

## **Belinda's Visit to Meru, Kenya 2014-11-03 to 2014-11-21**

In this document, I wish to share my experience of what I observed during my 18-day visit to Meru, Kenya to stay with the Executive Director of Compassion Beyond Borders Lawrence Tharp and his wife Purity. The goal of my trip was to learn as much as I could about the local situation so as to explore ways to help one of CBB's project "Joy World" to become self-sustaining. Since the trip, I still have not determined what needs to be done but I have a much better understanding of the poverty, the needs and the dire condition young girls face everyday.

### **Background**

I have supported CBB for nearly 10 years and became a CBB board member about five years ago. The mission of CBB is to educate girls from the poorest of the poor. According to the United Nations, the World Bank and UNICEF, educating girls is the single most effective way to achieve human development and poverty alleviation. An educated woman will have fewer children, healthier children, and better-educated children. Educated girls and women contribute to the political, social and economic development of their community. CBB currently provides financial support to educate young girls in Kenya, India, East Timor and Guatemala. 100% of contributions to CBB go to educating poor and vulnerable girls as the Board of Directors fund the overhead.

Three years ago, I started the CBB **Nurse and Community Health Worker Training Scholarships** as a

way to honor my mother's 40 year career as a radiologist and her strong belief in education. My mother's father had told her and her sister that daughters do not receive family inheritance so all he would do is to provide them a good education. That turned out to be a blessing: after the communists took over China and my mother escaped to Hong Kong, she was able to practice medicine in Hong Kong and provided for her family left behind in China. When my father suffered a stroke in his fifties that prevented him to continue his practice in architecture and had to sell the firm while my siblings and I were all studying abroad, my mother had to pay off my father's hospital bills, pay off the lawsuits from my father's clients, while continuing to support our studies. She would not allow us to return to Hong Kong to work because education would be her greatest gift to us. When two of her friends passed away at a young age, she also helped the children of those two families to receive post-secondary education.

The mission of CBB coincides with my mother's belief in the importance of a good education; the Nursing/CHW Scholarships would enable young women to receive post-secondary career training, thus enabling them to help themselves and others. The Nursing/CHW Scholarships currently fund students in Kenya, India and Guatemala.

### **CBB work in Kenya**

In Kenya, CBB used to just provide financial support for girls to attend school. Even though primary school tuition is free, all the schools require uniform and fees to buy books, stationery, and supplementary tutoring.

Unemployment in Kenya is 40%<sup>1,2</sup>. Even those who have a job would be fortunate to make the equivalent of US\$3 to \$5 a day. By comparison a uniform would cost roughly \$10. After Lawrence moved to Kenya, he quickly realized that many girls not only come from poor families but they were being physically and sexually abused as well. He quickly built a hostel to get the girls out of such dangerous environment. The need was so huge that CBB now has two hostels housing 46 girls, plus another 5 who stay with Lawrence and Purity. In Kenya, CBB currently supports the education of 300 girls, 50 of whom also receive shelter. Lawrence also has since acquired nearly 6 acres of land in order to grow beans, corn and vegetables for the 50 girls. I had not previously realized how expensive it is to shelter, feed and clothe 50 girls, ranging in age from 4 to 20 years of age. He buys rice by the gunnysacks. At least he does not have to buy corn and beans that the hostel girls raise, which is the primary diet there.

Each hostel has only one matron. This is possible because the girls all have chores to do around the house, such as cleaning and cooking. The older girls also help care for the younger girls, especially with their schoolwork. The girls are in general quite obedient but there have been occasional problems - some would abuse other girls, others would steal food. This is not surprising considering these girls had to be tough to survive the conditions they had been under. While I was there, a few girls from one of the

hostels went to a soccer game instead of attending Church on Sunday. On another occasion, a few girls scared and chased after other girls during a power outage in the evening. Lawrence and Purity had to apply tough love and punish girls when needed. Contrary to Kenyan society that believes in corporal punishment, they do not believe in beating children and they do not yell and scream. I personally have seen them sit down with disobedient girls and explain to them how their behavior is incorrect, how they need to change, and their expectations of them. Prior to my arrival, a disobedient girl was sent back to her family after many warnings. Fortunately this girl did not come from an abusive situation, only a family that was extremely poor. After the girl went home, she was reminded that she had nothing to eat; so after a month, she asked to return to the hostel. Lawrence and Purity agreed to let her back for a month conditional upon good behavior. I am glad to report that the girl has improved her behavior since her return; after consulting with the matron, Lawrence and Purity allowed the girl to stay. The girl even wrote one of the best notes to me among the many thank you notes I received from the girls; she mentioned how grateful she is for what Lawrence and Purity have done for her. The disobedient girls were punished by not being able to attend the going-away party (more about the going-away party later). The girls like parties because they get to dress up, meet the other hostel's girls, play, and eat very good food, and so this was quite a serious punishment for them.

The area around Meru is very green and lush, with many corn and bean fields. As mentioned before, Lawrence and Purity have several acres of corn & bean fields

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<http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/?articleID=2000082985>

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<http://www.tradingeconomics.com/kenya/unemployment-rate>

to feed the girls. Because of two rainy season, the crops grow twice a year and needed weeding regularly. The girls from the hostels fought to be included on the weeding team. I have never seen any children so anxious to work. The four girls who are staying with Lawrence and Purity are the same way. As soon as they get up in the morning, they would start doing their chores, even before breakfast. One evening, I caught them singing and dancing while dinner was being prepared. Even four-year old Consolata, who had just started staying with Lawrence and Purity since September, tried to find chores to do, although the older girls get upset at her for making a mess.

### **Places I visited**

I got to visit 2 primary schools and a secondary school that these girls attend. Some are better than others. One did not have electricity hence it has no lights, and many of the rooms only had dirt floor. I also got to go with Lawrence and Purity to interview two candidate hostel girls. They were recommended respectively by a teacher from the primary school in Kaaga and a school chairman in Kambiti. Both girls are orphans. One girl was living with an aunt who is also caring for 3 boys. Another was assigned by a village chief to live with a local family. Neither girl appeared to be abused but their guardians were not financially able to care for them properly. Both girls were brought into the hostel quickly. Lawrence and Purity had to arrange for their schooling for the next school term, get them uniforms, underwear, towels, regular clothes, clothes for attending church Sunday, and medical checkups - just more necessary expenses I had not appreciated previously.

I saw men all along the main highway pounding at rocks, earning maybe \$3 a day - all the gravel is hand pounded that way! I haven't seen such poverty since the early '60s in Hong Kong. The towns I visited in the remotest parts of China were much better than Meru, which is the 7th largest town in Kenya. Yet Kenya has just recently been moved up to a "median income" developing country. I hate to see what a "low income" developing country is like.

The infrastructure in Kenya is minimal. Only the main highways are paved. All the side roads are non-paved dirt roads, which makes 4WD a necessity. I brought two pairs of shoes with me. During my 18 days of stay, I washed one pair once and another pair twice. Most towns do not have sidewalks. Since I was there during the rainy season, my shoes were always muddy. While there is main (potable) water supply and electricity, the services are extremely unstable. The power was often out; fortunately Lawrence's house has a back up generator. The last week of my stay was without main water supply; we had to rely on agricultural (non-potable) water, boiling & filtering what we need for cooking and drinking. According to Lawrence, as of 2014-12-07, his house is still without potable water.

Besides getting to meet the 50 rescued girls, I also got the chance to meet Jackline, one of the first recipients of the **Dr. SY So Memorial Fund**. She is receiving her nursing certificate Dec 10. I was so overwhelmed with emotions when I met her that I had to fight back tears. I told her about my mother and the reason I created the scholarship fund. She was most appreciative and thanked

me many times. She is extremely intelligent and articulate with a bright future ahead. My mother would have been very proud to see her become a nurse. I have accomplished a lot professionally and have done a lot of volunteer work. The scholarship fund created in memory of my mother is the best thing I have ever done, it's what I am the proudest of.

In between all the activities Lawrence and Purity have to do, such as buying food for the hostels, managing the weeding activity for the corn and bean fields, meeting with potential hostel girls, visiting school teachers or school principals, checking on the girls in the hostels, taking the girls for medical check-ups, they managed to take me sight-seeing. We went to Meru National Park one day, and the entrance to Mount Kenya and the folk art market nearby another. Since I am a volunteer for the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market, I spent time with many of the folk artisans and dealers to explain to them the SFIFAM and left my business cards with them.

The safari trip to Meru National Park was especially memorable. Since Lawrence has a 4WD vehicle, we felt we could save some money from having to rent a vehicle. The guide who was scheduled to meet us there did not show up, and a worker who is not a regular guide led us. Both the ranger at the gate and the substitute guide told us the road condition was fine, that we should not have trouble driving through the park. Well, they were wrong. Within half an hour of entering the park, we got stuck. After going back and forth many times, with Lawrence and the guide getting immersed in mud, the guide had to call

for help. Two rangers came with a 4WD vehicle and cable. They got us out, only to leave us at a location where we immediately got stuck again. One of the rangers asked Lawrence to get out of the truck, tried to drive the truck and proceeded to get us even deeper in the mud. The rangers went away and said they would get more help. A little while later, a tractor came and pulled us out - this time all the way for almost a quarter mile until we were safely out of the muddy area. We had arrived at the park at daybreak so we still had a full day ahead. We went on and had a wonderful time, seeing lots of giraffes, zebras, elephants and waterbucks; quite a few hippos, gazelles, baboons, and a family of rhinos. The highlight for me was seeing a leopard and warthog.

#### **Farewell & end-of-school-term party**

Since the school was out for the year, and many of the hostel girls received prizes for their high performance, Lawrence and Purity decided to have a going away party for me and celebrate the end of the school term as well. I had never been to a goat market before so they decided to get a goat for the party. The Saturday before my last week there, we went to the goat market and bought a goat large enough to feed at least 60 people. Purity took the goat to her Dad's place for him to slaughter for us. The following Wednesday, most of the hostel girls (except for those who sneaked out to the soccer game, and misbehaved during the power outage) were rounded up early in the morning to Lawrence & Purity's place. We all then got to work - peeling potatoes and carrots, and cooking a huge pot of rice, a huge pot of mash food (potatoes with vegetables), and a huge pot of goat stew. While waiting for the food to cook, many of the

girls played with soccer balls, volleyballs, jump ropes, or just relaxed in the garden. I took lots of photos because the girls just love to have their photos taken. When the food was finally ready, the girls lined up, with the youngest and smallest ones being served first. They may be little but they sure could eat. Their dishes were filled at least three times the amount of what I could eat. Afterward, the girls played some more, then Purity had them dance and sing for me. Purity had also asked them to draw and write me cards, which I will treasure forever.

Prior to my trip, I had been concerned about the growing security problems in Kenya, as well as the threat of the spread of Ebola from West Africa to other parts. I also knew that God would watch over me and see me through any troubles. To show how God was watching over me, I almost missed my return flight but didn't. Meru is normally a 5 hr drive from Nairobi. On this day, it was more than 6 hrs, having witnessed at least 2 serious accidents, and barely missed having a head-on collision by an on-coming car that was passing a truck. After reaching Nairobi, we rested a few hours at the hotel where Lawrence and Purity were to spend the night, as my flight was not to depart until 10:40pm. What normally was a 45-minute drive to the airport took us 3 hrs! By the time I arrived at the airport, it was after 10pm. I had experienced rushed hour traffic in New York City, San Francisco, Hong Kong, and Beijing. Nairobi's traffic was the worst I had ever seen. Even the taxi driver said he had never seen such mess. The people at the KLM check-in desk scolded me for arriving so late but allowed me to check in my luggage. I went through immigration and security

smoothly, and arrived at the gate just as the economy class started boarding. I was not sure if my luggage would get on the plane with me but everything was fine.

The trip to Kenya made me appreciate how blessed my life has been. When I was growing up, I was never hungry; I had nice clothes to wear, house to reside, and clean water to drink. These basic things I took for granted are still not available to more than a billion people in the 21st century<sup>3</sup>, with 1.2 billion people still living in extreme poverty. I met young girls in Meru who were abandoned by their families and had to fend for themselves. Some had to go around begging for food; others had to sell their bodies in order to have money to buy food. Still others were forced to be prostitutes by their own father or grandfather so they can have money to buy alcohol. These are girls as young as 10 years old!

Although I do not have any immediate solutions to make some of Joy World's activities self-sustaining, I do have a better understanding of the local situation. I have some ideas that I hope to work on in the coming year. With 40% unemployment, many high school and college graduates are unemployed. I heard stories about people bribing government and company officials just to ensure that their applications would get in front of the proper officials, with no guarantee of employment. Such information is extremely troubling and discouraging. What will happen to these nice girls? The government appears to be

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<sup>3</sup> The Millennium Development Goals Report 2014, p.9.  
<http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Resources/Static/Products/Progress2014/English2014.pdf>

doing its part to encourage foreign direct investments, invest in building infrastructure across the country, and control domestic security problems. Its horticulture and agriculture exports are growing. I saw healthy, industrial-size fields planted with tea, coffee, rice, pineapples, wheat, and green houses in most of the areas I visited. Recent oil and gas discoveries<sup>4</sup> will no doubt help drive the growing economy further. Maybe by the time the CBB hostel girls graduate from high schools, Kenya's employment outlook will be improved. Nursing is probably one of the few degrees where one would have no trouble finding employment immediately upon graduation and without bribes. Perhaps by the time these girls graduate high school, the Nursing/CHW Scholarship Fund would receive enough donations that more scholarships would be available to all the good students who wish to become nurses or nurse-aides. At the very least, I hope their opportunity to receive high school education and the responsibility they learn living in the hostel would teach them to delay having children, be good mothers and be responsible citizens when they become adults.

### **Final thoughts**

I am amazed at the resilience and am impressed by the diligence of the hostel girls. I am thankful for the opportunity to see them acting like children: laughing, playing, being silly, getting excited, and yes getting into trouble. The awful, abusive conditions they once lived under had not completely robbed them of their childhood, their wonder and excitement. Perhaps this is the biggest gift provided

by Lawrence and Purity and CBB donors – allowing children to be children: go to school, learn, play and laugh with full stomachs and a roof over their heads.

### **For more information**

For more information on Compassion Beyond Borders, its projects and annual reports, please visit <http://www.compassionbb.org/>

Donations may be made with personal checks from US and non-US banks to **Compassion Beyond Borders**  
**P. O. Box 22991**  
**Santa Fe, NM 87502, USA**

Donors in the US may also donate through Network For Good at <https://www.networkforgood.org/donation/ExpressDonation.aspx?ORGID2=352217067>

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-09-18/kenya-sees-oil-resources-almost-doubling-with-more-drilling.html>



**Figure 1.** Girls from the hostel weeding the corn & bean field. There are 3 such fields that CBB bought in order to feed the girls throughout the year.



**Figure 4.** Girls relaxing and having fun at the party.



**Figure 2.** Classroom of a school where some of the hostel girls attend. This classroom only has dirt floor. The school has no electricity.



**Figure 5.** Girls playing while waiting for the food to cook at the party.



**Figure 3.** CBB supports 300 girls in Kenya for their schooling; 50 of whom also receive shelter.



**Figure 6.** Jackline is one of the first recipients of the Dr. SY So memorial fund which provide financial support to nurse and community health worker training. She receives her nursing certificate Dec 10 2014 with a bright future ahead.



**Figure 7. Mount Kenya. The highest point is at 5,199 metres (17,057 ft), making it the highest mountain in Kenya and the second highest in Africa.**



**Figure 10. A rhino family in Meru National Park.**



**Figure 8. The four girls who live with Lawrence and Purity, in front of Mt Kenya.**



**Figure 11. A family of giraffes. Large number of giraffes, zebras and elephants roam in Meru National Park.**



**Figure 9. Lawrence, Purity and the four girls who currently live with them.**



**Figure 12. Very graceful looking gazelle. Gazelles usually don't stay still so I was fortunate to get this shot.**