

AWCA Tulip Talk
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I recently returned from Nairobi, after visiting Safe Spaces for 10 days. I traveled with 3 other AWCA members, to give workshops to the girls from the Eastland slums during their Easter holiday. Schools were closed and children were free for one month during the month of April. Peninah Musyimi, the founder and director of Safe Spaces, creates workshops and programs during the holiday times so that the girls stay safe and off the streets.



During this period Loretta Simon and Patricia Kennedy were generous to share their time and expertise with the girls. Loretta created dance, injury prevention, music appreciation and Pilates' programs and Pat gave reproductive health and dental hygiene workshops. Kathryn Chlosta and I traveled as Safe Spaces board members and had extremely full agendas. Kathryn shared her computer skills with the staff and gave trainings. She investigated many possibilities for expanding the computer literacy programs within Safe Spaces. One of my goals was to give design direction to the many mothers in the community for their crafts, which they sell to support themselves and their families. I also researched local construction techniques and processes for a future community center.



The first couple of days were spent walking through different neighborhoods in the Eastland slums. We saw devastating situations of how the local people live. The conditions are extremely poor, without proper housing, plumbing, electricity and sanitation. For example, in the Mathare slums alone, there are 800,000 inhabitants and only 3 toilets. To use these toilets, not only are they filthy, but also one has to pay to use them. Since the incomes are either very low or non-existent, most people do not use the toilets. They have other solutions, which are extremely unsanitary and completely out of our realm of thinking. But for them it's all about a lack of resources and survival. The sewage runs between your legs when walking through the very tight alleys they call streets. It is common to walk through (luckily, we had full-height rubber boots on) and witness many children sitting in the waste playing... a sight very difficult for us to watch. We experienced extreme smells of gasoline, urine, feces, burning coal, rubber, local lethal brew, and dust from the drought and poor air quality. It literally made us gag.



The government mostly ignores the communities and they have to fend for themselves. Most people lack education and work. Women work as cleaners when they are lucky or are forced into prostitution. Rape is rampant and girls face serious emotional situations at very early ages.

During our days we visited several primary and secondary schools; day schools and boarding schools and orphanages. Some were quite grim in appearance, but the scholastic talents of the children were high and they are so eager to learn.



We were happy to visit the basketball courts where several of the girls train and play in the only girls team in the slums of Nairobi. They excel at the sport and play at such high levels that just this year 10 girls received full scholarships for secondary boarding schools for all 4 years. We look forward to more girls achieving such rewards in the coming years.



Within Safe Spaces, another strong program is Auto Mechanics. Presently there are 10 girls in this program at different levels. We went to a couple of garages where some are employed as interns. The training program is a win / win for all parties. The girls learn fast and work hard. There are many success stories of graduating girls who are now employed full time in garages in Nairobi and Mombasa.



Before Loretta and Pat began their workshops, it was clear to both of them that the girls seemed very tired and foggy and it was concerning. They both approached me immediately; shared their concerns. We then realized that many of the girls had not eaten for possibly 3 or 4 days prior. Yes, this is their reality and, to have the workshops effective, I immediately organized biscuits to be bought and distributed before the classes began. Although we had lunch prepared for them during these days of the workshops, it was apparent that that was

not enough. The biscuits helped tremendously and we saw immediate transformations in the spirit and energy of each girl. Again, to us in the western world it is normal to have 'brain food' but in such poverty it is not common. It's a luxury which most of us take for granted each day.

Loretta worked with over 40 girls from several ages. The girls were hand chosen to become peer educators, so that the lessons Loretta taught can continue and eventually filter through and reach all 1200 girls in the program. At first the chosen girls were quiet, shy and extremely stiff. Once they established mutual trust, they were experiencing the space and dancing, stretching, laughing, singing and focused on new movements. Such transformations happened in front of our eyes. Loretta worked in a very large space in an open pavilion, which is used as a church on Sundays. The girls are most of the time in cramped tight spaces, which are dark and soiled. Here they had a generous amount of space and Loretta encouraged them through dance and music appreciation to move within large areas and feel the freedom and the open clean air. She introduced them to different styles of music such as jazz, pop, R&B and classical. The girls' faces were beaming and Loretta felt proud.



Pat had 60 girls learn basic dental care and the importance of using your own toothbrush and how to brush; something we take for granted in the western cultures but more challenging for them where clean water is just not available. Sara Banyardalan, a Dutch dental hygienist, generously made a film to help educate the girls in the proper dental care... Sara also fundraised and gave us 1500 toothbrushes to distribute to the girls. Pat used the film and information to teach the girls with the donated brushes.

The reproductive health classes were more challenging even with Pat's -medical background, Pat is extremely knowledgeable on the topic but nothing could have prepared her for the questions and the situations the girls described. These girls are faced with not only awkward, but also dangerous circumstances, from early on. It was an opportunity for Pat to teach important information, which might have been completely new to them. Although they are faced with sexual encounters at early ages, they have never learnt about sexually transmitted infections and diseases. Pat created a safe environment for the girls and it was an opportunity for the girls to ask personal questions about such conditions, HIV, protection, etc. Pat prepared several manuals and posters to leave behind after her teacher

training sessions. Once the course was completed, the girls received graduation certificates and they are now prepared to pass along the information to the other girls in the program.



The four of us visitors took a 2 day break to visit Maasai Mare which was 8 hours from Nairobi. The trip was quite overwhelming for us so the short break in nature was welcoming and much needed. We arrived during sunset and in our view was a family of giraffes. It was breath taking to see their silhouettes in front of the African sunset. The next morning, I woke up to a giraffe outside my door producing immediate goose bumps. That day we were fortunate to see The Big Five (African lion, African elephant, Cape buffalo, African leopard, and rhinoceros) plus many more.



We returned to Nairobi and were guests at the American Women's Club of Kenya (AWAKenya) monthly meeting. Prior to our trip, I arranged that Peninah would be a guest speaker at their meeting. It was a nice group of about 40 women from several different nationalities. We were very welcomed and the experience is always warm and friendly when you are visiting another culture.

Through thick and thin the girls have huge hearts, personalities that shine, passions for life and aspirations for their futures.

They have very little in their lives but yet we have a lot to learn from them. I was personally touched by many and several times on the trip I was in uncomfortable positions which made me stop and think of the richness in my own life and how lucky I am that I was born where I was born.

The moment I returned to the Netherlands I couldn't stop appreciating the clear air and the clean water pouring out of my faucet - just simple things to us, but not simple at all to those in the Eastland slums. I have so much more compassion and admiration for Peninah and her strength and courage since my trip. I remain committed to Safe Space, now more than ever.

