feature | global citizens

My Experience in the Slums of Kibera, Nairobi

Mary Davidson

Several years ago I made a critical decision in my life to leave my comfortable home in the suburbs of New York City and travel to Kenya with an organization called Cross Cultural Thresholds for a five-day work trip in the slums of Nairobi.

Cross Cultural Thresholds is an organization dedicated to working with local grassroots leaders focused on the education, care, health and hopes of the poorest of the poor and the voiceless—the children who struggle every day to scrounge some bits of food to fill the unquenchable hole of hunger. In these slums, food is the first priority, safety is the second, lodging is the third and education is an afterthought. Cross Cultural Thresholds identifies and works with those few leaders who have managed to find their way out of this deep despair to look back and, with unimaginable determination and vision against all odds, try to bring others along with them.

While there, our group's daily routine would be a range of work: some of us would build classrooms in the midst of mud and fresh flowing sewage while others in the group would bring some bit of education and exposure of the arts to the children.

As the day came closer to departure on that 18-hour trip by air to Nairobi, I asked myself why in my middle age with a secure life had I been so touched to travel over to what was certainly going to be a challenging five days in ways I could not yet even imagine. I remember specifically on the eve of departure a moment when I walked into my bathroom—warm in the midst of a wintry cold day outside—flicked on the shower to let the water warm up, flushed the toilet, and the revelation came to me that I would never again experience this situation in the same way. At that moment I could not fully fathom how profoundly different I would feel upon my return about hot running water and a flushing toilet.

As an American, I grew up thinking that where there is poverty we must try to change things and in a hurry. To save the world from all its evident and not so apparent malaises was possible—throw some money at it, send over the Peace Corps, teach the gospels of the Bible, take over a country in the name of democracy and human rights.

Before our departure to Kenya, we had been well prepared to expect the unexpected. Various 'what if' situations had been explained to us and I thought that I was fully ready to be a part of a team on its way to 'save at least this corner of the world.'

When we got out of the van to enter Kibera (one of the slum areas of Nairobi), where our orphanage is, I was nearly struck down by the smell, which was so strong that it seemed to take on a physical form. The overwhelming sense of being enveloped by it did not allow me to focus on anything else until I became aware of the utter and complete sense of chaos, the movements of huge numbers of people with no apparent destination. Somebody reminded me to watch where I was walking to avoid the rivulets of fresh sewage, the carcasses of dead dogs, the little tiny children running up to us with their invariable and joyful shouts of "Hello!" and "How are YOU?"

I was not discouraged. I was thrilled to be there to 'help', to make a difference, to have an impact—to solve the problems of poverty. Certainly I was uncomfortable by the realities of the venue, but I knew that anything was possible and I could let that discomfort go. I would just apply our well-worn American practices of assessing the problems, then design and apply the solutions and all would be well. Idealism at its best!

When we walked through the very crude fencing that was the entrance to the orphanage, I was staggered by the faces of 300 children, ages 4-17. Many had huge smiles and looked at us with wonderful joy; others sat on the edge of the circle and looked uncertain and a bit scared and subdued. I wondered about them. I knew that I was looking into the eyes of many who had suffered unimaginable abuse of all kinds in their very short

photography | ©Phillip Ennis

The children ate their lunch, a non-nutritious gruel with their fingers, having patiently waited in a long line to put out their little tin bowls for one scoopful of food.

lives—starvation at an early age, most irreparably scarred by the simple reality of being orphans in the midst of desperate poverty. My heart rang out with "these poor children—it is all so sad."

I looked around and gauged the work to be done—the classrooms that we would try to build in our brief visit and so much else that we had planned. I knew that we would make such a measurable difference to these children with all of our 'doing' and we would go home having accomplished so much for them. This sense of anticipated accomplishment gave me such a good feeling and I couldn't wait to get to work.

The first few hours were most successful (by our standards) with hammers and shovels going at full speed, everyone working hard and the children watching from their classes. Lunch time came and we ate our box lunches that had been prepared by our hotel and the children ate their lunch, a non-nutritious gruel with their fingers, having patiently waited in a long and very slow line to put out their little tin bowls for the one scoopful of food. I noticed the contrast—our healthy and plentiful food versus their 'slop'—and a slight twinge of unease came over me.

We went back to work for the afternoon. A few hours later, with comments like "job well done!", off we went back to our comfortable hotel and another full meal. As we debriefed over dinner, we expressed some of our discomfort and fear about Kibera, and our concerns for the health and well being of the children. We all realized that after only one day we were coming up against some disquiet that we couldn't or didn't want to articulate.

The next day was both a little more comfortable and a lot more uncomfortable. As we walked through the entrance of Kibera, we were fully prepared for the sights and smells. We started greeting people as we walked past them. We smiled at the children and when they asked, "How are YOU?" we replied, "I am fine—How are YOU?" They loved the interchange and kept repeating their well-learned lines, ever louder and with more certainty. I thought to myself that on my next trip I would walk through the 6 square miles of Kibera and try to teach every child I could find a few more lines to greet foreigners.

Discomfort came as we entered the grounds of our orphanage. All was the same: some children laughing and smiling in their greetings, others sitting alone and not sure or not believing. And I became more unsettled as I realized that the work that we were doing was wonderful, impactful and would make a difference to each child… but what else?

Thus began the real discomfort for me—we had come to build, to 'do', not necessarily to become attached. After all, we might

photography | ©Phillip Ennis

never see these children again and emotional attachment in a world so very distant in time, place and circumstance had not been part of my equation. One of the customs in Kenya is that the children do not shake hands; they bend and present the tops of their heads to be patted in greeting, as a sign of reverence for the elders and affection to the children by their elders. It is only after that connection is made that they may look in an elder's eyes.

The second day passed much the same as the first, but now I came to realize that the time schedule we had set up for ourselves was a bit unrealistic. Within our cultural standards and expectations it was fully possible, but that was without all the extras that were expected in the Kenyan culture. What about conversation? What about taking some time to sit and relax with the teachers? How about running around a bit with the children?

Once again we were faced with our cultural pressure of 'doing' and 'accomplishment' while our hosts looked at time in very different ways. The sun came up and the sun went down and in between there were no set hours to 'do', but there was an expectation to 'be' together, to share each others' stories. The hammers were no longer banging away, the shovels had stopped heaving the mud around and in the last hour there, we were quietly together, listening and speaking with each other. The job could get done tomorrow and as we returned to our hotel, we experienced a strangely different sense of the day than that of our first day.

The third day was busy, or at least the morning was, and the afternoon was devoted to 'being' with the children, playing some of their very simple games created with the detritus and discarded objects of slum life. We forgot about their dirty fingers that clasped our hands and our cleanliness-is-everything attitude was ignored as we sought that human touch. The cross-cultural shift had begun to take place. Changes in attitude began to seep through our bodies, hearts and minds and released each of us to a new awareness of 'being' in a very different community but with all the same human needs for affection, respect and attachment. All of this meant breaking through some deeply ingrained attitudes of expectations about success and accomplishment.

The fourth day we attempted to get caught up, back on schedule, and each of us could feel the tension of having relaxed too much the day before. We had had too much fun and now we had to work really hard. But when the children finished their class work in the morning, they wanted to spend time with us to teach us new games. They showed us the letters they had written to each of us to take to our families at home describing their lives in Kenya so that we would never forget. Did we know what an elephant looked like and had we ever seen a picture of a giraffe? Did we know that they had these animals in their country called Kenya? Someday, they said, they might even be able to see a real one, not just a brightly colored picture. Tears welled up in my eyes as I realized how many times I had seen elephants, giraffes and zebras and only a few miles away from these eager and proud children. Could they ever imagine a tiny bit of my life or would they always imagine it in terms of their own?

Whether the images in their minds accurately reflected my actual life, none of that mattered. We had crossed over the cultural threshold of a far deeper understanding of each other via other rituals: patting all those little heads, most marked by the scars of malnutrition; catching and throwing balls, so old and overused that they were always leaking air and having to be blown up constantly; practicing their penmanship with letters for each of us to take home; holding hands as a way to reassure each other that the human touch was so much more important than the last nail banged into the corner of the building.

On the fifth day the children performed several skits, sang out with rich and sure voices, and thanked us in all sorts of different ways including dances and poetry. None of us knew quite what the specific words meant but we were each very clear about the message.

As we walked through the fence we had entered five days before, full of the certainty of our purpose and clear about our expectations of the week, I was struck by how all of us had changed in ways we would not even fully realize for weeks, months and even years. I looked back and saw all the beautiful work we had gotten done and I was proud of that, and there was the profound realization of so much more.

These children were not victims; they were strong and had already endured so much more than most of us would in a lifetime. They had survived, still loving and trusting 'the other,' the foreigner who came in to their midst. Their innocence was palpable and yet their maturity could be spelled out in one word: wisdom. I clutched close to my heart the memory of that little ritual of patting their tiny, scarred heads and how they had reciprocated by the soulful look into my eyes, not asking, not expecting anything except the connection of one human to another.

In those short five days, inside this filth-ridden slum, grace had entered and was present in our midst. Our cultures, too often defined by profound differences, had connected and changed each of us.

Mary Davidson *has a rich history of investment management and holds advanced degrees in Business and History. Employed by The Bank of New York for 25 years, Mary managed stock and bond portfolios, each minimally $1M. She also has a broad range of experience in education—from classroom teaching to fund-raising and alumni affairs. She travels to Africa frequently to improve the quality of life for those in poverty, especially orphaned children in Kenya. She was honored to be initiated into the Maasai community in the summer of 2009. In addition to serving as a Board member of Kosmos, she is a long-time board member of several other organizations including World Learning. An avid reader and international traveler, Mary is committed to lifelong learning and her passions include music and theatre.*

gallery two | the children of kibera

Phillip Ennis

About Phillip Ennis

Interiors, location portraiture, architecture and landscape photography are the life's work of master photographer Phillip Ennis. His personal work includes shoots in Africa and Nicaragua published in Kosmos Gallery Two. Many of the world's leading magazines, designers, decorators, architects and manufacturers rely on Phillip to capture the essence of their creations. He establishes a mood in his photographs, which exudes a sense of intimacy with the subjects he shoots. www.phillip-ennis.com