

KENYA 2017—CHECKING IT OFF THE BUCKET LIST

Is it because we are growing old that life seems to be on the fast forward track? Where did three weeks in Africa go! My trip to Africa consisted of one week at TEM BAY A (Tembea) Academy teaching and getting to know other sponsors that hailed from Florida, Wisconsin, New Hampshire, Washington DC, Connecticut, Maine, etc. who came to see their sponsored girls graduate. While I am connected to BEADS via Ben and Sue Heersink, I met people that heard about BEADS through social media and had never met Debby Rooney, the founder of BEADS, Sue's sister. I was astonished at the breadth of reach that BEADS encompasses.

Week two we went on safari to three different game reserves travelling on teeth rattling, bone jarring dirt roads. My head actually hit the ceiling of our tour bus after crossing a pesky bump in the road. We passed many TAKA TAKA towns (that means trash) The litter is inconceivable: plastic bags blow in the breeze on every living tree and piece of vegetation accompanied by plastic bottles and the refuse of towns that have no waste management plan. The extent of the litter is unimaginable BUT the safaris were right off the pages of the Discovery channel's National Geographic with lions and elephants, giraffes, crocodiles, rhinos and hippos alongside of wildebeest, warthogs and gazelles. What an imagination God must have! After a long day on safari (I had a Pina Colada poolside in mind), Sue the incredible task master, shamed me into going to a government school that she had brought books to years ago and where BEADS had sent its first interns to teach. The school was a far cry from Tembea. Sue found only one of her books from the hundreds of dollars worth of books that she had provided. Let me describe the condition of the school's library: most of the books had no covers and were layered in an inch of dust. They were unrecognizable. This lead us to conclude that they weren't being used. The children were mostly barefoot and covered in gray dust with flies resting all over their eyes and noses. The picture of poverty was hopeless and what struck me was that there was new construction of a school addition going on. For me it was difficult to justify construction when water, food, clothing and basic health care were so lacking. Sue was bereft at the conditions of the school, books and quality of education. Tembea Academy, the school Debby and sister sidekick Sue founded, was a virtual Harvard in comparison.

My third week was back at Tembea and entailed more bonding with Mary Lou Tyler and my sponsored girl Simma and her classmates. Being at Tembea and teaching was by far my favorite part of my three week stay in Africa.

I got to go to church twice at Tembea. The service is conducted entirely by the students. Worshipping with these girls is an aerobic exercise—we jumped, danced, clapped and hollered. Give us an AMEN, GIVE US AN AMEN AGAIN. PRAISE GOD! My last Sunday there church service lasted three hours with testimonies, scripture readings, praying: presumably asking forgiveness and petitioning God as many of the girls wept. BUT then the joyous singing accompanied by the beat of a drum (which was a resurrected empty water barrel) and the jump dancing resumed. The smiles and laughter returned. Give us an AMEN, Give us an AMEN AGAIN! I am a big fan of JOY—here it was palpable. Church was obviously entertainment and all the different tribes joined in. Forgive me while I step away from Africa for just an aside and read to you from Glorify by Emily Heath—this is a book I took to Africa just in case I couldn't zero in on a topic which turned out to be silly as I found a ton of things I could expound upon. Heath's book is about progressive Christianity. On joy: pg 33 she says: Joy does not always come easily to those of us in the "frozen chosen" traditions. We prefer quiet dignity and reserved praise. On another level,

for those of us who are so keenly aware of the inequalities and pain of the world, being asked to be joyful may even be met with suspicion. How can we be joyful when so many suffer? The Apostle Paul told the Philippians to "rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice." He could be saying the same thing to our churches today, churches that are often filled with negativity and a sense of despair, both for ourselves and for the world. So, there is a question for us to ask ourselves as individuals, and also one every church should periodically ask itself: With all the choices people can make with what to do with their time and resources these days, who would want to be a part of something negative? How much more powerful is our witness to Christ when we rejoice?" Incidentally Paul was speaking to the Philippians about rejoicing when he himself was in prison. But back to Africa!

Sue brought boxes and boxes of storybooks for the nursery school children. I loved reading out loud to these beautiful babies even though I had to have an interpreter as they mostly speak Maa. The children were rapt except for one little girl who was terrified. I believe it was her first introduction to a white person and no matter how expressive I was reading The Hungry Caterpillar she bawled in utter terror.

Among my other joys was teaching a lesson on the thesaurus to all four forms culminating in grading three of the forms assigned paragraphs on a description of a giraffe. The students were challenged NOT to repeat words especially VERY VERY TALL and the word LONG when describing a giraffe. Though they did use the few copies the library had of a thesaurus there were lots of LONG AND TALLS AND VERYS!!! Even though the Tembea girls spoke English we both felt the barriers of language due to thick accents....hard for me to believe I have a Boston accent but I guess it is so. I was pulled away from this lesson and instructed to have the girls write a two page autobiography. Reading eighty essays kept me up till midnight the night before my departure and up at dawn the next day in an effort to finish correcting and honoring each girl's life story.

Let me back up: Earlier in the week I was helping twelve incoming Form One students write their life stories for their admission to Tembea. One young girl named Ann was weeping while writing. Dust is a problem in Africa and you could see where the library table was splattered with her tears. Becky, the visiting sponsor music teacher who taught the girls two songs: Leonard Cohen's Alleluia and Todo's Africa which she hopes to get on You Tube, ran to get toilet paper for Ann to wipe her tears and blow her nose as she was inconsolable. I looked over Ann's shoulder and read: both her parents had died. She was an only child. Her grandmother brought her to the school. Ann hopes to be sponsored. Just writing down her story brought back such sorrow. She couldn't stop crying so we told her Tembea was her family now and gave her many hugs and of course in Gail fashion I cried right along with her. I repeated Ann's story to Debby choking back my own tears. Debby matter of factly told me that was nothing compared to what some of the other girls had endured. I privately thought Debby was callous UNTIL I read those eighty autobiographies. Murder, divorce, prison, homelessness, abandonment and profound hunger were common themes. Girls couldn't go to school because they couldn't pay school fees. They were embarrassed when told to leave school because fees were owed. In addition tribal customs don't feel girls need to be educated. They are the work horses and need to be circumcised and married off for the family's financial gain. Later in class Ann, the new girl, beamed at me as I taught and at church rejoiced in her tattered hand me down frayed collar uniform. Tembea feeds these girls three times a day, assures and encourages them that education will lift them out of poverty and reinforces that girls can make a difference.

Peggy Utterback, after her trip to Africa, warned me that Sue was a force to be reckoned with. Sue crashes early—she is in bed around eight o'clock provided we are not all singing and dancing hysterically with the girls around the firepit. She wakes up around one AM with ideas and lesson plans swirling through her head. You can see her headlamp shining in her tent if you venture to the latrine at night. She goes back to bed between three and four and sleeps till five. Before leaving I popped into her class to tell her it was lunchtime (all of us had already finished Book Club—another institution Sue initiated) Sue was teaching a Pearl S. Buck book in her Book Club and was passing out chopsticks and a huge pot of rice to twelve giggling girls. We ate lunch without her after waiting quite some time. ✓

In conclusion, I have mixed feelings about returning to Africa—it is a harsh land and cruel. I know I will always support this mission though. What gives me hope is also a recurrent theme in the autobiographies: many of the girls came to Tembea in despair. Tribal war and disagreements and prejudices were part of their culture. I believe seven different tribes are represented at Tembea. I read in many essays that though the girls love their individual heritage, they have learned about the customs of the other tribes and they accept each other forming close friendships. Sue and Debby promote teaching that instills independent thinking while exposing these girls to the world via books. Sports, scouting competitions and a plethora of clubs enrich their lives. It is a herculean task but I was blown away at their accomplishments especially when compared to the government school. If you need proof that as Margaret Mead, the famous anthropologist said: "Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Then look no further. I hope Belleville will help continue the Kling girls (Debby and Sue's) legacy: When you educate a woman, you educate a village. BEADS: CHANGING ONE LIFE AT A TIME.

This is a sermon I gave February 12, 2017. I hope that you will consider sponsoring a girl. Please visit the website: www.beadsforeducation.org or contact Debby Rooney rooneydeb@aol.com.

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