

Two Weeks in Kenya

written by Paula Parker-Sawyers

When we left on December 26th, 40+ Hoosiers were excited and committed to bring some joy into the lives of children who live in poverty beyond our imagination. When we arrived in Nairobi, after 16+ hours in an airplane, all of our luggage arrived with us and we all felt that we would make a difference in the lives of many. Several Kenyans proudly displayed their ink stained fingers that proved that they had voted when asked about the elections. We arrived in Kenya December 27th. The country was still on "holiday" because of the elections and the mood was generally upbeat.

After checking into the hotel, modest by American standards, my son and I decided we would watch a little television. Besides old "B" movies, the only thing on most of the stations was coverage of the election and early returns. Two days later, the same coverage was on the television, but the tone of the reporting had changed. The commentators were clearly frustrated by not having any "new" news. However, that did not stop them from analyzing the results and declaring winners in some of the less important races. As an American it was interesting to note the reluctance to predict a winner in the Presidential race. Our media outlets have been known to make predictions with less than 10% of the vote counted. That was definitely not the case in Kenya, and of course, we all now know why there was such reluctance.

One fact, however, was very clear...almost every registered Kenyan had voted, the last we heard was 90% of the registered voters had cast their ballot. Many of those voters had walked for miles to their designated polling place to insure that their voice was heard. All the members of our group expressed awe at such political engagement by the Kenyans. We all wished that Americans would practice their freedom of expression through voting in the same numbers.

We visited the Cottelengo Orphanage and observed the love and care provided by Italian nuns for 70+ children who were victims of HIV/AIDS by the loss of their parents or by contracting the disease themselves. Of course, for me, visiting with the infants and toddlers was both heartbreaking and encouraging. The young ones are loved and cared for by several nuns who give them as much as they have but resources are very limited. Needless to say, the donations of clothes and medical supplies were very well received. Sister Adriana was overwhelmed with the generosity.

On December 30th as we were preparing to move to our next location, we were told that the election results were expected at any moment and that we should be prepared for some disturbances. When we arrived at Lake Navaisha, we learned that the disturbances had escalated and that travel to Eldoret would not be possible the next day as we had planned. We noticed more "hushed" conversations among the Kenyans and a growing tension. That evening, our plans were changed. It was decided that we should do the safari portion of our trip first rather than last in the hope that things would "calm down" enough for us to go to Eldoret.

December 31st we moved to the Masai Mara. Travel in Kenya is always difficult because of the roads and I found myself thinking about our roads in Indiana and how lucky we

are to have smooth roads, little dust, and stop signs and stop lights. It is the little things you notice the most when they no longer are available.

January the 1st symbolized a day of confusion, anxiety, and uncertainty. It was clear, based on the reports of major violence, riots, destruction and deaths, that traveling to Eldoret was impossible. Part of our group was supposed to go to Bungomo while the rest of us went to Eldoret. We had brought over 5,000 pounds of donated goods, including medical and school supplies, arts and crafts, clothes and shoes, books, toys, balls, and drums, toothbrushes, tooth paste, etc. Since our trips to Bungomo and Eldoret were now cancelled, we wondered what we would do, where we would go, and if we would be safe. This is when our prayers and our questions were answered. The needs of Kenya did not just exist in the two cities we had planned to visit.

Part of our group (Bungomo group) decided to stay in the Masai Mara and to help the Masai refurbish their school. They ended up painting the classrooms for the Kindergarten through 8th grade classes, purchasing desks for the classrooms, school supplies and even a sewing machine and cloth for the students.

Our group moved to Nakuru, where we had hotel reservations at the Lake Nakuru Lodge. We arrived in the late evening through a back gate to avoid the fires and riots in the city. Since the Lodge was in a National Park Reserve, we were behind guarded gates. Seeing guards everyday in fatigues, boots, and carrying machine guns was a sobering and scary feeling. The next morning negotiations began with the owner of the lodge to allow us to stay there until it was time for our flight back to the United States. After many conversations, he agreed to a reduced room rate for the additional days in return for our assistance with three orphanages with which he was affiliated. Again, our prayers were answered.

We ended up visiting the three orphanages over the 8 days that we were in Nakuru. We met over 300 children. Most of these children had been abandoned and did not know their parents. The youngest child was 3 weeks old. While we have all seen the commercials of poverty stricken children around the world or have watch National Geographic specials, there is nothing that can prepare you for the first time you see a child whose head was split open by a machete or a baby with toothpick sized legs and a "basketball" sized stomach due to hunger. None of us were prepared and all of us were touched by what we saw and felt.

However, each child was so happy to have visitors who cared about them, if only for a few moments. They took us by the hand and gave us a tour of their humble home. The children were eager to learn from us and to show us what they knew. For me, I sat with several children and practiced their numbers, alphabet and learned a little Kiswahili from them. For others who were part of our group, they took pictures of the children and immediately printed out their picture. For some of the children it was the first time they had ever seen a picture of themselves.

Again, we left behind hundreds of pounds of donated goods. It was clear to all of us that each item would be carefully used and treasured. Of course, we also left money to help purchase food.

Our last act of charity was unplanned, but should have been expected given the turmoil that had developed because of the elections. Several of the staff at the Lake Nakuru Lodge had family members who had fled to Nakuru to escape the riots in Eldoret. Many of those family members had lost everything and did not know what the next day would bring. Without hesitation, several of us left clothes, shoes, and toiletries behind to help families get through the next few days. Money that I had specifically taken for uniforms of school children in Eldoret seemed to be needed more by these families whose belongings had gone up in flames. The smiles and tears of gratitude were touching and humbling. We all were thankful that we were where we were at the moment to help. It was truly an unexpected blessing!

With a truck of security officers in front and behind our little caravan, we left Nakuru on January 10th to return to Nairobi for our long ride home. We were grateful that no one stopped us along the way and that the roads to the airport were open (they were blocked earlier). We returned to the United States tired, dusty, humbled, relieved and grateful.

One of the first questions I was asked by the media once we landed in Indianapolis was if I would go back. Without hesitation I said yes. You might think that that response was spoken by someone who was not thinking clearly after 16+ hours in the air. However, today, January 15th, I can state emphatically that I want to go back to Kenya to help the children who can't help themselves. I want to provide them hope. I want to bring a smile to their face, if only for a moment. I want to give a hug and receive a hug back just because it's the right thing to do. It seems like such an awful tragedy that we have so much here in America when there are so many who have nothing. I hope that with one small gesture I can continue to make a difference in the life of just one child and for me that child is in Kenya.

Thank you again for your continued good thoughts and prayers for me while I was away and I hope that you will continue to keep the children of Kenya in your thoughts and prayers.

THANK YOU,

Paula Parker-Sawyers