A Greenwich English Teacher Shares her Transformative Visit to a Tanzanian School



An Endupoto class being instructed in "High Fives" by visiting English teacher Debbie Smith. Contributed Photo.

"This trip really taught me the power of being grateful and caring about what you have, Asana." Debbie Smith.

By Anne W. Semmes

Tanzania, yes, think safari, and that was on her itinerary. But this English teacher, Debbie Smith, newly retired, was most keen to visit a primary school, in Maasai country. It's called Endupoto, now referred to as "Miracle in the Bush." And it is a bit of a miracle now educating 750 students. Thanks to a relationship forged 35 years ago by a former minister of Christ Church Greenwich with the Bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Mt. Kilimanjaro.

Debbie Smith stepped up last Sunday at the Christ Church Forum to tell the story of her visit to that Endupoto school earlier this year joining 17 fellow church members including their church minister the Rev'd Marek Zabriskie. Here's how her transformative visit began.

Expecting Africa et al to be "drought, starvation, disease, poverty, war," her first clue with what awaited her was the image on the door key of the hotel the group stayed in. The image was of a Monarch butterfly, that has long been for her a "symbol of transformation."

And then came time to board that Land Rover in Arusha for the hour drive to school Endupoto. "There was no road. We would pass farmers on the way, subsistence farmers very dependent on the rain for their livelihood, nomadic people. And the signs of climate change were everywhere. The decertification, the dust, the low water level in the rivers, the great cracks in the earth."

And then they arrived. "I was bracing myself to feel sadness for their lack," said Smith.

But what greeted her and her fellow travelers was an avalanche of welcoming Maasai. "And they were just exploding with joy...They were celebrating their school community as for them, this school means regular food for their kids. It means education and a shot at economic viability. It's clean water. It is this beautiful, thriving community." At the end of that day Smith could only muster one comment in her journal, "I've been fire hosed with joy."

She had not written of the fact that half the country lives in poverty, that the average Tanzanian makes $160 a month, much less in rural areas. And, she had not written of that first image when they arrived of seeing "a sea of blue," seen closer to be hundreds of school students in their blue uniforms. "There were 650 children standing out in the sun waiting for us." And saying "Jambo" that means hello. "And they sang and sang a song about Tanzania."

And then there were those visits in the classrooms. "I was expecting to feel sad. But they're not focused on what they don't have - they don't have backpacks and smartboards and iPhones. They have each other, and they have songs."

So, why not teach them an American song. "So, we decided to go for "the wheels on the bus go round and round" because it had a lot of good repetition... It had some good hand movements." And Smith told of school buses and the kids in the United States who don't live where they can walk to their schools. So, she sang the first line. "Do you remember this? The wheels on the bus go round in round? And they sang it right back!" Did they know it already? No, they're listening, said their administrator. She'd never encountered students with attention spans so "fully intact." Her experience was, "You try to teach and try to compete with the telephones, and they're a hundred percent locked on." She was shocked.

She'd asked the students to raise their hand for their favorite subject. "Who likes math? And every single hand went up. Who likes history? Every single hand went up...This was the enthusiasm." She told them, "I'm going to go back to the United States and tell them how excited you are about learning because I think some of my students have forgotten. And I don't think we do a great job always making our teaching relevant to them."

Wanting to wrap up her story Smith returned to how she had felt at the start of the trip, "and how I had this sad story about Africa." But instead, she had experienced the importance of, "The ability to be fully present, to be joyful while we're learning." She saw the Endupoto students with "a relaxed pace. "So, when you introduce yourself to someone, it's not in a rushed kind of way. It's just a lot of real connection. They're also living lightly on the earth, which is certainly something that we need to emulate."

And she remarked on that phrase used so often, Asante Sana (thank you very much). "It was one of the biggest takeaways from our trip. It was just thank you, thank you for everything. This trip really taught me the power of being grateful and caring about what you have, Asana."

Finally, it was time to hear from and honor the two women from Christ Church who made that "Miracle in the Bush" Endupoto Primary School happen, Cheryl Kyle, and Karen Royce. Kyle told of her hearing that message of "What are you doing with the gifts God has given you," in Rev. Lee Walker's Christ Church sermon, circa 1992 that had led Cheryl and husband Pete to become missionaries to the Diocese of Kilimanjaro. After the loss of her husband, Kyle would lead safaris for Christ Church members. And it was during a 2008 safari that she was approached by a Maasai guard saying, "Mama, there's no school for our kids. Will you bring your people on the safari to look at some land?" Waiting to greet them were 400 plus Maasai men, women, and children "jumping, singing, and welcoming."

Also on that Church safari were Debbie and Bill Lord - he then of the ABC News Peter Jennings Show. "Bill just said, 'Cheryl, Debbie and I will give you some money and you get busy and raise with Karen and get one classroom finished.'" Kyle contacted Royce, "We're building a school. Let's raise some money and finish it. And we built one classroom and 98 Maasai boys and girls showed up."

Started under a partnership with the Diocese of Mount Kilimanjaro, after growing to three classrooms, "Endupoto became a government school," told Kyle. With 741 students, it now has 10 classrooms, four teachers' houses and six 20,000-liter rainwater harvesting tanks." And next door, "We built St. Michael's Church in 2016. It was built for 200. They're outgrowing it."

But then some of those primary school kids needed to move on. "They take a national exam and those children that pass go on to the Oljoro Secondary School [8th through 11th grades]," Kyle said. But in 2017 Kyle and Royce found that School, an hour away, to have only three classrooms, "and the students were sleeping on the floor." Since then, "We've built a girls' dorm, a boys' dorm, a teacher's house, refurbished another teacher's house, built latrines and a physics lab and a biology lab."

"With this $20,000 unexpected gift," added Royce, "We were going to help this school look like Endupoto...The principal is excited that now that it's fixed up, more students are going to enroll at the beginning of January. So anyway, that's transformation."

"May I just say a few words?" concluded Kyle. "It sounds like Cheryl and Karen do all this. But we have such a great team of Tanzanians. We have a contractor that we have worked with for 15 years. I'm no longer the project manager, darn it. Our driver, Ephraim, is now our project manager and we have our finance person I've known since she was a little girl, and she works for a bank and her father was a priest. So, we have built over the years with Tanzanians that are on the ground as dedicated, faithful workers. So, we really have a lot of joy in our life because of that."