The Courier-Mail

MARCH 30-31 • 2013

Qweekend.

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OP SHOP SHOWGIRLS
RETRO GLAMOUR & THE NEW PINUPS

MISSION POSSIBLE

How Queenslanders are helping African children escape the poverty trap

By Kylie Lang

TIPPING POINT

Amid the acrid slums of Nairobi, a band of Brisbane business leaders seeks ways to help Kenyans escape crippling poverty.

Story **Kylie Lang**

STANDING ON THE EDGE OF A SPRAWLING chasm thick with refuse, our throats raw from the fetid fumes of burning plastic, it is as if we are in the midst of an apocalypse. Except that here, in this East African wasteland, people are still alive, eking out an existence amid the squalor and stench.

Humans are incidental, almost, to the macabre Marabou storks that rule this and many other Kenyan tips. With their scrawny white legs and heavy, cloak-like wings that span up to four metres, the creatures are nicknamed "undertaker birds". They feed on death and decay. At a menacing 1.5m tall, they tower over the children who scavenge alongside them. Children, their faces grubby with soot and stained with tears from the smarting smoke. Children, who if not for the lottery of birth, could be anywhere else but here.

For days now we have walked with the poor, dodging noxious open sewers as we've negotiated the precarious tracks of Nairobi's slums. We've become so accustomed to "flying toilets" – plastic bags filled with excrement and flung into ditches in the absence of sanitation – that we no longer flinch when we tread on them. Yet the dump in Mukuru, in the capital's east, leaves us utterly crushed. How can human beings be allowed to live this way?

There *is* wealth in Kenya, a country of 43 million, but it is concentrated in the hands of a few – notably politicians who are reportedly corrupt and until recently have refused to admit slums such as Mukuru, despite its 600,000 inhabitants, exist. They exist, all right. Fly over Nairobi at night and they're the patches in darkness. Electricity, like paved streets, piped water and sewerage, is a service governments choose not to provide.

From the rim of Mukuru dump, shanties of mud, sticks and tin form an ugly labyrinth. In ▶

grim alleys where second-hand school shoes sell for $1 a pair and goats' testicles sizzle on hotplates, families cram into shelters no wider than a parking space at your average suburban shopping centre. Australians wouldn't keep livestock in such hovels, so it beggars belief that these people pay rent – to slumlords who prey on the weak.

In one windowless hut, as our eyes adjust to the darkness, we find Peris. She's sitting on the only chair in the place, her stooped frame swamped by a dirty blue coat. At 27, Peris has outlived four of her five children. Until recently, the single mother managed to sleep here rent-free, on a slab of foam with her remaining child, a boy aged seven, but when slumlords discovered her "good fortune" they demanded she cough up 500 shillings ($5.60) each month, a sum she struggles to afford even though it's at the lower end of the scale.

An uneducated Kenyan would be lucky to earn 200 shillings ($2.30) for a day's casual work, but monthly rents can be 15 times this amount. Every morning you see them, streaming out of the slums in one long procession, the men with sleeves and trouser legs rolled up to reveal able limbs, the women immaculately dressed. They trudge kilometres to stand by a main road in the hope someone will pick them up for a spot of housework or gardening.

Unemployment in Kenya officially stands at 40 per cent. In Mukuru, the figure is rumoured to be at least double that. Unlike in Australia, there is no access to social security for most Kenyans. The International Labour Organisation estimates that 84 per cent of the workforce is excluded, while those who are covered receive next to nothing. Basic healthcare is out of reach for the 60 per cent of Kenyans living in poverty – they're the ones plagued by dysentery, malnutrition, malaria, typhoid, mental illness and AIDS. In Mukuru, emphysema is rife due to smoke inhalation from burning plastic. Children as young as four are put to work, hunting for plastic items they can melt and sell to the companies that dumped them. For each kilogram, they earn 13 shillings (15¢). Every shilling helps.

Child labour, including prostitution, is viewed by many as unavoidable in a society in which the rights of the individual are sacrificed for the group. Families pull together to survive. One day at a time.

Astonishingly, through it all, the Kenyan smile endures, big and wide, welcoming us *mzungu* (white people) to their world. A gangly bloke squatting on a mound of refuse spots us and scrambles to his feet. "*Karibu!*" he shouts, which is Swahili for welcome. We wave, unable to speak as we take in the 360-degree panorama of despair.

I'M WITH THREE OTHER AUSTRALIANS ON THIS leg of our journey, which began in Brisbane. John Tyquin, 48, runs goa billboards with his two brothers in Bowen Hills. David Waldie, 43, is a lawyer-turned-entrepreneur who's taking a break from his telecommunications company Frontier Networks in Eagle Farm, also in the city's inner north. Our leader is Shane Arnold, a 30-year-old GPS rugby coach and director of Australian Financial Advisors, based in inner-west Paddington. This is Arnold's fifth visit to Mukuru but it doesn't get any easier to stomach.

All up, there are ten of us on this inaugural "Gone Fishing" immersion in East Africa, and we're split into three groups, each with an Aussie leader and a Kenyan guide. Some blokes, in their forties, have known each other since school in Brisbane at St Joseph's College (Gregory Terrace), so when we meet for breakfast and dinner there's a healthy degree of sledging and plenty of humour to lighten the mood. God knows, we need it.

There's Peter Murphy (Davidson Recruitment), Damian Wright (accounting group BDO) and Tyquin, possibly the funniest guy I know, as well as Geoff Rodgers (communications firm Rowland) and Waldie, whose kindness carries me several times. Marketing whiz John Lazarou (the Coffee Club), Rachael Trihey (AvantGarde Recruitment) and two 20-somethings, lawyer Andrew Kelly (Clayton Utz) and Melbourne photographer Madeleine Chiller, complete our crew.

Gone Fishing aims to connect decision-makers in corporate Australia with the people of Africa. We're asked to look for tangible ways to empower Kenyans to help them solve their own problems. The invitation to "teach each other to fish" is pivotal – it's not about handouts, but a hand up.

Organiser Anthony Ryan, featured in *Qweekend* in November 2012, is a man of action. "Words alone are meaningless," he tells us as we gather at our modest lodgings at the Mary Ward Centre, run by Loreto sisters in the township of Karen, on Nairobi's outskirts. "Each of you will be moved to take action, in some form, to effect change here and back home in your own communities," says Ryan, 44, a charismatic former teacher and assistant principal who worked in Christian

Brothers' schools in Brisbane from 1995 to 2008 and established programs to feed the homeless. The married father of two boys is now CEO of the Melbourne-based Edmund Rice Foundation, which provides financial support for development projects in Australia, Africa, East Timor, the Philippines and Papua New Guinea. He sees his work as humanitarian rather than religion-based.

Taking time out to regroup – to digest so much that is disturbing – is vital, Ryan says. So it is that on two nights, we swap convent hospitality for the Karen Blixen Tamambo restaurant and bar that featured in the 1985 movie *Out of Africa*, starring Meryl Streep and Robert Redford. And, two-thirds of the way into our immersion, two days in a game resort in the Maasai Mara puts us in touch with the images of Africa with which we're more familiar – elephants, giraffes, rhinoceros, lions, cheetah and the most unforgettable of sunsets.

It's in these moments of distance from the suffering we've seen in the slums that we unload and find the strength to push on. We're reminded of our reason for coming – to see ourselves as part of the solution to the Kenyan poverty crisis. The real challenge, however, lies in determining how we can be most effective once home in the comfort of our lives in Queensland.

IF WE EVER NEEDED PROOF THAT ONE PERSON can make a difference, we find it in Frank O'Shea. Think Mother Teresa meets Crocodile Dundee. Humble, tenacious and irreverent, O'Shea is director of the non-profit Ruben Centre, a gated oasis in the Mukuru slum and one of eight projects in Africa supported by the Edmund Rice Foundation.

Brother Frank is an agitator. He needs to be. Sidestepping bureaucratic corruption and ineptitude, he has turned two humble classrooms (created by an Irish Sister of Mercy in 1986) into a nursery and primary school for 1900 children. O'Shea also oversees an onsite medical clinic that treats 58,000 people per year, including children with cerebral palsy – which he blames on "home birthing, since women fear if they go to hospital their babies will be swapped or stolen" – and a smaller HIV clinic that gives free antiretroviral injections to more than 300 children.

Not one to limit his ambition, he has established a vocational training unit, a market garden and recycling project, and an education campaign to reduce the incidence of rape in the slum.

Then there's the micro-finance scheme. It helps the unemployed set up small businesses, 94 per cent of which are deemed successful. Loans are offered at 15 per cent interest, a rate far lower than those of Kenyan banks which, O'Shea says, wouldn't consider financing asset-poor slum dwellers in any case. Another inspired initiative rescues slum kids from child labour – and gets them into school – by employing their parents.

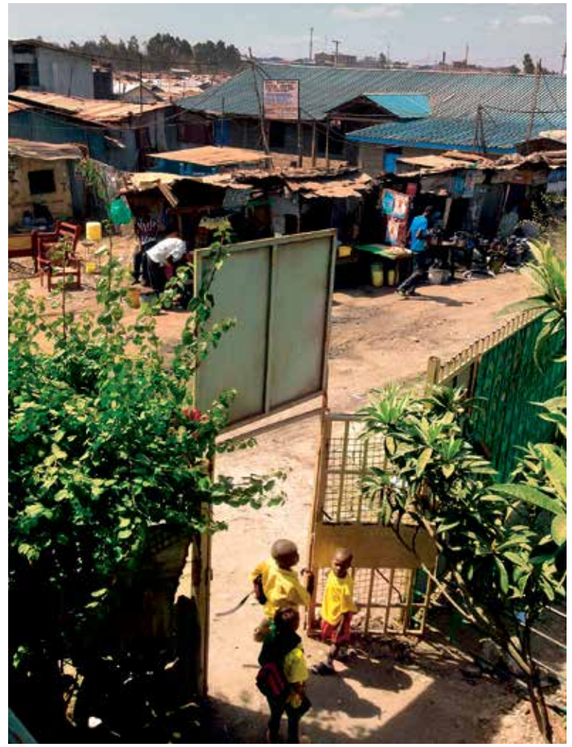
At 59, O'Shea is not finished yet. Next on his list is Ruben's own radio station and a secondary school on a prized patch of adjacent land. The Ruben Centre is presently a $350,000-a-year enterprise, with $230,000 provided by the Edmund Rice Foundation and other sums from private donors personally secured by O'Shea. Among them is the Planet Wheeler Foundation, based in Melbourne, and one of its trustees, Mark Cubit.

International aid programs often cop flak for squandering donations on operating costs, but O'Shea won't have that. His administration runs lean, and when people visit the slum environment and see how many thousands of lives are benefitting, he says they're sold.

It helps that the ERF has capped operating costs at 10 per cent for the first $25,000. Any donations over $25,000 go in full to the cause. It also helps that Frank O'Shea is such a character. From teaching physical education at St Patrick's Primary School in Ballarat in the 1970s to the slums of Kenya in August 2010, it's been one wild ride. Ask him how he wound up here and you have a script for a movie. It begins with a naughty boy who was expelled from Christian Brothers College in Warrnambool, Victoria, in 1968 but a few years later, to the surprise of many (including him), fronted up to the same Brothers who kicked him out and asked to join them.

A Bachelor of Science degree followed and since leaving Australia in 1983 to work in Tonga, Tanzania and Sudan, O'Shea has, among other things, taught Sudanese prisoners in leg-irons to read and write in their own tribal language (Zande), established a mobile education resource for children in the forests of West Equatoria, taught English to Congolese refugees fleeing Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army, and suffered temporary brain ▶

> EACH OF YOU WILL BE MOVED TO TAKE ACTION TO EFFECT CHANGE HERE AND BACK HOME.



Worlds collide … (*from top left*) Ruben Centre director Frank O'Shea; Brisbane businessman David Waldie in the centre's market garden; the gate to the centre; children who tend the flowers at Ruben; (*opening pages*) the dump in Mukuru.

damage after a giraffe crashed into a bus in which he was travelling. Oh, he's also survived anthrax.

In Kenya, working out of a tin shed with barred windows, O'Shea is fired up, buoyed by the optimism of the people he serves. "Everyone in Kenya is busting their gut to get somewhere – what a place! They just need help; they don't want you to do it for them. If people have energy and desire, that's a great starting point for a mission."

A neatly dressed woman hovers at the door of O'Shea's office. "Come in, Miriam," he hastens. "What have you got for me today?" Miriam bakes bread onsite, and comes bearing two warm rolls tied in plastic bags for each of us. "Freshest bread you'll find in Nairobi," beams O'Shea, explaining that Miriam is "empowered" – she now earns enough money so her children can go to school.

Touring Ruben, we encounter other women – stirring vats of corn kernels for the children's lunch, sewing uniforms, and mixing coal dust with paper to make cheap fuel for cooking. In one demountable there's a working bee of ladies making exquisite hand-beaded jewellery. Incredibly, a 200-shilling ($2.30) bracelet will keep a child in school for another month. We buy up big.

At the gate of the market garden, 14-year-old Felister introduces herself as my guide and tells me about Wangari Maathai (1940-2011), a Nobel Prize-winning environmentalist who founded Kenya's Green Belt Movement. Felister, like so many children we meet, is confident, articulate and polite. She says we have much to learn from the earth as she points out eggplant, corn, sunflowers, beetroot, potatoes, spinach, tomatoes, cucumbers and maize (her responsibility to water twice daily).

Five children hovering at the gate ask to show me the flowers they tend. They're beyond excited. Rose, who's 10 and likes reading books and skipping rope, explains how nothing goes to waste. Broken plastic chairs are upturned and filled with soil so cuttings can take root. Her friend Mercy, 11, would live at school if she could. "I love Ruben and Brother Frank is a very good man, but I don't like being in the slum," she says softly. "It's unsafe and dirty, but I don't have a choice."

Later, when I tell this to O'Shea, his eyes water. "You know," he says after a long pause, "I set out to make Ruben a place you want to be, to build a sense of ownership and, well, to be a bit like an Irish pub – where when patrons stay past closing time the publican hollers, 'Don't you have a home to go to?'"

A KENYAN CLASSROOM MUST BE A TEACHER'S dream. Children respect their uniform and are eager to prove education is their ticket out of poverty. No wagging class. No fibs about homework. Brother Beausang School in Embulbul, about 24km west of the Nairobi centre, is a shining example of what foreign resources can achieve when working with the local community. The school of 750 students from prep to Form 4 (Year 12) could be any other in rural Queensland – except that here, pupils are fed a hot lunch, probably the only meal they'll eat all day.

Peter Shanahan was the lay principal of St Paul's College in Adelaide before upping sticks for Africa five years ago. Strolling around the spacious grounds – which include a toilet block that baffles students accustomed to defecating in plastic bags – Shanahan says he planned to be away from Australia for only 12 months. "The African people won me over straightaway – I have great admiration for them. They never give up."

Brother Beausang costs $400,000 a year to run, with the Edmund Rice Foundation funding $220,000 of this. The Kenyan Government contributes nothing, since the school is classified private. The shortfall is met through fees of $140-$300 per year, which few parents have any hope of paying. This is where donors from St Bernard's Catholic boys' college, Melbourne, step in. They sponsor families who are assessed, at home visits by school staff, according to three levels of need: almost desperate; desperate; very desperate.

On one of these visits I meet Isaac, 15, who is keen to hear how my 12-year-old son finds school in Brisbane. When I explain that the bell rings at 8.25am, not 7.15am when Isaac's school assembly starts, he is impressed: "Wow, your boy must get a lot of sleep; how lucky he is."

Isaac lives with his mother in a particularly miserable part of Embulbul. His mum's first two husbands beat her, Isaac explains, clashing his fists together. Her third, his father, died four years ago. I ask what would make Isaac's life easier – if he could name one thing, what would it be? He doesn't hesitate. "An alarm clock."

For the past few years, Isaac has slept fitfully, willing himself to wake before 5am so he can complete his homework. He'd study at night,

except the family can't afford electricity. Clocks cost a lot, he adds, around 200 shillings ($2.30), but his mum is trying to save up for one.

Of the 90 children who complete Form 4 at Brother Beausang, three or four will qualify for a coveted scholarship to university. While this ratio is dismal by Australian standards, in impoverished parts of Africa it provides a foundation on which to grow. "We are giving kids a pathway after high school," says Principal Shanahan, "and they've never had this before. Even if only a few make it [out of poverty], it gives hope to the younger ones coming through."

HOPE IS ALIVE, TOO, AT THE MARY RICE CENTRE in Kibera, Africa's largest slum where one million people are sandwiched into 2.5 square kilometres of red dirt. (On the border of the slum, unbelievably, is the Royal Nairobi Golf Club, catering to the elite with an irrigated 18-hole course, swimming pool, squash courts and clubhouse.)

At Mary Rice, three staff and an energetic band of young volunteers care for 17 physically and mentally disabled children, many of whom, director Brother Gerald Mgalula explains, have spent the first five years of life chained to beds, their parents too ashamed to let them venture outside their shanty. These are kids who've been shunned by their community and, being poor, would otherwise be denied access to physical therapy, medication and assisted learning. We're besotted with Donald, 10, who has autism and breaks into giggles when he grabs our hands; with Felix, 11, whose legs "don't work properly" so it takes him two hours to get to school (a distance an able-bodied child could walk in ten minutes); and with Dennis, 5, who has spina bifida so his mother, a 19-year-old orphan, carries him 4km to and from class.

> "WE'RE HELPING CHILDREN LEAD A MORE DIGNIFIED LIFE AND BOOSTING THEIR CONFIDENCE.

PHOTOGRAPHY: KYLIE LANG, MADELEINE CHILLER

Rising above … (*from top left*) Senior students at Brother Beausang School; the choked Nairobi River in Kibera slum; Brisbane businessman Peter Murphy and head teacher Catherine with disabled children at the Mary Rice Centre; the Brother Beausang primary school, built with foreign donations; (*top right*) the 2013 Gone Fishing crew with guide Godfrey Isali (*centre, white T-shirt*).

The centre is named after the disabled daughter of Edmund Rice (1762-1844), a Catholic missionary who devoted his life to educating the poor in Ireland. Since opening in 2007 under the careful eye of Australian Brother Russell Peters, it has transitioned children into regular school and, through the tireless work of occupational therapist Esther Wanjiru, improved their speech and mobility. "We're helping children lead a more dignified life and boosting their confidence," says Brother Gerald.

At the same time, donations from Australia assist parents with the cost of vocational training, offered in a nearby demountable, so that they too might improve their prospects.

BACK AT THE MUKURU TIP, ON THE LAST DAY of Gone Fishing, the reaction of our Kenyan guide Godfrey Isali is telling. One of nine children, Godfrey, 24, was raised in Kibera slum and still lives there, in a two-square-metre mud hut he shares with an older brother and a 13-year-old sister who needs to be in Nairobi for school. (The rest of the clan now resides in western Kenya.) A bright spark, he holds a diploma in mass communications and is polishing his first freelance submission to a local newspaper. The article is called *The African Child* and tells of a boy trying to escape his wretched life in Kibera.

Godfrey's been by our side as we've cried and laughed over recent days. He's seen us angered by the injustice we've witnessed, and humbled by the resilience and generosity of his people. He's remained stoic throughout, expressing confidence that change is coming to Kibera. A $300,000 United Nations-funded transformation is building roads and mapping the area, while access to electricity and piped water is slowly improving.

But here, as we stand together in the Mukuru dump with the undertaker birds and the children scavenging for plastic, Godfrey is desolate. "This is a real shock to me; I never knew people could live like this," he says, shaking his head.

Godfrey is ready to move on and so are we. Leaving Kenya, however, is hard. There is so much to do. We've made friends, real friends, with Kenyans at the coalface and feel guilty going back to our affluent world where people are troubled by the smallest of things – bad drivers, disappointing restaurant meals, homes without ensuites.

But each of us leaves with a promise – and business plans under way – to make a difference, to teach other human beings to fish so that they might one day fish for themselves. ●

The Edmund Rice Foundation Dinner on May 11 at the Brisbane Convention & Exhibition Centre will raise money for development projects in Australia, East Timor and Kenya. Details and bookings at erf.org.au/events/ or phone 3023 1034. For information about the next Gone Fishing program in October, email AWRyan@edmundrice.org or ph (03) 8359 0114.