Compassion Story of the Month

With Brattleboro voting overwhelmingly to become part of the international Charter for Compassion, the Reformer and The Commons have agreed to publish a "compassion story of the month." This is the twentieth. Information on submissions from Brattleboro area residents is offered below.

Under the Radar: The Power of Community

Joyce Vining Morgan

We were warned.

Every few years since meeting legendary environmentalist Wangari Matthai at Brattleboro's School for International Training, Reverend Lise Sparrow has led groups to Kaiguchu, a couple hours drive from Nairobi, in the green terraced foothills of Mount Kenya - Wangari's homeland. Traditionally, the groups carry donations of clothing, food and school supplies for the AIDS orphans in the community and the elders who parent them.

Lise warned us that a Kikuyu village welcome involved an invitation to join its older women in a traditional dance. Once we were all in the dance circle and had melded into the synchrony of the dance, we would be escorted as guests into the village.

And so it was.

The symbolism is powerful. In US news reports we learn of Kenya's political turmoil, the tribal strife, the violence that could wrack the country even without terrorists from abroad attacking malls and hotels. But what we met, well under the radar of politics and power-struggles, and against alarming odds, was community.

In Kibera, in Nairobi, one of the world's most notorious slums and Africa's largest, we were taken to SHOFCO (Shining Hope for the Community), an NGO born of one disaffected young man's vision for a better life. He began with a soccer ball and a few players; then he founded elementary schools for girls which are now the center of community facilities: a medical center, adult education centers, day care, a library, a system of purified water delivered to bright blue water stations by overhead pipes (to avoid ground contamination and to promote easy monitoring). Step by step that young man and his community have brought all this into being.

Then we drove through Kenya's lush green to Kaiguchu, to the welcome dance and homestays with local families. We brought 26 suitcases of clothing and supplies for the village (our own needs were limited to carry-ons). We were assigned tasks set by a new boarding secondary school three-quarters established, with the first class due to graduate in December of 2019. Weru Integrated (meaning co-ed) Secondary

School (WISS) began as the dream of another young man, who looked at a deserted building and saw a school – answering the educational needs of children who had finished elementary school either locally or in Kibera and who would otherwise not have means to attend secondary school. Primary school is free in Kenya but secondary school, is not.

Funds had been raised in Vermont for a water-purifier, supplies, and two cows to join the one previously purchased by donations to provide milk for the students. We had 5 days, working with the school community, to: build a cow shed, help students create a mural for the 30x15 foot back wall of a half-built dining hall, establish initial health records for every student, and teach some African American history and literature - mindful of local pride in the Kenyan roots of an American president.

On our first day at WISS, the students learned that we were a pastor, four teachers, two students, an artist, a carpenter and his wife – an engineer (students were visibly surprised), a woman lawyer (more surprise), a male chef and a male nurse (audible surprise). As we began our work, the boys soon learned that girls could also build. Differing interpretations of Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise" made for lively discussion. We all sang "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing." Students played the Kenyan National Anthem on recorders brought by the Vermont group two years earlier. Every member of the school community and our whole group created the mural together. Finally, we all planted trees, as Wangari would have wished.

One student, herself from Kibera, told me she was Luo and had been very fearful of coming to school in Kikuyu territory, but soon realized that WISS students came from all over Kenya and formed one community. She messaged me later to tell me that she had memorized "Still I Rise."

No warning prepares you for the magnificent synchrony of dreams coming alive.

Kaiguchu is being considered to become one of Brattleboro's sister communities.

Submissions, from Brattleboro area residents, for future publication, not to exceed 650 words, should be emailed to: compassionstory@gmail.com or mailed to: Compassion Story of the Month, c/o Robert Oeser, PO Box 6001, Brattleboro, VT 05302. Please include your name, address, phone number and email address. Earlier submitted stories will automatically be considered in subsequent months.