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Home > RANDOM ACTS OF KINDNESS: East Lansing Family Supporting Kenyan Girls? School

RANDOM ACTS OF KINDNESS: East Lansing Family Supporting Kenyan Girls? School ^[1]

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By:

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Sometimes on a July afternoon, as I slog through the red mud of a rural road in Kenya carrying a backpack full of picture books and watching tropical birds flit through the ancient trees overhead, I reflect on the surprising path that brought an Iowa farm girl to this unusual "second job." My husband, Richard, and I have lived in the Lansing area since 1990 and in East Lansing since 1998, but every July, I spend four weeks in Kenya, working on our project of building a secondary school for girls in a rural village and conducting literacy outreach programs at rural elementary schools.

Richard was born and raised in rural Kenya, I was born and raised in rural Iowa, and we met as students at Iowa State University. We knew from the beginning that someday we would give back to Richard's home area. However, in the meantime, we attended grad school at Michigan State University and started a family. When I traveled back to Kenya for a visit after receiving my PhD in English literature, Richard's family and neighbors asked me to consider developing a secondary school for girls in the area. Although there are two outstanding public secondary schools for boys in Richard's area, girls who want a good education must travel long distances and pay high tuition to have the same opportunities. Many families do not want to send their daughters so far from home, so they settle for the poor quality alternatives available.

After we arrived back in Michigan, where I teach college writing and Richard works for the Michigan Department of Agriculture, we committed ourselves to building a high quality school for girls in the area, with a community library and meeting room, science facilities, and highly trained teachers. As parents, we are so grateful that our children were able to attend world-class public schools in East Lansing and we wanted to offer that opportunity to Kenyan children. In 2006, we managed to purchase land, and we broke ground in 2011. Currently, we are 50% finished with

construction. Every winter, Richard travels to Kenya to work on the construction project. Every summer, volunteers and I travel to Kenya to share books, stories, and activities with hundreds of children to promote the joy of reading, as well as hosting a literacy workshop for local elementary school teachers to exchange ideas and information for promoting reading and literacy in local schools.

Financially, this is a huge undertaking. Richard and I have dipped into our own savings and Simbolei Community Assistance Association, the non-profit organization we founded, has raised money through local activities such as the annual Riffs for the Rift concert, cookbook sales, and donation fundraisers. Working with the kids and developing a school for them has been one of the most rewarding activities of our family's life, but we can't finish it alone. We are always looking for volunteers to help with fundraising and outreach programs. We offer presentations for churches, schools, and organizations. This year, I am especially excited that we will be able to take five volunteers to Kenya! These volunteers will help read stories and lead children through literacy related activities in our cooperating elementary schools. We count on our friends and neighbors in East Lansing to help us raise the funds to finish the project and open the school. I hope you will visit our website, simboleiacademy.org [2], and also consider joining us in Kenya this summer. For information about summer or other volunteer activities, you can email us at info@simboleiacademy.org [3].

Photo: The author with school children in Rift Valley Province, Kenya

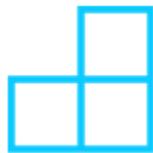
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