

Our Trip to Addo, South Africa

August 9, 2008 - **How do we leave this place?**

Our final week in the township of Nomathamsanqa was filled with the excitement of teachers learning new skills and eager to learn more, and the reality of the need for books that the students can read along with up-to-date computers that work consistently. We pledged to raise money for both (more on that in our next addition).

The school gave us an extraordinary farewell party, filled with singing and dancing by students and teachers, along with touching presentations. While we waited for the dignitaries to arrive, the students taught Sara new games and sang with Larry and Eileen. At the farewell event, the mothers in the community surprised everyone (even the principal) by giving each of us hand-crafted African garments which we will always treasure.

At the end of our last day, all the students gathered in the courtyard and sang us our favorite songs as we waved goodbye and tearfully hugged our teaching colleagues for the last time. We dragged ourselves into the car as students gathered around the vehicle, and the principal had to create a lane for us to pull out. We are emotionally drained.

Dancing with Nomthle at the Farewell



With our hosts the Mofu Family at the Farewell



The singing students!



Yet the day did not end. We tried to teach some of the faculty how to access email, yet the computers at the school were too old and slow. We offered to meet a few teachers at the Internet café in the city of Port Elizabeth late Friday afternoon. Although we had been warned not to get our hopes up that the teachers might continue contact beyond the school because communication is so difficult, there they were ... three teachers at the Internet café 10 minutes early. We signed them up for gmail accounts and they quickly began emailing each other and Larry who was at the 4th computer. Then we showed them how to do a search on Google. Their faces glowed with delight and excitement. The email notes they wrote reminded us of how special this place is: "We are now computer literate, thanks to the Kuglers." "WE ARE NOW CONNECTED TO THE WORLD. We will never forget this day." Nor will we.

Teachers intent on learning e-mail at Internet cafe



More when we are home and our brains can process this incredible experience.

Eileen, Larry and Sara

August 2, 2008 A Day in the Life of the Kuglers in South Africa

It's our second week in Nomathamsanqa township and we've hit our stride. We love the strong sense of community in this village. Neighbors look after each other although most have little themselves. There is a large feeding program for children who come to school hungry, which amounts to mothers preparing 2 pieces of bread with butter and jam and a "nutrient drink." I asked the principal what happens to these children when school is not in session and he told me that neighbors make sure everyone has something to eat. "That is part of our culture."

Kids from the neighborhood playing after school



Here's a typical day -- We rise before the sun when the house is still about 45 °. It's hard to get out from under our thick blankets but Mama has a bucket of hot water waiting for us to wash up. We all sit down to a large hot breakfast. ("Fat cakes" – fried dough dipped in a tomato & onion mixture – are Sara's favorite). Then we head off to school with Yanga, who has to be the cutest and happiest 7-year old you ever met. We're joined by his friends and we walk a few blocks along the sandy rocky streets to school. We teach each other English and Xhosa and the kids giggle at our awkward pronunciation of the different clicks in their beautiful language. We exchange greetings with everyone we see along the way – and the neighborhood is bustling in the morning. Then there are the animals: the donkeys carrying loads of twigs, the goats who clean up the orange peels (it's harvest time in the nearby groves), the cattle moving we're not sure where, and our favorite, the hen and her brood of chicks. Yesterday we saw an ostrich at the fence to Addo Elephant Park which borders the township. We hear that in summer (it's winter here), elephants come right up to the fence.

Sara and Yanga playing with a "ball" (actually a tightly wrapped ball of plastic bags, which does indeed bounce)



As we get closer to the school, we're joined by other children who smile widely as they join us. The school siren (we can't call it a bell), sounds at 8:00 a.m. and all 950 students gather in the central courtyard for morning devotional, lively harmonious singing of hymns and prayers, mostly in Xhosa, to start the day. We love it and join in when we can. This is a country where EVERYONE sings with great spirit and always in that particular harmony that you hear in African music. The idea that a child might be told they can't sing is beyond comprehension. Kids and adults just plain sing all the time.

Larry and Sara have been working with the teachers in grades 2-4, both in class and in afternoon staff development, on strategies for teaching English, particularly using oral language beyond the parroting the students now do. None of us could imagine the lack of resources here – pencils of a ¼ inch shared between students, little or no paper, absolutely no books other than poor texts and workbooks that are largely beyond the student's comprehension. Classes are overcrowded with furniture that is falling apart except for the new furniture provided as donations through Callabash Trust, the same group that organized our visit. At the same time, the teachers are bright, intelligent and caring and are eager to learn ways to reach their students. Most of the teachers have been very willing to try the new strategies and they have been excited about the results. Sara has been modeling lessons and Larry has been coaching the teachers.



Eileen has become the computer guru. When she showed the principal how to get his email working, he sincerely said, "you are a gift from God." She spends most of her time trying to get their computer lab in decent shape. The donated computers are old and slow, connected to the Internet on a very slow land line. One of her first jobs was to try to get antivirus software installed and it took 10 days just to get someone out to this remote village. Then it took nearly 2 hours to install the software on each of the 8 aging and dusty computers. She's been offering computer classes after school and the teachers are so excited to get to actually touch these machines. Only a handful have ever touched a keyboard, let alone a computer. Yet within a few 1/2 hour classes, they learned the basics of Word and are thrilled to be able to see their text in different styles. Nomthle, one of the most enthusiastic teachers, was absolutely elated when she learned how to change the font color, "I'm typing in ORANGE!!!" she exclaimed with enormous excitement, knowing she could now create fun things for her students. The next day class was cancelled because of some unforeseen teachers' meeting and the teachers in Eileen's class were not happy about that. She told them she would keep the lab open after the meeting. Nomthle came in after the meeting, saying, "I must peck away at this and learn something new every day." Eileen showed her how to insert a table and the next day Nomthle was in the lab every free minute typing a chart for a class she is taking.



These teachers are the most extraordinary group of people, and we've grown to adore them. They have the best sense of humor, always joking with us and each other. They are always striving to improve themselves with course work or independent study. It is mostly women, who are outgoing and sometimes outrageous. The two men are warm, but reserved. At a community concert put on for our benefit, the teachers all bought school T-shirts and went on stage to perform although they had little time to rehearse. They were singing (in harmony of course) and dancing and just plain raucous, pulling us up on the stage with them. It will be very hard to leave them.

The students are eager to learn but have few opportunities for creative thought. They take pride in their school and they sweep the room and dust the office each day. On Fridays school ends an hour early and the students clean every inch of the school including washing the floors



After school, we've either got classes or some activity the school or our host family has planned for us. The sun is often hot in the afternoon, rising 20 or more degrees throughout the day. But when the sun drops low at around 6:00 p.m., the temperature drops with it. We start layering on the sweaters and fleece because there is no heat in the house. A large warm supper is served at about 7:00 p.m. and then the family starts preparing for bed. The first night we laughed at the thought of bed by 8:00, but suddenly we find we can't keep our eye open much beyond that. We snuggle back in under the covers and listen for the night sounds of the animals, and the neighbors' music, as we fall asleep.

We can't imagine leaving after just one more week.

July 26, 2008 WE ARE THE LUCKIEST PEOPLE ON EARTH :)

We tried to prepare ourselves for just about anything, but we could never imagine the warmth, enthusiasm, caring and outpouring of appreciation that we have received both from the school and the entire township. Once we established that we recognized we had a lot to learn from the school and community, as well as share with them, the relationship has been extremely positive. The teachers, as one teacher noted, "are hungry to learn how to help the students." There are few school resources -- students work with stubs of pencils and very limited paper -- but the human resources are valuable beyond measure. This is a caring and committed staff, with one of the best principals any of us has ever met. They welcomed the opportunity to learn new strategies for engaging their students and increase the learning.

Our host family has been caring and warm, making us feel comfortable in every way. The food has been delicious and high in healthy vegetables. The only "comfort" we lack is a shower, and we have quickly learned how insignificant that is. The entire family is great fun to be around.

We were prepared for the responsibility of being the first volunteers in this school, but also learned the first night from our host family that we were the first white people to ever stay overnight in the township. This was said not with any resentment, but rather a sincere appreciation for our willingness to be with the community. We heard the same message from many others in the township. For us, the home stay has been one of the most meaningful parts of our trip.

Even in our first week in the township, we've learned many valuable lessons. Among these are (1) The significance of family in the Xhosa culture - Certainly, family is important to us, but family is at the heart of everything here. Greetings between people often reflect your place in the family, so Eileen was often referred to as "Mama" because we traveled with our daughter. This was meant as respect, and actually there was tremendous respect attached to our traveling as a family. This made it all the more disturbing to think of how apartheid often split families or how the AIDS pandemic is taking away parents in so many families. (2) The wastefulness of American culture - While there is a green movement in the US, we became very aware of how much we waste in our society. For example, our host family brought us lunch at the school and carried with them plates and utensils which were washed and returned. There is no concept of paper plates which would just be discarded.

We are still processing this and will have much more later. For those who might want to help this incredible school, we do see there are many needs beyond just books for the library. We're working with the school on a priority list for fundraising in general and will talk about other options for donations in future updates (as well as discussions once we are home in an all-too-short 2 weeks). Here are a few photos... more next week.



Students singing for us as a welcome

Teachers in their traditional dress, dancing and singing to welcome us... an event we will never forget!!



One of the teachers gives Sara a hug on her birthday just after all 950 students sang Happy Birthday in English and Xhosa.



WE LOVE IT HERE!!!!

June 2008

Imagine a school of 1,000 students, in which 70% of the families have no income, that's zero income. The school has a total staff of 29 serving the students and when one of these teachers is absent, there are no substitutes and the students are distributed to other teachers. There are few, if any, supplies that teachers have at their disposal.

The AV Bukani School in Addo, South Africa is this school. Fourteen years removed from the end of Apartheid, South Africa remains a country struggling with the education of its majority black population. Schools and society in general remain largely segregated with the wealth still residing in the hands of the white minority. Yet, when Eileen and Larry visited South Africa as part of a multicultural educators People to People contingent last year, they came away impressed with the measured optimism of the black educators they met. In the face of persistent underfunding, overcrowded and crumbling schools, the worst HIV epidemic in all of Africa, and overwhelming poverty in their communities, principals and teachers alike expressed an optimistic view of the future.

Now, with their daughter, Sara, they will return to South Africa in July to work with the teachers and students at AV Bukani School.

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