

Changing
the world
one
child
at a time

MAKENA Musings

Newsletter of MAKENA Children's Foundation, Inc.

Spring 2007 Vol. 8, No. 1

JAMBO



A Message from the President

Foundation
President
Sherri Mills

TONS OF FUN HAD ON FUN DAY

I can't wait to tell you about the children's first Fun Day – a long awaited dream realized.

For the last few years we have dreamed of assembling the Makena children during holiday time for some academic review, competition, games and time to share "best practices" for successful students. One of Headmistress Keziah Waitthaka's concerns for our children is that they get few opportunities to study while home on holiday and that it shows in their work when they return to school. She says some of the children take a few weeks to get in stride again.

We certainly understand the importance of the children helping at home. There is much work to be done and having one child taken from the home most of the year leaves the family with less resources. Many of the children at Elite schools come from wealthy families and are able to continue schoolwork at home. That means our kids may lag behind when the new term begins.

In December of 2006, our dreams were realized when Francis Karanja and Charles Mutota organized our first Fun Day for the children. It was a great success with 35 children attending, and a report from Francis that a good time was had by all. Also attending were six parents/guardians and a couple of members of The Leadership Forum (an organization designed to help young people see opportunities for their futures).

The children were divided into four teams by age groups: nursery to Class Three (5 students) made up the Orange Team; Class Four through Six children (13 students) made up the Green Team; Class Seven students (9) were the White Team; and the secondary students (8) were the Grey Team. Each student received a t-shirt of the appropriate color for his/her team inscribed on the front with the words "Fun Day" and on the back with the words "No Pain, No Gain."

For those of you who are sponsors, here are the names of the team leaders elected by the children: Orange Team – John Muiruri, Green Team – Lucy Muthoni; White Team – Mary Gatuku; Grey Team – Simon Ngure.

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A Birthday Gift Named Hannah!

By Mary Jo Baich

"Birthdays," I like to say, "are not all created equal." Celebrating the ones ending in zero are usually BIG ones, but for the birthdays in between, well, I am content to let them pass quietly with some funny and thoughtful cards from loved ones. So, imagine my surprise when, on a decidedly non-BIG birthday, a card comes wending its way to me that continues to thrill me almost two years later.

I like to brag that my women friends are all beautiful, funny, wise and terribly smart; but each and every one of them have hearts so large that you often forget their other attributes. My friend, Gayle Olson, is such a person and her idea of a birthday gift to me was to sponsor a Makena child.



There was no hint or suggestion that this gift of life was headed my way, so the surprise of opening a card that revealed this bestowal was one of shock and surprise. Actually, I screamed and danced around the house in sheer delight.

Meanwhile, unaware of the excitement her young life was causing in America, Hannah Njeri (shown in photo at left), a shy and beautiful child with large almond eyes, was living a quiet life with her grandmother in a small village in Kenya.

She was born in February, 1999 and has two older brothers, 10 and 12 years of age. Their mother, Monicah, was married to an irresponsible man who supplied little attention and no money for the care of his family.

Shortly after Hannah's birth, her mother died, and her maternal grandmother took over the care of all three children. In over six years the paternal side of the family has never contacted the children or sent any financial help. Still, Hannah, under the caring and watchful eye of her grandmother, did well in the village school's kindergarten.

One of her older brothers was also noticed by the local school. But after explaining to him that he would have a much better chance of succeeding at Elite School if he, like the other Makena children, dropped back a grade, he succumbed to peer pressure and tearfully declined the offer.

Hannah was then interviewed and chosen to take advantage of the educational opportunity. While all our young children are reserved around those of us visiting from another country and culture, Hannah was particularly shy.

Now that she is in her second year at Elite, one sees both her mind and personality maturing. She's adjusting to being away from home as well as being excited about the world that is opening up to her. She estimated that her class standing would be 9th out of 29 students – and she did not miss it by much. She holds a respectable 13th position. When asked to answer a series of questions Hannah offered that, in her free time, she likes to arrange her locker. We hope it is a clear sign of her organizational skills. Let's you think she is all work and duty, Hannah loves the color red and singing!

Gayle's five young grandchildren are also benefiting from this relationship. Some of them have participated in seeing that Hannah receives gifts they think she might need and enjoy. They have also sent Hannah postcard greetings and mailed her a picture of themselves. Nine-year-old Emma says this exchange of caring in each other's lives has sparked a greater curiosity in knowing more about Kenya and Africa so that she might understand how Hannah lives. Emma thinks that Hannah will learn more about the United States because of knowing them.

From this one gift many blessings have blossomed, and there is much more to come as we watch Hannah grow and mature into being a viable member of her culture and society.

One Guardian's Story

By Anne Batzer

I received the warmest of welcomes when I spent a couple weeks in the Makena children's home village, Maraigushu. Along with open curiosity and quick humor, their parents and guardians eagerly offered bright smiles, firm handshakes and invitations into their homes.

Their natural hospitality and boundless generosity of spirit are truly remarkable when you hear their life stories. Many are inspiring models of resilience, their lives filled with the harrowing experiences of growing up in conditions of extreme poverty, inequality and political turmoil.

One guardian who welcomed me was Mary Wambui, the aunt of Makena student Ann Njeri. Mary graciously offered me her hand so I could jump over the huge puddle that covered the path to her home — but she just couldn't stop herself from joining my laughter when my awkward leap fell short and water splashed everywhere. (There's a good reason April in Kenya is referred to as the season of "the long rains.")

Mary held back the thin curtain covering the doorway to her home, three simple rooms constructed of mud and a few boards. Clean dishes were stacked neatly on green wooden shelves. We sat together on a narrow bed covered with a spotless cotton blanket. The rain hammered on the tin roof as we spoke. Here's Mary Wambui's story as she related it to me:

Born into a Kikuyu family in Tanzania in 1948, Mary said she, her mother and her sister fled to Kenya in the early fifties after her father was jailed for political reasons. Mary referred to this period as "the state of emergency." When her father was released from prison, he got a job and moved the family home to Tanzania. Mary's brother, Ann Njeri's father, was born at this time.

When making a living and feeding his family in Tanzania became impossible for Mary's father, he financed his family's move back to Kenya by accepting a dowry from a Masai man and giving Mary to him in marriage. Mary's family packed up and moved out of the country, leaving Mary alone with her new husband and his first wife.

"I was much too young to be a wife, just barely a teenager," Mary said. "I was given to this man's co-wife to raise. She saw to it that I lived in the same house like I was a daughter." Mary expressed gratitude to this woman who protected her. "But after five years she got tired of trying to keep her husband away from me, so she brought me to Kenya and returned me to my family."

For Mary it was a longed-for, emotional reunion — but it was short-lived. "After three years my father beat my mother and insisted she take me back to my husband in Tanzania. For him it was a matter of honor because my husband had paid a dowry. I was just a girl so I had no choice."

Over time Mary gave birth to nine children. Her husband's first wife, who had protected her earlier, became jealous and treated Mary with the gravest indignities.

But Mary's trials were only just beginning. In a voice barely audible, Mary told me seven of her children died. Her grief was overwhelming. So when her husband took a third wife, his eldest brother's widow, Mary found the courage to leave him and return to Kenya to be with her beloved brother and his daughter, Ann Njeri.

Again, Mary's time of joy was brief. Her brother soon became ill. Planning ahead, he called upon an ancient Kikuyu tribal practice: Four respected elders were brought together and they created a document officially making Mary Wambui the guardian for her niece, Ann Njeri, and insuring the two of them would inherit the family's small plot of land in Maraigushu.

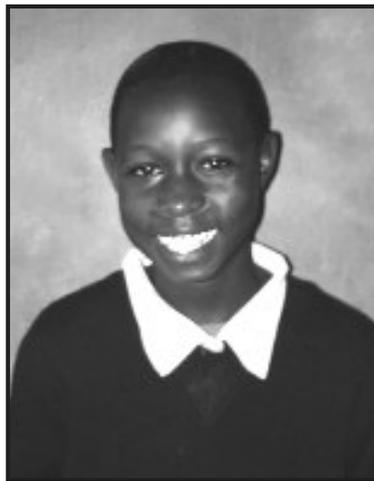
"Tell them to go in peace."

"Ann Njeri belongs to me," Mary beamed. "No one will ever take her away."

As Mary's brother became increasingly ill, Mary said she sold a cow to get the money to take him to a hospital. "When we got there, I was called aside and told he had AIDS. He died a short time later."

I was overcome hearing Mary's story of incomprehensible loss — and the unrelenting beat of the rain on the roof wasn't helping much — but she reassured me: "Really, I'm happy now because Ann has a chance I never had. She is going to school. My hope is that she will become a responsible woman with a good job, able to take care of herself."

For the second time that day, Mary Wambui reached out her hand and offered it to me. "Please," she said, squeezing my fingers tightly, "Tell all the noble Makena sponsors I pray for them. And tell them to go in peace."



Ann Njeri and her guardian and aunt, Mary Wambui

Happy Birthday to ...

By Mary Jo Baich

... The Makena Children's Foundation has a big birthday party coming up soon!

It will soon be our tenth year of lending a hand and providing the opportunity of education to the children of Maraigushu, Kenya. To celebrate this dream becoming a reality, we envision, in our mind's eye, this gathering having as its centerpiece a large birthday cake with 10 lighted candles and lots and lots of icing.

Of course you are invited to this virtual gathering because you made it happen. Because of you, children have been fed, clothed, educated and — best of all — given the gift of hope. Before we blow out the candles on this cake, we make a wish that we will continue to have the success that has made the first 10 years possible. With your ongoing support we can look forward to many birthdays to come.

A celebratory gift would pay for:

An organized day of tutoring during each of the school's three vacation breaks. These gatherings, coordinated by the Kenyan management team, have been a huge success in keeping the children from losing their skills while at home. This child-centered day includes team building opportunities and includes a motivational T-shirt and small prizes that conclude the day's work.
(\$5 per child or \$200)

School uniform replacement from wear-and-tear — or a sudden growth spurt.
(\$66.49 for grade school, twice that for high school)

Letterhead stationery, envelopes and business cards for the Kenyan management team.
(\$660)

Postage stamps to mail your sponsored child's grades to you and printing their pictures so you can enjoy watching them grow.

A new Makena Children's Foundation brochure to inspire others to join our cause.
(\$1,000)

Let's celebrate! I want to join in the effort and give the priceless gift of education to a deserving child.

Please accept my tax-deductible gift, payable to Makena Children's Foundation, Inc., 4138 Crossings Lane, Birmingham, AL 35242.

- I wish to lend a hand to the smooth operation of the Makena Children's Foundation with a gift of :
- \$50 \$100 \$200 \$400 \$600 \$1,000
- You have permission to mention my support in your publication(s).
- I prefer to make my gift anonymously.
- I am unable to contribute now, but please keep me informed about the work of Makena Children's Foundation.
- I would like to share my story relating to Africa or my sponsored child.

Please contact me by phone or by e-mail .

Name _____

Address _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Telephone _____ e-mail _____



Mary Wambui and Peter Kaman graduated elementary school in January and joined our other secondary students at Elite.

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MAKENA Children's Foundation, Inc.
4138 Crossings Lane
Birmingham, AL 35242

If you'd like to help bring the priceless gift of education to deserving children, please complete the form inside and send your donation TODAY to the Foundation at the address above! Your gift will be greatly appreciated!

Meet Our Eighth Graders



January began a very strenuous year for our 8th graders who will take the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education Exam in the Fall.

Students are, from left, first row: Mary Muthoni, Rose Waitihira, Rosemary Njoki, Mungai Mbugua, Joseph Kariuki and Samson Machobi. Second row: Simon Gatonye, Rachel Njeri, John Karanja, Isabel Muthoni and Mary Gatuku.

President's Message (Continued from front)

The T-shirts were given as attendance prizes and other small prizes were given to those who answered questions on various subjects that were called out by Francis. It was reported that the students "tried all they can to answer the questions." It sounds like a lively time.

Another competition was for the "best handwriting" award. Each group judged the handwriting of another group and came up with 4 handwriting awards – one for each group. There was also time blocked out for the children to enjoy field games.

Francis gave a talk on planning and choosing a career. The point of his presentation was that "not planning is, in fact, planning to fail." There was then discussion on various career options. The children were encouraged to work hard and make good grades so that they might have the luxury of choice in deciding their careers.

The students then broke up in their teams and discussed issues affecting them – specifically homework, friends and, personal study. Discussion was lively and the groups came up with resolutions for homework problems and

personal study. They also agreed that having friends with good morals was important and that peer pressure should be resisted.

Before ending with a question and answer period, the students were asked to talk about the importance of study timetables and how to develop an effective personal timetable. Certainly sounds like time well spent! The children seem to thrive on learning and be excited at every chance. A couple of students asked Francis if they could do it all again the next day.

Francis wrote to me, "There was a surprising moment when a student from the Orange team recited a beautiful poem entitled 'Mlevi.' This is a Swahili word that means 'drunkard.' The student was Christopher Kidali who demonstrated brilliant oratory skills and confidence. The poem was loaded with advice to youth not to engage themselves with alcohol as its end results is destruction." Francis reports that Kidali is young and still very small, so he climbed on top of a table so that he could be seen and heard by all. "The whole experience was great," Francis added.

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MAKENA Children's
Foundation, Inc.
4138 Crossings Lane
Birmingham, AL 35242
Phone (205) 980-6861
e-mail sm595@bellsouth.net
www.makena.org

Anne Batzer, Co-Editor
annebatzer@aol.com

Mary Jo Baich, Co-Editor
mjbach7@earthlink.net

Tina Horton, Graphic Designer
tunat@bellsouth.net

Sherri Mills, President
sm595@bellsouth.net