

Kylie Lang on Sunday



My eyes opened in Africa

They live in slums, sleep 12 to a small room and think themselves lucky for one meal a day and their determination to build a better life will steal your heart away



Eye opener: Kylie Lang makes potato prints with Clinton at the Mary Rice Centre, Kenya.

PATIENCE has eluded me this week (more than usually, I mean) and I haven't been very easy to be around.

My son hasn't said as much but it's evident in his sighs, shrugs and silence.

What I'm struggling with is the laziness and lack of thought for others, the grumbling about nothing, the ingratitude, and the disrespect for possessions.

Drawers are left open after sought items are retrieved, the bedroom has become a "floor-drobe" strewn with clothes, and when we went to buy a simple torch for school camp, it turned into a 10-minute exercise as he evaluated the colours, merits and "coolness" of the range.

Just pick one!

The nose was turned up at a meal I'd prepared, there was griping about going to bed at a reasonable hour, and an Oscar-worthy performance on reasons not to get ahead on school assignments.

Seriously, some kids don't know how lucky they are.

Now, I say all this, because my eyes have been opened, my heart marked forever, by 10 disturbing, exhilarating and exhausting days in East Africa.

Along with nine other Queensland professionals, I upped sticks for Kenya on the Gone Fishing program, an immersion run by the Edmund Rice Foundation, which supports eight Christian Brothers' development projects in this impoverished part of the world.

We saw three of them, in Nairobi, and didn't they make us think.

The Mary Rice Centre cares for 17 disabled and utterly adorable children from the nearby slum.

Kibera slum has up to one million people jammed into a 10km strip of red dirt.

Shanties stretch for as far as the eye can see; mud huts no bigger than a small Australian bathroom house families of up to 12 people.

It takes two days to walk from one end to the other, dodging open sewers rancid with faeces, rotting food scraps and other refuse.

The stench is like nothing else, the heat overpowering.

Humans live in conditions no better than the goats and chickens we see scavenging for

children have nothing, they're grateful for anything.

An education is prized above all else, because they believe, rightly enough for those who get the grades, that it's their ticket out of poverty.

At the Ruben Centre, also in the midst of a slum (this one housing 600,000 people in

In Kenya, the community is more important than the individual, and because these children have nothing, they're grateful for anything

food, competing, almost, for whatever is going.

But it's the kids that win us over, everywhere we go. Happy, courteous and considerate, they're raised to think of others.

In Kenya, the community is more important than the individual, and because these

Mukuru), the children are animated, unashamedly curious, their love of life infectious.

Joshua, who's 12 (the same age as my boy), isn't shy in telling me he adores school.

Not only does he get up at 5am to do his homework, but he receives a hot lunch simply by going to class – it's his only

meal of the day. His father divorced his mother and, in Kenya, I'm told, this means the wife gets the kids and a big fat zero in child support.

Joseph is one of seven kids. He sleeps on the floor so his younger siblings can share the one and only bed in their windowless shanty. Hard to believe, right?

So when Joseph says he loves sleeping in a real bed, that he washes by hand his school uniform at night, that doing homework is important because it will make him "smarter", and that he dreams of earning enough money one day to buy his mum a second dress, I want to scoop him up and bring him home with me.

For those of us with so much, his is an unthinkable reality.

And while each of us on the Gone Fishing trip has committed resources and money to keep the support coming from Australia – to try to make a difference in a country so

desperately in need – adjusting to my own reality is tough.

I've always thought my house was small at only three bedrooms, but to think that a whole family can live in one room, and in it have a few chairs, a table and a shabby old TV, well, mine's a palace.

When my son starts whinging, as many Aussie kids do, about having to do more than the bare minimum, to settle for the cheaper, less cool item or to look after his things, I'm also reminded that this is his reality.

He has been born in a comparatively lucky country.

My next challenge as a parent, apart from finding where the heck it is that I left my store of patience, is to be more effective in teaching him about sacrifice, moderation and self-discipline, to show him that what we have already is more than enough.

Next time I go to Kenya, my son will be coming with me.

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