



Clockwise from left: The author (in back, waving) and friend in a sea of Kenyan school children; Mama Mary and Mama Rosemary saying “asante sana” (thank you) for the donated goods; Sponsored school children in their uniforms from Kaliwa, Kenya.

Small Ripples, Big Impacts

by Nia Sherar

Janna Harrell (my friend and colleague) and I landed at the Jomo Kenyatta Airport just before dawn.



The darkness obscured the scene that has greeted my past arrivals to Kenya; miles of savannah dotted with umbrella topped Acacia trees and corrugated roof topped huts—what most Kenyans call home. It always brings a tear to my eye. This time however, in the darkness, I felt excitement. Kenya!

My earliest fantasy as a child was one of wanting to go to Africa to help plant corn and feed hungry children. As I grew older, the dream stayed with me, but I realized Africans did not need me to help them plant corn, they know how to plant corn. What they need are the resources; the land to harvest and the money to buy seed, as well as access to medicines for when they become sick with deadly diseases like tuberculosis, malaria, and the HIV virus.

As I continued pursue my dream, I was introduced to the concept of microcredit, which is the loaning of small amounts of money to those with no collateral. Averaging around fifty U.S. dollars, the money is used for small income generating businesses. The loans are then repaid so others can borrow. I had finally found a way to help! A hand up, not a hand out.

My first trip to Kenya came as a tourist in 1992 where I made friends of a

school headmaster and a local farmer. In 1998 I traveled again to Kenya, this time to visit my friends, live in their villages, and learn their ways. I brought two thousand dollars of my own money and introduced them to microcredit. We formed women’s groups, gave loans and sponsored children in school.

Upon my return home, a friend said he would make a donation if I would get tax-exempt status from the IRS. And so the Opportunity Fund for Developing Countries was born. The OFDC provides microcredit loans for women in Kenya. Using indigenous teachers, we also provide trainings which include basic literacy (most of these women can’t even write their own name), home cleanliness, and basic and reproductive health.

This trip was to be more of the same. Grabbing our six bulging backpacks and duffels from the carousel, we lugged them onto a cart and started toward the customs official, who gave us a wary eye.

“What is in there?” he asked.

“School and medical supplies for poor children,” I replied.

“Open it!” he said as he waved his hand towards the largest duffel.

We had placed toothbrushes and pens at the top of all our bags so we could make our token offering if necessary. It worked. The officer reached in, took a pen, checked to see if it worked on his hand, and then waved us through to a sea of dark faces waving and yelling, "Taxi, Madam?"

"How much?" I asked one young man.

"Twelve hundred shillings," (approximately seventeen U.S. dollars).

"Too much," I replied, and after haggling for a minute, we reached an agreement of seven hundred Kenyan shillings (about ten U.S. dollars). As we drove into Nairobi we saw many people footing, or walking. Men dressed in suits, women dressed smartly in heels, laborers carrying shovels, all footing. In developing countries where the average salary per day is four U.S. dollars, one simply cannot afford a car that sells at western prices.

After we arrived in Nairobi, I haggled with handcart drivers to get a good price to take our bags to the Acamba, the bus which would take us to Bikeke, our first stop. In Nairobi, we picked up two donated solar lamps. Now, in addition to our six bags, we had the two lamps and two solar panels to carry. Each time I come to Kenya, I swear I will never bring donated goods again. But when the time comes to go, how can I not? We are such a throw away society and these people have so little.

Our trip to Bikeke took 7 hours, bouncing over very pot-holed dirt roads with patches of tarmac here and there. Whenever we stopped, street vendors lined up under our bus window selling bananas, biscuits, and watches. As we drove down the road, we saw giraffe, zebra, baboons, impala, ostrich and wart hogs grazing on the roadside. It's difficult to explain the feeling one gets when seeing wild animals in their natural habitat instead of in a zoo.

Once in Bikeke, a farming community which covers about twelve hundred square miles, we stayed with Isaac and Everline, who are brother and sister as well as administrators of our projects there. When we arrived, Isaac was teaching several women in preparation for them to receive their loans. Each woman must attend their training classes for two weeks before receiving loans.

Mama Rosemary (Kenyan women are called "Mama" followed by the name of their first born child) is typical of the women we help. She has AIDS, and her husband is dead. She also has five children, one of which has AIDS. She cannot write her name. She foots one hour each way to attend our classes so that she can receive a loan of fifty U.S. dollars to purchase corn seed which she will plant, cultivate, harvest, and sell at market. She will repay the loan and send her children to school. Her family has access to a latrine built with OFDC funds.

Mama Alice has four children and her husband was killed in an industrial accident. She received no compensation from the company. She must walk thirty minutes each way, five times a day, just to collect water that is unclean for her family. Two of her children have malaria. She cannot afford the medicine for them so we give it to her for free. One of her daughters has cerebellum malaria. If this is not treated, the child will become 'mad', or insane. Mama Alice can now write her name if she writes it very slowly.

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BY THE NUMBERS

In seven years the Opportunity Fund for Developing Countries has raised almost half of a million dollars. These funds have provided much to women and children of Kenya.

28 latrines, 29 water wells, and 32 water tanks have been provided using funding from the OFDC. The water wells are especially important since they provide clean water for villages as well as limit breeding grounds for mosquitoes.

600

Over six hundred women have received microcredit loans, enabling them to earn small profits and repay their loans. They use the remaining profits to feed their families, buy medicines and send their children to school.

1,800

Almost eighteen hundred mosquito nets have been provided. Two to three children can sleep under one net, giving them safety from malaria carrying mosquitoes.

Over nineteen hundred treatments have been given to children already infected with malaria.

2,000

Almost two thousand children, mostly girls, are attending school, with help provided by the OFDC.

6,000

Almost six thousand women have received training in basic literacy, home cleanliness, basic and reproductive health, HIV and AIDS awareness, simple bookkeeping, and women's rights under Kenyan law.

The OFDC isn't the only local group trying to aid developing countries. When you go, and before you leave, look into these organizations where you, too, can help.

Opportunity Fund for Developing Countries (OFDC)
www.ofdc.org

Choice Humanitarian
<http://www.choicehumanitarian.org>

Globus Relief
http://www.dwmedical.com/p_home.asp