

Kenya Help

2020 Fall Newsletter

Supporting women and youth in Kenya

P.O. Box 516
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November 2020

THE EFFECTS COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON OUR LEARNERS

Hillary Agisa

On March 15, 2020, the Kenyan government abruptly all closed schools and colleges in response to COVID-19, disrupting nearly 17 million learners. The social and economic costs have not been borne evenly, with devastating consequences for marginalized learners, including the girls and boys sponsored through Empower the World Foundation (ETW). Research conducted by UNESCO shows that these school closures exacerbated previously existing inequalities and that children already most at risk of being excluded from a quality education have been most affected, leading to nutritional and childcare challenges, with resultant financial cost implication to households who have no work.

One of the chief impacts is absence of in-class teacher contact, occasioned by social distancing. On-site learning has been replaced with digital learning. However, inaccessibility of technology and reliable internet access has barred learners in rural regions or from underprivileged families, including those sponsored by ETW. Many of our students have confirmed to me that remote learning did not help them as expected. For example, Archbishop Ndingi School tried remote learning for form 4 candidates. Only 2 of our 4 candidates managed to attend due to the cost of internet connectivity.



Victoria at her home during the Covid-19 break

Above, Victoria, a 16-year-old girl sponsored by ETW, prioritizes her limited internet data to download material for mathematics and science. "Subjects like Christian Religious Education, English, or Kiswahili language I read from the textbooks that I have." ETW tried

to download and print learning materials and examinations for the students to pick from our office but this did not work since families live far from Naivasha.

As noted, in Kenya, the 2020 decelerated economic growth is highly pronounced to the poor, vulnerable and marginalized households who rely on informal employment and businesses. Their ability to finance school related expenditure such as uniforms, meals, learning materials has been severely compromised. At the time this report was written, schools in Kenya had been partially re-opened. Only form 4 students, class 8 and grade 4 students have been allowed to return to school for contact learning. All 7 of our form 4 students reported back to school.



Francis Kamau at his home during Covid-19 break

Francis, a form 4 students at Archbishop Ndingi told me that during the long break, he had plenty of time to read. However, home was not a good environment for him to study. "During the day, there are so many kids around our home playing loudly that I couldn't concentrate on studies, while at night, we do not have lights," said Samuel. This is a reality to many other students that we sponsor.



Lukas and his form 4 classmates at Archbishop Ndingi

ETW Food Program

Challenges in regards to nutrition and food insecurity have been dire. Diet plays a significant part in cognitive growth and academic performance for learners. Many depend on discounted or free meals at schools. When institutions close, diet is especially compromised for these children. Many children in urban slums and other pockets of poverty in Kenya rely on school meals and sanitary towels provided by government and partners. This prompted us to develop with the food program that has been very instrumental to the families whose children we sponsor.

Hellen, a form 2 student and a resident of Kabati (an informal settlement in Naivasha) told me that after the closure of schools, her mother lost her job at a grocery shop. With five children, in the house, getting a meal a day was almost impossible. "We could only eat one meal a day. Mum had decided to send me and my two sisters to the village to live with my grandmother but there was no money for transport. "ETW came in at the time we most needed help. The food we received from ETW was able to take us for a month, which gave my mother time to strategize on her next move." Most our students went through the same ordeal, as many people were fired from their jobs without even receiving their last salary. Especially those from the flower farms and other informal employment wouldn't be able to support their families after their existing food supplies at home ran out, leaving them fully exposed to hunger and the virus itself.

In the first week of the food program, we selected 10 families that were in dire need of food. I asked some families what their normal diet was and all gave similar answers. Accordingly, each packet contains 10 kg rice, 5 kg wheat flour, 10 kg maize flour, 3 L cooking oil, 10 kg beans and 3 bars of soap, enough to feed a family of 6 for about 1 month

Over time the program has benefited more than 40 families. Families living far from Naivasha but belonging to the bigger ETW family, receive \$50 each month to buy food.

Where are the Mji Kids Now?

By Margo McAuliffe

In 2005 they seemed like a sea of little faces on shaved heads. How would I ever learn names, let alone personalities? If they were in their “home clothes”, I found it hard to distinguish the girls from the boys. The oldest, Cyrus, was away, in high school and the 2 youngest, Michael and Joseph, were just toddlers. Joseph was later adopted, by a family wanting a new life for him, so he was not allowed to return to visit his old friends. Toleo, aka Mercy (pronounced Marci) was born in August 2005, just 1 month before my first visit, while Lucas and Joseph (different Joseph) arrived a few years after.

There are 35 different stories for the 35 kids I eventually got to know. Several were quite challenged but have found places where, with their limited abilities, they could help in the fields and kitchens. One boy has disappeared. Two girls have passed away, one born HIV positive and another with an untreatable heart condition. The rest are working their way towards adulthood—or have arrived.

Two of the boys, Cyrus and David Mungai, completed medical training. David is employed by the local water company, testing water. Cyrus has finally been able to sit the licensing exam in pharmacology. While awaiting results he volunteered to talk to rural students about personal hygiene and to girls about sexual assault—how to avoid it and what a victim should do. He hopes eventually to become an oncological pharmacist. Monica completed nursing school several years ago and has just completed further training to be a critical care nurse. Selinah, is still in nursing school, her education delayed by school closings, while her sister, Beatrice is studying agriculture. Cynthia is studying

automotive engineering, her sister Evelyn in culinary school and brother, Tylon, mechanical engineering. Lucas is completing high school, while younger brother, Joseph will begin high school next year.

In Mombasa, Margaret studies marine resource management, her sister, Mary is learning water engineering, David Wekesa studied IT, and David Kamau is doing electrical engineering. “Big Ester” is a hair stylist, “small Ester” is learning to manage hospital medical equipment. John studies plumbing, but hopes to train in electricity and other building skills with the goal of becoming a contractor. Big Patrick” is training to be a math/science teacher, helping with math and physics in our summer math camp. “Small Patrick” is doing electrical engineering, Simon had a job selling cereals to schools. That ended when schools closed, but ever-diligent, he now works for a company building railway tracks. Tabitha studied hospitality with the Kenya Wildlife Service, but didn’t like it and dropped. Jecinta was studying hotel management. Again, it wasn’t right for her, as she’s very artistic and wants to be a designer. She is now married, with a daughter. Josephat studies plant management and how to drive large equipment. During the school interruption he works for a road construction company.

Those still in school who have not found interim jobs are still being supported by ETW with funds from Kenya Help. We are proud of all those kids, how hard they’ve worked and how determined they are to succeed.

The Mji kids think of themselves as one large and loving family. Monica’s support of her Mji sisters and Cyrus’s financial support for others, give testimony to the strength of the bonds formed in that home. In past summers I sponsored a reunion, complete with roasting a goat and all the trimmings. It was such a joy for me and all the kids to be together again, teasing,

Monica Wanjiru Maina



Here is her message to us

How are you lovely people? It is my sincere hope that you are doing OK despite the pandemic. Continue keeping safe and taking precautionary measures. After graduation, I worked for 9 months as a home-based care nurse, and then started working in St. Mary’s mission hospital. I was placed in the postnatal ward where I dealt with post-delivery mothers and as well as newborns. This has been

Monica is one of the older of Mji kids, a fun, light-hearted girl, always helpful around the compound. Monica was very bright—sufficiently so to be admitted to Naivasha Girls Secondary School, a prestigious national school. Knowing she wanted to be a nurse, she was admitted to Our Lady of Lourdes School of Nursing. On holidays she would be back at Mji, regaling everyone with stories of delivering babies and caring for extremely ill people. Upon graduation she was immediately employed, working in various areas of nursing care. Realizing her heart was in the ICU, she began a 1-year course to gain ICU training. Her progress has been slowed by the closure of schools, but she expects to complete in September 2021.

my place of work, and I always have a drive to keep learning and ICU is one of my specialties. I started my online classes on the September 2020. The class has its challenges because it’s online but am trying my best. The most important thing I love about being a critical care provider is that a patient comes out better and more stable than they came in. That is the most beautiful and fulfilling act as a nurse. During this pandemic I have been staying with Cynthia and Evelyn, my (Mji) sisters because their schools are closed. Luckily enough, I have been going to work and this gives us our daily bread with my beautiful sisters. I have always dreamt of working abroad because this will give me experience. My future hopes and dreams as well are to start my family and always be a helping hand where I can.

hugging, taking pictures, catching up on news and just hanging out together.

I am moved by the fulfilled promise of these orphaned young people. The most they could have expected (if they were very bright) was high school. The parish didn’t have funds to continue their education. Priests who followed Fr. Kiriti had little interest and I suspect if it weren’t for us, the home would have

been closed much earlier. As it is, they are becoming contributing members of the Kenyan society. They have the sense of “pay it forward” and are modeling that for their countrymen. This, dear donors, is all thanks to your generosity. You are the driving force. As Margaret Mead so wisely said, Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

In Gratitude to Kay Williams 1942-2020



It was summer 2005 that my dear friend, Kay, told me about Fr. Kiriti, leading me to my first visit to Naivasha, Kenya. Kay drove me to the airport, then worried for 2 weeks about how I might be faring. From then on, she and I worked hand-in-hand to establish Kenya Help, obtaining our IRS 501 (c) 3 status and building our board. Kay was our secretary for these 15 years, a position for which she had a great talent and did joyfully. But that's just the bare outline of Kay's part of the success of Kenya Help. She was my advisor, sister, mother confessor and when necessary the one who said, "Margo!!!!" to put me on the right track again. She assembled our newsletter, printed the labels (having first noted my typos, wrong zip codes and duplications.) She wrote board meeting minutes, edited all my writing (except the blog from Kenya) and was an incredible support to me. She helped with most of the craft fairs we held. She's the one I called about everything. In addition, when we were young, she and I ran in the mornings, back-packed in the Sierra for 18 years, rode bicycles,

hiked the Stanford dish, raised each other's children, sat next to each other at church. She was my best friend, one who taught me so much.

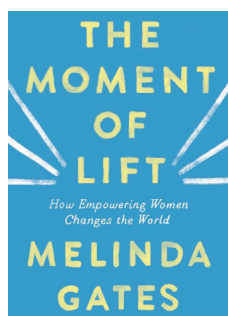
In 2009 she joined me in Kenya, visiting St Francis Girls High School, which was nearly complete, sitting in on classes, enjoying seeing Fr. Kiriti in his home area and learning much about how he works there. She met many of the Life Bloom ladies and helped with a bread making class we did for them. Here Kay had just arrived at the Nairobi airport, joyfully greeting by Fr. Kiriti.

Alas, she left us November 18. The breast cancer that hit her 5 years ago returned with a vengeance and laid this wonderfully energetic, capable, joyful, spiritual friend low. Tears are running down my face as I write this. She will be missed.

We have established a Kay Williams Memorial Scholarship fund to honor her 15 years in Kenya Help. Anyone wishing to be part of that can send a check to *Kenya Help*, indicating *Kay Williams Fund* on the memo line.

– Margo McAuliffe

Book Recommendation



In 2019, Melinda Gates published her book, *The Moment of Lift*. *How Empowering Women Changes the World*. It's available in bookstores as well as on Audible, where Melinda reads her own words. I have listened to it and saw how powerful her journey has been and how my own journey has been a mini-version of hers.

Margo's Message

For the first summer since 2005, I couldn't go to Kenya. It has been a wrench for me. I keep regular contact with Fr. Kiriti and Hillary Agisa, our Kenyan social worker, who monitors all our sponsored students, as well as their families. I get news about the Mji kids, but it's not the same as having them "knock my door" and pop in for tea or hot cocoa and a long chat. Often, they would bring their problems to be sorted out at my small kitchen table. I was the loving grandmother, mother confessor and sometimes source of much needed cash. I loved that, but alas, it may never be again. Mji Wa Neema has been closed, as the kids have grown up, and I have no information about how those buildings are being used, including "Margo's House". In what I can only describe as divine intervention, I left nothing of my own in the house in August 2019. Several boxes and a trunk are stored in Fr. Kiriti's house. The only things important I left were my Kenyan math books.

Little did I imagine that in summer 2020 I would be tutoring a handful of Kenyan kids who, through their sponsors, had computers, network, electricity and the desire to catch up on math. I really needed those books, which are not available in the US. We spent 6-8 hours a week for 5 months discussing topics for which they will be examined by the KCSE board. That high school exit exam is one tough exam! No one ever gets all the questions right (including me!), but over the years I've seen how points are awarded, or withheld. Often, they are picky points one wouldn't imagine if not seen the grading sheet first-hand. The hours I spent in previous summers, helping mark the mock exam taught me a lot of pointers. We solved problems,

and discussed strategies. My line has been, "The purpose of taking a test isn't answering the questions correctly (gasp!), but convincing the person reading the paper that you know what you're doing. Sometimes that means documenting your work. In that process of carefully laying out one's thinking, the right answer is most likely to come up."

When the form 4's returned to the classrooms in October, the only form 3 decided he knew what he needed and we called it quits. It helped them a lot, particularly the one girl, who was an "I don't understand math, I can't do math, I don't like math" sort. She turned out to be the star of the group. She's the perfect example of what happens when girls are discounted in math and science classes and no one tells them any different. As I began to see she was much sharper than I'd been led to believe I would point out, "you get this, don't you?" One day I asked, "You're enjoying this aren't you?" "Yes," she said, "I'm learning that I understand math and I find I like it." Can you imagine the smile on my face?

A side benefit was figuring out Zoom. I purchased a small camera to show the students the notes I was writing. After the session, I scanned the notes to be emailed to the students. This is how I am now tutoring local students remotely, including several friends of my San Diego granddaughter. Zoom and the camera have allowed me to tutor everywhere!

What is my future in Kenya? That's the big question. Even before the March shutdown, my trip was still iffy, although leaning towards going. By summer of 2021 I will be 85. Who knows?

Kenya Help Board Members – Old and New

We are delighted to welcome **Anita Dippery** back to the board. One of the founding members, Anita visited Kenya with her grandson and another friend in 2009. After 5 years of tireless work on the board, she retired but never lost her love of Kenya Help nor her drive to support our work. Each year she raises funds for 4 years for 1 student or 4 students for 1 year. To date she has raised upwards of \$75,000, plus hosting many talks and fund-raisers in her home. Anita is a creator, making beautiful quilts, 2 of which adorn the 2 form 4 classrooms and 1 in the library. She established “The Knitting Elves” who make scarves for Margo to present to form 4’s on Scarf Day.

Judy Murphy, Margo’s high school friend of 70 years shares Margo’s birthday. Another founding member, Judy visited Kenya 5 summers, where her social work experience and her big heart for children, led her to “take on” Mji Wa Neema and the kids. She organized special outings—wild animal park in Nakuru, museums in Nairobi, Lake Naivasha for a boat ride, and she bought them NEW shoes. New shoes were special! Previously they had had used shoes from the street market vendors. She raised funds to build a wall around the home, redo the kitchen and dining hall, paint the dorms and much else. She found workmen to install a slide, swing set and teeter-totter. Because playground equipment is virtually unknown in Naivasha, those items became hugely popular with the Mji kids as well as outside children. Now 85, and retired from our board, Judy enjoys her garden, her cat, her 5 children, 11 grandchildren and soon-to-arrive great grandson.

Retired engineer and math teacher, Alison Staab also visited Kenya 3 summers, tutoring, advising and mentoring St. Francis girls, as well as teaching in our math camp. Strong and athletic, she often trotted down to the Naivas Market to pick up needed supplies. Margo always appreciated Alison’s early morning trek to the gate to pick up *The Nation*. It was with sadness that we accepted Alison’s resignation due to home needs.

Flora Sullivan has been an active and effective board president, but is stepping down, although happily for us, not off the board. Flora is an idea person. A community supporter in East Palo Alto and natural leader, she offers ideas and challenges to all of us. We are grateful for her energy, good spirit and love of Kenya Help.

Our new president is **Njeri Albrecht**, one of our Kenyan members. Njeri, a busy mom of 2 small children whom she home schools, wants to ensure that the work of Kenya Help continues, even as our founders age and retire. She has

held successful crafts fairs in her yard, luring passers-by with her artfully arranged gift items. In fact, Margo has come to depend on Njeri to arrange our goods at all our craft events.

Peter Ojany, also Kenyan, is our new treasurer and keeper of our documents. He and Margo are in the process of posting everything of importance on our Google Docs page—tax returns, newsletters, board agendas/minutes, founding documents, including our registration as a non-profit with the state and our 501 (c) 3 designation with the IRS. Peter is a much sought-after financial consultant, married with one small daughter.

Financial planner **Julie Schatz** is our new board secretary. She has visited Kenya twice, sharing her financial expertise with various groups, mostly women, who pool their money, either to let it grow until they can buy land, or lend it at low interest to a group member. This self-financing movement is growing in Kenya and is one of many ways women are moving out of poverty. Julie visited virtually all of the banks and lending institutions in Naivasha, gathering information about each one, then advising the groups about where they could best grow their money safely and fast. Her support was gratefully welcomed by parish grounds workers, nurses, Life Bloom ladies and other groups.

Tom Gibboney, a retired local journalist who worked for many years at the *Almanac* and *Palo Alto Weekly*, joined the board about two years ago. His expertise is vital for the newsletter and other publications. He and Margo met in the Menlo Park Rotary Club where he was a big factor in starting the club’s biggest fundraiser, the Tour de Menlo bicycle ride.

Christoph Van Hover, our much-appreciated accountant is new to the board. Every year one of our larger expenses was auditing the books and sending various reports to the state and IRS. Margo tried to learn Quick Books, but found it too complicated. Frustrated by auditing costs, she posted a NextDoor request for someone familiar with Quick Books. Several days later, an email from Christoph came saying he had been looking for a non-profit where he could volunteer his CPA expertise. Needless to say, we did not hesitate.

Our newest board addition, **Lana Kairos**, is a leadership development professional and an executive coach. Her background is in microfinance and she has spent time in Africa working with girls and women to help them attain economic stability. She will handle our website and social media. These are 2 areas where we have sadly been lacking. A mom with 2 small children, Lana is busy, but loves Kenya Help and hopes to spruce up our website.

Kenya Help Board of Directors

Njeri (Jane) Albrecht, President
Peter Ojany, Treasurer
Julie Schatz, Secretary

Members:

Anita Dippery
Tom Gibboney
Lana Kairos
Mary Anne Rodgers
Christoph van Hover

Kenyon Coordinator:

Rev. Daniel Kiriti



Margo McAuliffe,
Executive Director

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Sr. Irene Loina



Sister Irene is a dynamo, full of energy and always ready to offer help wherever and whenever needed. Thus, when the pandemic hit and people suddenly lost their jobs, couldn’t pay rent, buy food or

get medical care, Sr. Irene organized a program to provide the most basic need—food. She searched out farmers who would sell her cabbages, beans and maize at the best cost, wholesalers who would give her a good price on cooking oil and *unga*, the flour used to make the traditional *ugali*, as well as soap. She found volunteers to help repackage and distribute whatever she was able to afford. As Americans became aware of her program, they began to send funds—not large sums, but enough to feed several hundred families each week. As the funds became available and the need grew, she set up distribution centers, each with its crew of volunteers to repackage and distribute the food to anyone who came to the centers. Here she distributes food to local people.

When Sr. Irene returned to the rural area of East Pokot, where for some years she had been teaching the people about the dangers of FGM (female genital mutilation), she took a truck load of food to that ever-hungry area. She continued her anti-FGM education, taught the people about COVID and set up hand washing stations at strategic places. The remote Pokots have no phones (no internet connection), so didn’t know about COVID nor how to protect themselves. Sons and daughters who had migrated to the big city began to return, bringing the virus with them. Irene foresaw a major problem, but stepped right in to head it off. Anyone wishing to support this cause can send a check to Kenya Help, indicating Sr. Irene’s work on the memo line.

Please Help

New information: Kenya has now scheduled schools to reopen for all students January 4, 2020. This compounds our needs. We will be paying fees for all our continuing students, as well as 10 new form 1’s, but om the meantime, our families continue to need our food support. Please be as generous as you can. NOTE: We welcome PayPal donations, but the bite becomes an expense for us. One wonderful donor of \$5000 didn’t realize how big the fee could be. PP kept almost \$125 as their share for simply passing on that money!!! We’ve included an envelope for your convenience.