

## The Carpenter High Trip to Kenya

March 1, 2010

Every spring school groups across Canada leave to go on national or international tours. Students can be seen taking photos of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, standing around in groups looking up at Big Ben in London, or strolling up to the Parthenon in the bright Athens sunshine. This is a great thing: travel broadens the mind and helps young people develop a more global perspective.

For two weeks fourteen students and five chaperones from Carpenter High School in Meadow Lake went to Kenya for sixteen days. They landed in Nairobi and after a two-day orientation they went to work in four orphanages: two in Nairobi, one on the outskirts of the city and one in the country. They financed the trip themselves and were also able to raise money to leave a legacy behind. This is a small sample of some of the things they learned:

That driving is an improvisational activity and that road signs and painted lanes are merely suggestions.

That you can get used to the sight of razor wire, high walls and police with sub-machine guns.

That corrugated iron and tin works for walls and ceilings and an open space makes a good window.

That people can be extremely warm and welcoming to total strangers, and that a Kenyan host family a continent and a world away can make a kid from Meadow Lake feel warm, secure and loved.

That when you walk into the Agape Centre orphanage (Agape means love), all you see at first are rusty corrugated metal walls and no people. Then a bell rings and 200 kids, happy smiling kids, coming pouring out of places that don't look like any classroom that you've ever imagined.

That central Africa in February is really hot, fainting hot, and dusty.

That Matatu means taxi, but they're really vans and you can fit over 30 people in and on one.

That 22 volunteers can happily share a 600 sq. ft. apartment, and 32 children and 5 workers can call a bungalow home.

That in the orphanage in the country you'll wake up, have a cup of porridge, do the dishes, sweep the floors, wash the floors with towels, dry the floors with other towels, then wash the towels and hang them out to dry, sweep the driveway, make the kids' beds, and then carry the lunch pails of food (real pails) down the hill (for 25 min.) to serve lunch to your 31 children, after which you get to hang out with them. Then you walk back to the orphanage (35 min. because it's a big hill and you're going up this time), grab some lunch, help with the laundry (by

hand) until the kids return at 4:00, play with the kids and help them with their homework, help serve the supper and then fall into bed at 9:30.

That the working week for a person working at an orphanage (not as a volunteer) is 365 days long.

That in an IDP camp (Internal Displaced People) people construct shelters by bending and binding sticks together to make poles, which are then covered by plastic bags and gunny sacks, split and fastened together. This makes a home for a family of 8, who live on a bag of rice, a chunk of fat, and a bag of corn flour. For two weeks.

That there are at least 400,000 people living in IDP camps in Kenya.

That when a group of Canadians brings enough food for 174 families in an IDP camp and distribute it in the headlights, it's a good thing.

That if you are HIV positive all the antiretroviral drugs in the world don't do you any good if you don't have the money for bus fare and walking to the clinic is impossible.

That there's a ten year old boy at Agape named Simon who jumps and laughs and turns cartwheels and treats everyone with a smiling grace and who takes 24 pills a day to manage his HIV. And who quietly states that when he turns twelve he will stop taking the pills because he understands how the next and last eight years of his life will play out if he continues taking them.

That when a group of Canadians buys a goat for the orphanage from the local market the woman who announces it doesn't say, "We have a goat!" She says instead, "We have milk!" And the kids go nuts.

That people will happily go to school from 7:00AM to 4:00 or 5:00 PM because it's a ticket to a better life, and it's a safe place to be.

That water doesn't come from a tap, it comes on the back of a donkey.

That people who have virtually nothing still rise and cheerfully greet the new day. And freely give what they have to those with less.

That the simple act of going out and getting your hair done can ensure that a family will eat for the next two weeks. And when two people go, it equals a month of provisions.

That you can give all your stuff away and not only not miss a thing, but wish that you had more to give away.

That fresh vegetables and meat are luxuries that you can do without.

That having a family to come home to is the best thing in the world.

That if people offer to take you out on a safari to view the animals you go because you know that this is something they want to show you. But you don't want to leave where you're working because you feel you haven't done enough, and every day seems so precious when the needs are so great.

That when you get home everything looks different and you'll never see things the same again, and that this is something called reverse culture shock.

That as a person you aren't fully complete until you think of others before you think of yourself.

That all travel broadens the mind, but some travel broadens the heart. Forever.

The students who went on this trip want everyone to know that they can't begin to thank the people responsible for making it happen enough. The parents that I spoke to echoed this sentiment. Thanks to Krystle Valliere, Jennifer Heddon, Kelsey Obrigewitsch and her father Darwin, Riley Epp and his mom Tamara, Brian Gislason and Andrea Halstead for sharing their experiences.

The students of Carpenter High were able to leave behind a legacy of: 31 school uniforms (sweaters socks and shoes); household items including plates, forks, knives, spoons and pails for water; hair clippers; 1000 lbs of books; a guitar; 3 goats with feed; water for 1 month; feed for chickens; food (rice, maize and beans) for students; 1 fridge; 15 duffle bags; food for the IDP camp; additional beds, and a lot of love.