

## A Servant's Heart: Choosing to Serve

Forty-two suitcases balanced haphazardly on the top of our bouncy bus, but at this point I didn't even care if mine bounced off! The sleepy soreness that I should feel after a twenty-six hour flight with limited sleep left as our bus pulled out of the Kenyan airport and we looked out of our bus windows. There were herds of zebra grazing! It was hard to believe that what I was seeing was real.

My mom, my fourteen-year old brother, and I mailed sponsorship letters, baked cookies, babysat, and took money from our savings to live this dream...a ten-day trip to serve orphans in Kenya. The faces of some of the children flashed in front of me. Having helped my mom for the past three years with a project called Christmas in Kenya, I felt like I already knew some of the children we were going to serve. Through this annual project our church provides each of the sixty-eight children at Grace Children's Centre with a backpack stuffed with a pair of jeans, a shirt, an outfit for church, a jacket, personal items, school supplies, and, of course, a toy and some candy. This trip was my opportunity to meet them face-to-face. The zebras were now out of sight and the skyline of Nairobi was disappearing. The bus settled into a monotonous hum that allowed sleep to overtake me. Only an occasional pothole jostled me from my dreams.

Suddenly we were there. A man with a bright white smile opened the corrugated metal fence that surrounded a six-acre compound. Curious children began to trickle out of the buildings. As our bus entered their compound shrieks of delight brought more children out of their rooms. How would I ever learn their names? All of the children, boys and girls, had hair no more than one-fourth of an inch long. All of their smiles were bright and their eyes sparkled. I wanted to know each child. My heart longed to connect with them individually and know their story. I wanted to do more than just stuff a backpack on their behalf. But there were sixty-eight of them and I had only ten days. Brief introductions were made and then the eager children grabbed our hands and led to a rough playground.

Back at our lodging our team talked about this short, but brief meeting with the children. They came up and seem to latch on to each of us. Why did Marisela and Moses choose my mom, Carlos choose my brother, and Steve choose me? It was all so very natural and at the same time I was surprised at how quickly my heart connected to the

children. This same thing had happened in Tijuana on a missions trip in 2008. There, Lily became attached to me on that first day and stole my heart. This phenomenon of children reaching out for relationship is not limited to Kenya or Mexico, I see it in the elementary schools at which I volunteer in Ashburn. I even see it at my home church. Many times it doesn't take a special skill to impact someone's life; it only takes a willing heart and available hands.

In Kenya, each day included Bible time, worship, playtime, and music lessons. Each moment with the children brought with it a tighter bond to the children who had found each of us on that first day. I discovered that over half of the three to five year olds in my group were HIV+, with very short life expectancies. My heart broke as I counted each minute with them. Would Gracie be here the next time I come to Kenya? A child in Kenya has similar needs, such as education, food, shelter, and medical care, as the children who live next door to me in Ashburn, VA. However, for the orphans, their doctor, their school, their church, and their lodging are all located on these six acres, so the children rarely leave to see the beauty and diversity of their native land. The more the children tugged on my hands to lead me into a game or have me push them on a swing, the more questions grew in my mind. What else can I do? Should I have stayed home and just sent money to support them? Is what I'm doing making a difference?

Six days flew past and we were back on our bouncy, humming bus headed to see and smell something that I never knew existed....Kibera slum, just outside of Nairobi. Kibera is the largest slum in Africa. It is a valley over a mile long that formed virtually overnight after an election that went wrong. The government does not want the people to stay in Kibera so it provides little to no services for them – no water, no school, and no sanitation. The oppression of the adults was apparent in their faces, but the children greeted us with smiles and songs. The Hatley family, who moved to Kenya years ago, not only started the orphanage we had been serving at, but they also have two schools and churches in two different slums outside of Nairobi. We assisted them in their selfless, daily routine of making and serving porridge to the children. This cup of nutrition was all that most of the children would receive for the day. As we made our way between the narrow walls of the mud houses, we saw malnourished children who were peaking out of makeshift doors, inquisitively watching their visitors. Many of the children did not realize

the poverty and squaller that they were living in because they were born into it. We finally made it to the bottom of the valley and saw nothing but happy children playing in the sewage from the “village,” reminding me of the children who play in the creek that runs beside my home in Ashburn. This scene, once again, reminded me that the basic needs and desires of the children in Kenya are very similar to those of the children in my own neighborhood.

The sights, the odors, and the people of Kenya have forever changed my life. When I returned to Virginia, I took a warm shower and snuggled into my comfortable bed, but all I could think about were the children at the orphanage who were not being tucked in by their mom or dad and the children in the mud huts falling asleep on the cold floor of their home in the slums. These precious children had no control over the conditions into which they were born. No matter their situation, the children revealed their humble and grateful hearts. I realized though this trip that I have more to offer people than just a backpack stuffed with a few gifts.

My experience with the Kenyan children fueled my passion for teaching. I feel so satisfied when I work with the children. Through my school I have helped coach at Athlete-to-Athlete basketball camps, which serve special needs children. This fall I will be attending the University of Alabama at Birmingham where I will be pursuing a degree in early childhood education, specializing in children with special needs. My experience on mission fields coupled with my time on the basketball court, has helped me discover that I have a desire to help children with special needs – whether their need stems from a developmental challenge or comes through their life circumstances. My hope is to use my education to teach in local low-income schools, as well as to continue to participate in international mission trips that involve reaching underprivileged children.

For spring break this year, I am the teen leader for a missions group headed to Barbados. We’ll be doing construction projects at a small school and leading activities with the children. This may not be your typical “Senior Beach Trip,” but I can’t wait! I have come to realize that children experience struggles and frustrations day in and day out. To think that by serving them that I could be even a small part of making a child’s day great, rewards me. To imagine that God could use me to make a lasting difference in the life of a child impassions me.