for yet," he says, adding that he plans to return to Kenya next year and hopes to be able to visit the school.



Zebras cavorting in Kenya (RYAN E. ALEKMAN)

Alekman's career as a wildlife photographer had an inauspicious start.

He recalls attempting to photograph a dolphin while on vacation in the Florida Keys some 25 years ago.

"[The photos] were going to be fantastic — but there was no film in the camera," he says, laughing.

Times have changed. Alekman now uses top-of-the-line Nikon camera equipment. His photographs appear on his Facebook and Instagram pages.

"I work hard at it," he says. "It's a fun hobby. I like that I'm able to use it to help people, too, because, being a lawyer, I'm fortunate. I don't need to make money from photography, so I'm just happy I'm able to put my pictures in front of people."

But make no mistake. There's nothing easy about Alekman's hobby.

"You need to be very patient when you're doing wildlife photography," he says. "You're sitting there waiting to get an animal to move. It may be a lion, and you're trying to get the right look in their eyes or having them look at you. If you're lucky, you'll catch them roaring."

Although his efforts to get the images he wants often have him crossing paths with potentially dangerous creatures, Alekman says there's been only one time when he felt he was in danger — during his most recent trip to Kenya when he went to the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, which is known for its rhinoceroses.

"The guide had removed the doors from the safari vehicle so I could get down low to take pictures," Alekman recalls. "We were riding



Ryan E. Alekman (right) drawing fresh water at Mara United School in 2023

along and about 150 meters out there was a rhino walking parallel to us. The guide pulled up and turned off the engine. All of a sudden, the rhino took a right turn and charges us. It stopped 20 to 30 feet away, but it was coming fast. I was lying down on the floor of the vehicle to get a photo at the time. I'm thinking, 'Oh, my God; I have nothing to protect me.'"

He immediately texted his wife that he had just been charged by a rhino.

It didn't play well with her.

"Once I knew I was safe, I thought it was the coolest thing ever. She did not feel the same way," he says.

Alekman's travels around the globe are far from over. In February, he and partner Robert A. DiTusa plan on attending a photo workshop in Japan.

"I pretty much want to travel the world and see everything," Alekman says.