

Trip-report August 21-28, 2006, written by Annemarie Lambrecht, her husband Jean-Paul and their daughter Sofie

After a long ride from Nairobi to Kabondo, we arrived at Hope Home (HOHO) by sunset. I can still see the Ambasa's great big eyes, a smiling delicate Monica, the glowing but questioning faces: "What are you white people doing here?" The older children speak a handful of English. The local language is Luo, one of the many languages in Kenya.

A few balloons offered by a local Belgian society were waving in the breeze, attached to the outside of the hut to welcome us. Was Flanders not so far away after all? A few children were dancing, and shyly greeting us in song.

Our first meal was rice, vegetables and beans, which is the daily ration. Bread is virtually non-existent. Ugali, a kind of flour based meal, and salted pancakes are plentiful on the other hand. Meat and fish are tasty but scarce. The bananas, sun-ripened pineapples, and passion fruits were heavenly, cheap and abundant.

The first evening, we sought lodging in mama Martha's huts. It took some organization and some searching to find our way in the pitch black of night. Sofie stayed in a second hut, together with Daisy, Achieng's 14-year-old niece. Daisy is shy, a good student, attentive, but very introverted. She was on vacation at the orphanage together with Susan, Achieng's daughter. They talked about their school: Daisy gets up at 4:30 AM; there's an air of strict discipline, however she's very pleased to be able to attend a good school. Susan likes to write, and promised to write more for our website. None of the girls attending boarding school, have access to internet at school.

After a good night's rest, we were welcomed at the orphanage by a wonderful breakfast buffet: fruit, milk, tea, bread and toast, jam and cheese. Admittedly, we had run some errands in Nairobi before coming here, where stores are few and far between, with a limited selection of products.

Achieng introduced us to everyone, and she dragged us through the house which she had painted herself in blue and pink tinted washable paint.

The nanny's were busy getting the 8 little ones ready for their visits to the hospital in Oyugis where they are weighed on a monthly basis, receive a check up, and vaccinations (there's only one doctor at the hospital, but the nurses perform the check-ups, and eventually refer to the doctor; there's no pediatrician nor ob-gyn for the moment). Since we had arrived in a 4 wheel drive, this was the perfect opportunity to take the 20 km trip.

We each received a child on our laps; the baby-bottles, pampers, fresh clothes and wipes filled up the empty spaces. We had fun. It wasn't long before a few of the children were asleep on our laps, while others stared straight into our white faces. They were well behaved in fact. At the hospital, we stood in lines to get weighed, the check-ups, and the pricks (baby's cry there too!). All the children had gained weight. There were no big concerns except for Monica. She had arrived at the orphanage in July, and had gotten a lot of attention and care for about 6-weeks from Birgit, the Belgian volunteer. The doctors were concerned that she had AIDS, and this concern was now confirmed. Time will tell whether she will be able to stay at the orphanage.

Arriving back at HOHO, we ate and had a chance to further explore HOHO and get to know the cow, the dog and the chickens, as well as having a look at the surrounding constructible land. The amount of work done on a daily basis was striking. Three-hundred liter water is carried in daily for the laundry, the cleaning, cooking, coal heating, ironing with heated irons...

On Thursday morning, we were impressed by the reception provided by the many women in the community. They meet weekly at Hope Home, to work, to chat, and to plan. This time, they had brought their husbands to hear about the Belgian project. Achieng had organized all of this. I told about how the project had started in Belgium, how all the moms and dads and children in Belgium were shocked by the high infant mortality rate and death-rate due to AIDS. I added that we admired Achieng, a seropositive Kenyan woman, having a desire not just to improve her own health, but determined to serve the community in which she had been born and raised.

The meeting was fun. We sang and danced; you could read the thankfulness and enthusiasm on their smiling faces.

In the afternoon, we went to visit a hut, where two brothers were living by themselves. Along dirt paths, we followed Achieng, John, Charles and Margareth. Margareth is the official contact in the community, with responsibility for children living alone. The objective of this visit was to check out the state of their hut, determine if there were any needed repairs, and to see if some of the unemployed youth would be able to make the repairs using materials purchased by HOHO.

At the hut, we found Ben, a 9-year-old boy, in dirty clothes, without his elder brother. The elder brother had left 2 weeks ago, and never returned. Together, we decided to take him back with us to the orphanage; someone in the community should be able to take this child into their family. Ben had wounded his foot, and was limping. At the orphanage, he took a bath, had his foot cared for, and received some fresh clothes. In the afternoon, he played football, showed Sofie his math homework, and in the evening, he was invited to join a nice foster family.

After asking around, it appears that in the neighborhood, another 5 children are- until now successfully- living alone with out their parents. This particular situation can occur in Kabondo, up to 5 or 6 times per year. (FYI: the children featured in the TV documentary are still being visited and followed up by a social service located in Oyugis).

On the last day of our visit, we met George, Hope's biological father. He was tipped off as to our visit by someone from the project. Achieng had previously informed us that he had been on her back for money, and was known for irresponsibly handling money. George requested that we start in prayer – as he is a pastor – to bless the outcome of the discussions. How could I refuse? Prayer and song play such an important role here everywhere. They are prayers of supplication for better times to come...

His eldest son Theodore sat next to him observing, yet not saying one word. Then George asked me for help (money) for Theodore's school tuition. He handed me a letter from the school with the school tuition for the next three year period of time. He told me that he himself was in need also, and would like to have additional funds to start a business for his wife. When I asked him how his other children were doing, her responded: "they are okay, no

problem”. I started having a very bad feeling about the whole thing, but kept listening, and then asked Theodore what he wanted to study. His answer was “to become a doctor”. I explained to them the Hope for Kabondo-Kenya project: priorities being the orphanage, orphans, children living alone, and capacity building in the community. Still, I promised him – because he is “Hope’s” biological father – that I’d submit his request to the board members of the Private Foundation for evaluation. I think he was disillusioned to have left with empty pockets.

We ended our trip with many positive experiences, good contacts, and heartfelt encounters with many people. But we also have memories of the dangerous roads, and the realization that over the past decade, AIDS has disjointed an entire society in Kabondo and the whole area. But at the same time, this situation has offered that same society, an opportunity to question certain traditional practices from the past, and to give women greater responsibility and respect.

Many more “Achiengs” will be needed in courageous and perseverant support of orphans and to strengthen the society. Your help and support has already produced a small miracle ...there is laughter, singing and employment. There’s also good news with regards to the property. The owner of the orphanage would really like for the orphanage to remain where it is currently located, and is taking great pains to establish formal title to the property. He is being assisted by a Kenyan advisor in this matter. Having newfound confidence in the progress, and because water is so important, we have already approved construction of a well.

And there’s more to come, more plans for us to carry out going forward.

You all receive warm greetings, and a repeated “EROKAMANO” (thank you)!

Achieng and mama Martha traveled with us to Belgium for a week, for evaluation meetings and various discussions. This was very useful for everyone. We also took advantage of their visit to attend the event in Lier on September 2nd, where Achieng met many people and had an opportunity to speak.

From recent telephone contacts with Achieng, it sounds as if Monica will be able to stay at HOHO. In October, she’s starting on antiretroviral medication. If ever she becomes ill, she can temporarily be placed in a specialized institution.

To be continued...

Annemarie

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