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The O'Brien School for the Maasai

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A Bridge Between Two Worlds

Susan Zidlicky desires to lessen the gap between the DuPage community and cultural pockets around the globe

BY MIA JONES

Places like El Salvador, Kenya, and the suburbs of Chicago might not seem like they have a lot in common, but for those who choose to travel beyond DuPage County, strong bonds, relationships, and life-long memories await the people of these countries.

Maria Shepherd and her daughter Caroline were not quite sure what they were getting themselves into when they embarked on a trip to El Salvador this past summer, but they were met with the joys of serving others once they got into the thick of their trip. After speaking with Susan Zidlicky for years about her mission work, Maria decided to go with her daughter, Caroline, to El Salvador for the first time ever.

Erin Milburn also listened to Zidlicky's passionate talks about her trips and took her eldest son to El Salvador. The impact of their first trip led her to take her second son to Kenya this past spring. Milburn said that she already wants to go back. Trips like these put things into perspective, offering DuPage kids a great learning experience, said Milburn.

"They have everything they need and want, and I think it's just good for them



Susan Zidlicky and a young Kenyan girl

"We can always find an excuse not to go, but all the much more reason to go. You don't know how your life is going to be changed."

— SUSAN ZIDLICKY

to realize that the majority of the world doesn't live like that," said Milburn.

Susan Zidlicky began doing mission trips 11 years ago. Inspired by her experiences abroad, she founded Light of Love Ministry two and a half years ago. While Zidlicky was not exactly sure what she was envisioning for this

organization, Zidlicky said the growth in the past two and a half years has been very impactful.

Light of Love Ministry partners with Sus Hijos in El Salvador, Mathare Community Outreach, and Karioangi Outreach Children's Home in Kenya. Zidlicky leads two trips to Kenya and at least one to El Salvador each year. Today, every trip Zidlicky plans and leads for her organization is filled with people, she said. Parents take their children on these trips to learn and grow together, and even bring a different child of theirs each time. Zidlicky encourages families to go, especially to see the real world.

"We can always find an excuse not to go, but all the much more reason to go. You don't know how your life is going to be changed," said Zidlicky.

For 16-year-old Caroline Shepherd, El Salvador presented a lot of firsts to her,



Max Milburn playing with children in Nairobi, Kenya's Mathare slums.



Kyle Zidlicky and Kenyan children

such as going to a new country and building a home for a family of three. The Shepherds were placed with a family through Sus Hijos, a program that works with children in public orphanages in San Salvador, El Salvador's capital. Watching the family's neighbors become excited about the family receiving a newly built house was a highlight for Shepherd. The Shepherds are already looking forward to the next time they visit El Salvador.

"It made me want to build a house for everyone there," said Caroline Shepherd.

Like El Salvador, relationship-building is at the forefront of the trips to Kenya, said Zidlicky. Going to Kenyan children's homes and spending time with them concludes in a retreat on the last night of these trips. Visitors also spend time with teachers and students at three schools in the Mathare Community Outreach program in the slums of Nairobi, Kenya's capital.

Inspired by the true story, *I Will Always Write Back*, by Caitlin Alifirenka and Martin Ganda with Liz Welch, Zidlicky started a pen pal program for kids to connect with Kenyan children. There are currently 90 U.S. children writing to 37 Kenyan children, meaning that the Kenyan children usually have two American pen pals, said Zidlicky.

"We see people as people, not projects," said Zidlicky.

Currently, Light of Love is raising money for education with the Kariobangi Outreach Children's Home in Kenya. They are currently sponsoring the education of 37 children, with



Maria and Caroline Shepherd on their trip to El Salvador

seven kids in college this year. It costs about \$1,500 a year for a child to go to college in Kenya, which can provide them with a way out of the Nairobi slums, said Zidlicky.

Light of Love's Junior Board, composed of students who have gone on the trips and are now helping to lead the organization, is raising \$10,000 for El Salvador and Kenya. Funds raised will go toward providing a home for a family in El Salvador and temporary shelter for Kenyan students while their children's home is being rebuilt after destruction from severe floods this past June, said Bill Shiell, who acts as a guide



Zidlicky bonding with the people of Kenya.

,for Zidlicky while thinking about the potential scope and long-term vision of Light of Love.

"Light of Love doesn't simply come once and then leave when the project is over; they continue to come and build trust, and they're someone that people can really rely on," said Shiell.

The children's home in Nairobi's Mathare Valley is a project that will cost about \$300,000 total, with Light of Love having already raised the first \$100,000 so far.

Zidlicky is not sure where Light of Love is heading, but her next steps include giving hope and inspiration for people to go on a trip, even if they may have concerns about coming on a mission trip.

"You see that we're all people, we were just born in different places with different needs," said Zidlicky.

To learn more about upcoming trips or to donate to this organization, please visit lightofloveministry.org. ■



A trip to Kenya, meeting with children in their classroom



O'Brien and the two young men from Cameroon who came to help supervise the construction of the Reception House.

From Shepherds to Students: Finding Their Greatness

Local Hinsdale woman continues to help provide remarkable futures for the Maasai village

BY MIA JONES

Walking through 82-year-old Kellie O'Brien's home, it is clear to see her love for gardening and landscaping design, but the Hinsdale-based horticulturalist has also experienced a calling that has grown into a larger project in the last 17 years to aid Maasai youth in "finding their greatness."

When O'Brien first met with the Maasai community in 2007, she decided to take up an instrumental part in helping them with their desire for a school. The Maasai people are a pastoralist group, and they move to different areas to take care of their animals. However, the Tanzanian govern-

ment has prohibited them from living on many of the lands they once occupied. So, for over a decade now, they have turned to education.

There are nearly 400 children currently attending the O'Brien School for the Maasai in the Sanya Station Village of the Kilimanjaro Region in Northern Tanzania. All the children are learning to speak, read, and write English as first-generation students. There are a total of 43 employees at the school, and all the teachers are Tanzanian.

"I've never once looked back and thought, 'What the heck did I just do?'" said O'Brien.

O'Brien notes that the graduating classes from the O'Brien School for the Maasai are nothing short of intelligent. The children go on to attend secondary school, which is usually a boarding school, and typically end up top of their class, said O'Brien. In fact, there are currently two young men who graduated from the O'Brien School for the Maasai and are now studying at medical school in Denver, Colorado.

One major reason for such success, according to O'Brien, is that the children are fed breakfast and lunch every day while at school. The school partners with Feed My Starving Children to distribute manna packs to the children, which contain a nutritional



Maasai children eating the Feed My Starving Children manna packs. One of the homes of the Maasai villagers.

value that the Maasai aren't used to getting out of their typical diets.

The children are also provided with an environment where they have classrooms equipped with school supplies, such as pencils, desks, chairs, and art supplies. Students can choose to participate in various activities through school clubs, such as debating, painting, or playing musical instruments like guitar. As for proper hydration, a well was built for clean access to water, and the children are given water bottles to take home with them after school.

The O'Brien School for the Maasai strives to teach not only academics but also important life lessons, such as the joy that comes from giving acts of kindness to others, said O'Brien. She recalled how a 7th-grade class washed the chairs of a 1st-grade class and how happy everyone was to participate in what might seem like a simple task.

"You can write a definition on the board, but they have to experience it," said O'Brien.

The school also created a gardening club for the children to learn more about taking care of the Earth and growing their own produce. This enables the Maasai to take innovative food-growing skills with them into their futures despite the harsh dry season they experience in Tanzania, said O'Brien.

Children are not the only ones who reap benefits from the O'Brien School for the Maasai. Widows and members of the community, along with two



Maasai women helping construct the Reception House out of plastic water bottles.

Cameroon men who helped supervise the project, constructed a "Reception House" out of 10,000 two-liter plastic water bottles that tourists on the roads of Tanzania had littered. The widows were hired to help with this project, and additional support came from the Bottles2Bricks Foundation and the Build a School Foundation. One water bottle has a life expectancy of 500 years, making the building very sustainable. 11 tons of fine sand fills the water bottles to hold them down in the structure.

"I don't even know what 10,000 looks like," said O'Brien.

Recently, guest houses were constructed so that visitors have a place to stay when they come to see Tanzania. The money collected from people coming to stay in the guest houses helps support the children going to secondary school.

This is especially important for the young girls, who face being sold off for bride prices, said O'Brien.

Maasai women create beaded jewelry at the school so they can sell it for income. This allows them to accumulate money to pay for their children's school fees and to support their families, said O'Brien. Additionally, a store was built for 12 women to host three individual businesses. Showing women that they too can be leaders and entrepreneurs to secure a steady future in the world reveals how the O'Brien School for the Maasai is more than just a school, said O'Brien.

"I'm not a bulldozer. I'm there to work with them and how we can improve the future of their children," said O'Brien.

As for current concerns for the Maasai, the Tanzanian government recently mandated that kindergarten classes take place in their own building, meaning they are separate from the other grades. The O'Brien School for the Maasai must build two new classrooms for kindergarten, leading to unexpected

something that the Maasai are not as familiar with, said O'Brien. The school is also hoping to encounter someone with a solar business who could potentially donate solar panels for more green initiatives at the school.

When people ask O'Brien about the

future of the school and long-term plans, her answer is always the same: "I just want to do 'the next right thing,'" said O'Brien.

The work put into this school would not be possible without the countless donations from various community members and organizations, said O'Brien. School supplies from District 181, water bottles from Notre Dame Parish, and girls' kits with menstrual supplies from the National Charity League have aided O'Brien in her work.

"Everyone sees their faces, but I see their hearts," O'Brien said.

To read more about The O'Brien School for the Maasai and what can be done to continue the school's mission, visit obrienschool.org ■



costs, said O'Brien. Christ Church of Oak Brook has already donated \$7,000 for these two classrooms, but it will cost a total of about \$30,000 to build the classrooms. On top of that, the Tanzanian government now requires cooking with gas, so the kitchens at the school must be transformed into gas stoves,

*"I'm not a bulldozer.
I'm there to work with
them and how we can
improve the future of
their children."*

- KELLIE O'BRIEN



From top left clockwise: The Maasai people show their appreciation. The Maasai students have been provided with school supplies from donations. The Maasai unloading a container filled with manna packs. 7th grade girls receive care packages from the National Charity League.