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## Helping a legendary runner make a difference

### Local family brings Kip Keino back to Ithaca

By Krisy Gashler  
Special to The Journal

Kevin Thompson's connection to world-class runner Kip Keino began almost forty years ago and is culminating in Ithaca this weekend in a slew of events honoring Keino and supporting his humanitarian efforts.

It was 1968 and Thompson was 10 years old — old enough to start being aware of the talents God gave him, and aware of what his society would and would not allow him to do with them.

Kevin and his brother were both getting into track and field, so they loved watching the 1968 Olympics, where the American track athletes were cleaning up, as usual, heading into the 1,500-meter race, where U.S. star and then-world record holder Jim Ryun was heavily favored.

Kevin understood that black Americans like himself were allowed to be sprinters; Jesse Owens' gold-winning

sprint in the '32 Olympics — right in the center of Adolf Hitler's Berlin — had proven that. But distance events, it was believed, required more than just strength and speed. They required an ability to pace yourself, years of careful training and expert coaching.

Jim Ryun had all of this. Another runner — Kipchoge Keino of Kenya — did not. Yet it was Keino, known as "Kip," who won.

"Jim Ryun at the time happened to be a great — not just a good runner — he was great. In theory, he was invincible," Thompson said. "And here's this African from Kenya, taking on the world record holder, Jim Ryun — an American — and he beat him. Like, really beat him."

"We (US athletes) traditionally have great coaching," said Thompson, now an assistant men's track and field coach at Cornell University. "Keino coached himself."

Keino's win resonated with Africans, but also with black Americans, said Thompson's wife, Michelle, now a visiting lecturer in Architecture, Art and Planning at Cornell. "That was a time when there was a lot of racial strife and tension in our country. And there was a pride in this African who was not elite, and who was considered untrained — he was a police officer who just jogged."

Keino went on to win three Olympic medals in 1968 and 1972, leading a surge in East African world-class running that continues to this day. In 1987,

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SIMON WHEELER / Journal Staff

From left, Michelle Thompson, executive co-director of the Kip Keino Foundation, Mary Winans and Anila Rehman, co-race directors and board members of the foundation, and Amy Fuhr, co-race director and co-vice president of the foundation at the Ithaca High School track, where the fundraising events for the Kip Keino Foundation will be held this weekend.

#### Keino Foundation events

May 12-13 is Kip Keino Weekend in Ithaca.

\* Health & Fitness Expo: From 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday, May 12, BorgWarner will host a Health & Fitness Expo at the Hilton Garden Inn in downtown Ithaca. The event will feature BorgWarner's employee wellness program, as well as exhibits and booths from other companies, health care providers, schools and local governments.

Former Olympic runners and Kip Keino are scheduled to be available during the Expo for questions and autographs. The event is free and open to the public, but attendees who are able are encouraged to donate new or lightly used sneakers, to be distributed to Keino's orphans and athletes.

\* Open mile run: At 11 a.m. Sunday, May 13, the Kip Keino Fun and Fitness Mile will be held at Ithaca High School. The event will begin with an open mile run, where Keino will run with local youth.

\* The event was organized by Michelle Thompson, Ithaca High School senior Mary Winans, Cornell student Anila Rehman, Amy Fuhr, T. Chad Montgomery and Weldon Johnson.

\* Kip Keino wristbands and T-shirts will be available for sale at the weekend events, with proceeds going to help Keino's humanitarian work, including building a High School in Eldoret, Kenya.

he was named a Sports Illustrated's Sportsman of the Year for taking in dozens of orphaned children.

Now, this weekend, the Thompsons are honoring their sporting hero in Ithaca with the Kip Keino Fun & Fitness Mile. The Sunday event is bringing notable male and female mile and 1,500-meter runners, including, organizers say, nine sub-four-minute milers from five countries.

The races are part of Kip Keino Weekend, which celebrates Keino's life and work. The event also includes citizen races, The Borg Warner Health and Fitness Expo at the Hilton Garden Inn downtown and an evening banquet saluting Kip Keino as guest of honor. The weekend also inaugurates the Kip Keino Foundation (USA), a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting Keino's legacy and his humanitarian efforts in Kenya.

The weekend is also the culmination of a relationship that began, from afar at first, with that event in 1968.

Two years ago, Michelle and Kevin Thompson celebrated the high school graduation of their oldest daughter, Rei, with a family trip to Africa to hike Mount Kilimanjaro and go on a safari. Kevin Thompson convinced his reluctant family to take an eight-hour bus ride to Eldoret, Kenya, and Keino's "High Performance Training Centre" for distance runners in Eldoret, Kenya.

Once in Eldoret, a city of 200,000 people, the Thompsons asked strangers how to find Kip Keino, and were immediately directed to his sporting goods store. They were introduced to two of Keino's sons, and shortly thereafter, Keino himself showed up at the store.

"He said, 'Come to my home for four days. Let me feed you, let me talk to you, let me learn about you,'" Michelle Thompson said. "We felt so honored that he would treat us as though we were his kids immediately."

In their four days at Keino's centre the Thompsons learned that Keino trains athletes who are national champions, Olympians, and world record holders. He's an unofficial ambassador and the president of the Kenyan Olympic Committee.

As if this weren't enough to occupy someone's time, Keino's home and training center are situated on a 500-acre organic farm, where he experiments with sustainable energy practices — he has solar panels, a windmill and is working on extracting methane from his livestock's manure.

He runs a tilapia fish farm, because he learned that tilapia produce a very nutritious, high-quality meat and wanted to provide it to the people in his community. He uses agritourism to subsidize his production costs, so that he can sell the fish to his neighbors as cheaply as possible (oftentimes for free).

Every day at 6 a.m. he personally delivers milk from his farm, free of charge, to the children in the school and orphanage. He also has cared for more than 300 orphans himself. He's built an elementary and middle school where he educates children who otherwise could not afford even a basic education. He's working on building a high school.

Yet when the Thompsons offered to make a donation to his charitable efforts, he refused.

"We said, 'What can we do? What can we do to help you?' And he said, 'Nothing,'" Michelle said.

Even after returning to the U.S., Michelle Thompson said the family was never contacted for donations. "And we just couldn't believe it: not one phone call, not one anything, and we just said, 'Let's do something.'"

And they have done something.

Last year Michelle Thompson and her brother, T. Chad Montgomery, launched a Web site, kipkeinotraining.org, to introduce athletes to Keino's High Performance Training Centre. They've started The Kip Keino Foundation, to oversee fundraising and collaboration efforts. Just last week Michelle Thompson was working with Ithaca Mayor Carolyn Peterson to make Eldoret, Kenya a sister city to Ithaca.

Michelle Thompson has talked extensively with Keino about why he has spent so much of his time and wealth in humanitarian service.

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“Kip’s motivation is, he’s been blessed with sport, and health, and good friends, and while he’s here on this earth, he’s gonna do everything he can to help his community,” she said. “And he doesn’t look at his community as just the people around him, he’s looking at humanity.”

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**STORYCHAT** 

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