



Kenya: *An Unbreakable Spirit*

By Tracy Grimm

Photos by Rev. Dr. John Ross

In the Kibera slum of Nairobi, Kenya, a 10-year-old boy holds out a little girl to a stranger and pleads, “Please take my baby sister.” As she’s been instructed, the stranger walks on, but the experience breaks her heart, shakes her to the core and leaves her with the knowledge that this place, these moments, these people are changing her, redefining her entire being.

The stranger is **Nan Peterson**, Blake’s PK–12 director of service learning, who last spring spent two weeks exploring some of the most impoverished areas of Kenya, one of the poorest countries in Africa. Peterson and three fellow members of the Wayzata Community Church embarked on the Africa Vision Trip with the primary goal of establishing long-term relationships with organizations in Kenya that might provide meaningful service opportunities for those in our local community.

Why Africa?

Both Blake and the Wayzata Community Church (WCC) have a strong commitment to service and are vigilant in their efforts to bring a wide array of service options to

their community members. Because Africa could be just the right service fit for someone, WCC, with Blake as its community partner, decided to explore such an opportunity as an addition to its existing local and international service projects and trips.

For Peterson, however, another obvious answer to “Why Africa?” might be “Why not Africa?” The statistics are staggering and dismal. With a population nearing 37 million in 2007, more than 50 percent of Kenya’s population falls below the poverty line. One in five Kenyans has consumption levels that are inadequate to meet basic food needs, and only 61 percent of the country’s rural population has access to improved water. The median age is 18.6 years, due in no small part to the ever-present HIV/AIDS epidemic that affects 6.1 percent of the nation’s total population.

To view Kenya from statistics alone is certain to overwhelm even the most optimistic and motivated of service-oriented individuals. Peterson admits that during her trip she experienced moments of hopelessness, mired down in the realization of how much need

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exists among the people of Kenya. But despite the circumstances, Peterson and her fellow travelers noted an unbroken spirit in the people they came to know during their stay. They are a people not with “problems” but with concerns — concerns for their homeland and for their fellow Kenyans. They are not looking for definitive solutions but are filled with hope that with some help from the global community and much work on their own parts their situation can and will improve.

In the face of hunger, thirst and disease, the Kenyans tell their global supporters, “Give us wings to fly out of poverty one feather at a time. No matter what, we must begin.”

So Little, So Much

Nan Peterson, Becky Pierson, Rob Robertson and Rev. Dr. John Ross arrived in Kenya late last May with their own preconceived notions of what they might find. As is almost always the case once one visits a country in person, however, these ideas shifted upon their arrival. For Robertson, a husband and father of two and the president and CEO of MedNet Solutions, the country was even more archaic than he could have imagined. “It was shocking to me that people have that existence today. People walk for two to three hours, both ways, to bring water back in a bucket to their village. That was a revelation to me, that people actually live this way.”

Pierson, a wife, mother of two and a travel and event professional, says she was prepared for the terrible poverty she witnessed, but the poverty stricken came as a great surprise to her. “What I never expected was that those in poverty would have that much hope,” she says. “I was taken aback by their attitude. They didn’t get down.”

Embodying the attitude that Pierson describes was Beatrice, an 80-year-old Kenyan woman who Robertson calls “the spirit who touched us all.” The four met Beatrice at her home in Nzueni, where she lives with the nine grandchildren who have been left in her care. Despite having lost her husband, two sons and both daughters-in-law to AIDS, Beatrice delighted her visitors with “the most joyful belly laugh” any one in the group could remember hearing.

Laughter and smiles were staples in the villages, homes and schools the group experienced, and at every stop the visitors were greeted the same way: “Welcome home.”

Concerns for Our Kenyan Home

Prior to leaving Minnesota, a WCC Africa Vision Trip committee was formed to conduct preliminary research and to determine which ministry sites the foursome would visit during their travels in Kenya. In the end, the committee narrowed its list to four organizations: the Light of Hope Home for Girls, an orphanage and private school that currently serves 24 girls ages 3 to 18; the Rafiki Children’s Center, which provides care and school for children who have lost their parents to AIDS; World Servants, an organization that mobilizes volunteers and facilitates mission experiences around the world; and Give Us Wings, which works to eradicate poverty in Kenya and Uganda.

All four organizations are confronting head-on Kenya’s most pervasive concerns of water, education, health care and orphans.

Water

Upon seeing Kenya’s Lake Victoria, Africa’s largest lake and the second largest freshwater lake in the world, Peterson was shocked to discover that the country’s primary water source looks like “Diet Coke mixed with a little chocolate syrup.” No one is able to drink the water until it has been sent through a filtration system, and clean water must be piped into villages via PVC piping, funding for which is in short supply.



A boy stands near his school in Nyaoga, Kenya.



The WCC travelers with their new friends, the children and staff of Light of Hope Children's Home in Naivasha, Kenya

Peterson's group visited an area water treatment center while meeting with the Give Us Wings organization, which is currently working on a three-phase water project to bring clean water to villages in need. The first phase of the project has been funded and will be bringing water to 10 outlets, including three schools. The second phase will require raising \$50,000 to build two water-holding tanks, one at a local clinic and one for the village, which will be needed when the pipe system fails. Phase three is to fund a tree-planting project, an organic farming project and latrine project.

The lack of water affects all aspects of life in Kenya and contributes to the country's other major concerns, particularly health care, since many clinics are forced to operate with little or no clean water.

Health Care

Though the Kenyan government provides some free health care, receiving the proper treatment in a timely manner is almost impossible. The doctor-to-patient ratio in the bush is about one to 15,000, and some clinics must operate with no water or electricity. The scores of those infected with HIV/AIDS require a specific order of cocktails to battle the progression of the disease that ravages their bodies. A clinic may carry one cocktail when a patient is in need of a different treatment for his or her stage of illness. In addition, the cocktails must be taken with plenty of nutritious food (three meals a day when most Kenyans are able to eat twice a day at the most) and water, which is always in short supply.

Complicating the country's effort to slow the spread of AIDS is the existence of traditional tribal medicine,

voodoo/witch doctors, and a lack of general knowledge about how germs and disease spread. Polygamy, wife inheritance and group circumcision of both males and females was only recently outlawed, and the effects of such practices are still very much felt throughout Kenya.

Education

In 2005, the Kenyan government made a commitment to provide all its citizens the opportunity to receive a PK-6 grade education. However the government was quickly overwhelmed when teenagers and young adults, most with several children in tow, began coming to school. Keeping up with the influx of students has been a struggle because there is little budget to fund enough teachers, resulting in student-to-teacher ratios of approximately 100 to 1. On a visit to one Kenyan school, Peterson learned that it was considered a "national school of excellence" because of the relatively low student-to-teacher ratio (40:1) and because the school building has electricity, water and food for its students.

Orphans

In a country with a population of nearly 37 million, 11 million of those people are parentless children. Around the country children can be found taking care of other children. Organizations such as the Light of Hope Home for Girls and the Rafiki Children's Center, which Peterson and her group spent much of their time exploring, are helping provide the care, education and nourishment these children need, but the harsh reality is that organizations such as these can only care for a small percentage of the children in need.

High Hopes

In Kenya, for each concern are many more hopes. Hopes for more PVC pipe to pump clean water into rural villages and for the money to build wells that will service whole communities. Hopes that through more and better education on the realities of HIV/AIDS and how the disease is spread, people will be better able to protect themselves and stymie the epidemic that has claimed so many Kenyan lives.

The very existence of a public education system is turning one hope into reality. Education is now becoming a part of the country's culture as the young eagerly take advantage of the opportunity to learn.

Peterson stresses that above all else, the people she and her fellow travelers met were most interested in receiving international support so that they might become self-sufficient. International service is done side-by-side with the people of Kenya —“service with” not “service to.”

“Everywhere we went we observed bright, welcoming people with great perseverance and a strong willingness to work and to learn,” Peterson says.

Out of Africa

The night before the WCC Africa Vision Trip members departed Kenya, they posted one last message on the blog they had kept throughout their trip. In it they remarked, “This is our last night in Kenya, and we're all very sad about leaving this place that will never leave us. Even as we can't get home to family and friends soon enough, we're feeling a heaviness about leaving new friends behind ... if only for a while.

WCC travelers (pictured, L to R) Nan Peterson, Becky Pierson, Rob Robertson and John Ross meet up with a group of young children from Nzueni and Kyai, Kenya, taking a footpath to school.



From the Classrooms to Kenya

Nan Peterson has been busy sharing her Kenya experience with the Blake community. Here are some of the projects her talks have inspired:

- Some of this year's Legacy Day groups created fleece blankets that were sent to Light of Hope Orphanage.
- Extended Day students at Highcroft and Martha Long's third graders on the Blake campus created books with pictures and short descriptions of themselves to send to three orphanages in Kenya.
- Highcroft first graders made bookmarks to send with children's books they collected.
- Kindergartners at Highcroft made a friendship book with drawings of life in Minnesota.
- Blake and Highcroft kindergartners collected shoes to send to several children's centers.
- Some of the taxes collected during eighth grade Business Day will be going to Light of Hope, Give Us Wings and Opportunities International, a microfinancing agency in Kenya.
- A Middle School homeroom is sponsoring three children for two months at a children's center.
- A faculty service group collected \$1,000 to pay a Kenyan teacher's salary for one year.
- A buildings and grounds team member donated clothing to the maintenance man at Light of Hope.
- A group of Blake faculty/administrators gave holiday honor gifts to family and friends. The gifts included a chicken, cow or rabbit given in the gift recipient's name to Light of Hope Orphanage and PVC water pipe given in the recipient's name to Give Us Wings freshwater project.
- A Blake donor is sponsoring a child at Light of Hope for one year at \$50 per month.
- A Blake donor paid for a pig and pig food for the Rafiki Children's Center.
- The Blake and Highcroft campuses raised money to purchase a cow.
- Two Highcroft students have decorated and filled shoeboxes with art supplies and clothing to send to Light of Hope.

If you are interested in learning more about service projects for Kenya, contact Blake PK-12 Service Learning Director Nan Peterson at npeterson@blakeschool.org. You can also learn more about the organizations the Africa Vision Trip team visited at the following addresses:

*Light of Hope Home for Girls — www.LMIAfrica.com
Rafiki Children's Center —
www.marafikiglobalaidsministry.com
World Servants — www.worldservants.org
Give Us Wings — www.giveuswings.org*



Beatrice, the spirit who touched the WCC travelers

“When we first arrived at each new location, we were greeted the same way: ‘Welcome home.’ This endearing way to address new friends is reminding us that on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean awaits a home for all of us. It will be our joy to share the countless experiences of our mission to Africa. We hope you’ll join us to explore the possibilities of our new relationships.”

Sharing the Experience

Since her return from Kenya, Peterson has certainly made good on her commitment to share her experiences and to tell the stories of the people she met along the way. And the Blake community has been a lucky recipient of her insights. Peterson has spoken to students at all three divisions of the School during assemblies, and she gave a special presentation to faculty and staff of the Upper School at the beginning of the school year. She also spoke at this year’s all-School Convocation ceremony, and introduced some of this year’s Legacy Day groups to speaker Boni Karanja, a Kenyan native, resident of Plymouth, Minn., and the founder of the Light of Hope Home for Girls in Kenya.

Peterson begins each of her presentations much the same way, letting her audience know that “I am speaking as traveler, not as an expert on Kenya.” And it is probably because of this distinction that her stories leave such an impression. She’ll often pause just a moment when a choke of emotion catches in her voice. Her admiration for the Kenyans she has befriended is evident, especially when she talks about her “heroes,” the teachers, administrators and care givers of the country’s orphaned children.

Though it is easy to spot the differences between life in Kenya and that in the United States, Peterson marvels at the similarities she saw, particularly in the values of the people she met during her trip and those the Blake community upholds. “I saw all of Blake’s values come to life in the people of Kenya,” Peterson says. “They were respectful of both us, as their visitors, and each other. They had great integrity and more courage than I could ever dream of having. And they have a great love of learning.”

Using such similarities as a point of connection, Peterson introduces her new Kenyan friends to her longtime friends of the Blake community. She tells stories about the girls she met at Light of Hope and the joyful children of the Raifiki Children’s Center and how much they would enjoy receiving “friendship letters” and books to read just for pleasure from children in Minnesota. Not surprisingly, Peterson has inspired many classroom projects (see sidebar on page 9) with her heartfelt talks.

Inspired for Life

Prior to the Africa Vision Trip team’s return home, fellow traveler and WCC senior pastor John Ross posted his reflections on the trip blog site. “This has indeed been a trip of extremes,” he wrote. “We are all well, but completely exhausted — physically, emotionally and spiritually drained. Needless to say we have had experiences and witnessed the realities of life we never knew of prior to this trip, and at the same time, we’ve never been so inspired and filled with the hope of the human drive and Holy Spirit.”

Many months have passed since their return, but when the four travelers gather, the connection created during those extreme physical, emotional and spiritual experiences in Kenya is obvious. They greet one another with hugs and give a hearty Swahili hello — “Jambo!” They recall special people they met along the way, such as Beatrice and the teachers and students at the Light of Hope Home for Girls, an organization with whom they plan to maintain a long-term relationship. And, with heavier hearts, they remember people like the little boy in Nairobi who offered his baby sister to a stranger hoping she could receive better care than he could offer.

For each of these new friends, the group has the highest of hopes and the strongest of intentions to help give them wings to fly out of poverty, one feather at time. No matter what, they will begin.

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Alumna Finds Blake Connection in Kenya

Successful documentary photographer **Elizabeth Barnwell '85** was half a world away from her Minneapolis home when a reconnection with Blake caught her completely unaware.

Early last year, Barnwell was traveling through the African nations of Tanzania, Malawi and Kenya with the nonprofit organization Kitegang when the group stopped for a two-day visit at the Light of Hope Orphanage in Kenya, a home and school for girls. As the girls introduced themselves to their visitors, Barnwell couldn't help but notice one girl who stood out from all the rest.

"Anastasia just blew me away from the get go," says Barnwell. "She's the one girl who looks you right in the eye. She sings louder than everybody else. She just sparkled."

At the end of the visit, Barnwell said good-bye to each girl, saving her favorite for last. "As I was saying good-bye to Anastasia, she turned around and I noticed she was wearing a Blake sweatshirt, straight from the same era I went to school there. It had probably walked the hallways when I did."

When Barnwell mentioned the coincidence to the school's headmistress, the woman responded with some surprise that Barnwell felt such a strong connection to Anastasia, saying that the girl actually had very few friends at school because the others found

Photography by
Elizabeth Barnwell

Quarterly Meeting, Council of Orphans,
Namtete, Malawi

her to be odd. This conversation turned out to be a revelation for Barnwell, who had always felt a little out of place socially and academically as a student at Blake.

"All of a sudden I realized that chances are, when I was feeling terrible about myself, someone else was looking at me and saying, 'That one sparkles.'"

The realization opened what Barnwell calls a "gratitude door" toward Blake, compelling her to contact someone at the School to let them know her story. The timing was uncanny. She was ultimately directed to Nan Peterson, Blake's PK-12 service learning director, who in three weeks was setting off on a service trip to Kenya. Peterson told Barnwell that she and her travel companions had seriously considered going to the Light of Hope Orphanage, but that they had decided against it. Barnwell encouraged Peterson to rethink the decision and visit the orphanage while in Kenya, and in the end Peterson's group built a strong relationship with Light of Hope, which they plan to continue in the future.

Barnwell's own relationship with Blake has also added a new dimension. At this year's Legacy Day she graciously shared the photos from her travels in Malawi and Kenya, which were on display in the MacMillan Performing Arts Center this fall. She also gave an eloquent speech on Legacy Day, sharing her experiences, her story of reconnection and her belief that within each of us can be found something that sparkles.

To view more photographs by Elizabeth Barnwell '85, visit www.elizabethphotography.com.



Girls from the Light of Hope Orphanage watch a slideshow of images Barnwell took of them on her first day at the school.



Anastasia, the girl with the "sparkle," wears her Blake sweatshirt.