

A LIGHT in the DARK

A GROUP OF AUSTRALIANS INCLUDING A FORMER ADELAIDE LAY PRINCIPAL ARE MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN THE KENYAN SLUMS BY GIVING PEOPLE AN EDUCATION

WORDS 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 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, are services governments choose not to provide.

From the rim of Mukuru dump, shanties of mud, sticks and tin form an ugly labyrinth. 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. Unemployment in Kenya officially stands at 40 per cent. In Mukuru, the figure is rumoured to be 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. 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.

GIVING A HAND UP

I’m one of 10 Australian professionals on this inaugural Gone Fishing immersion in East Africa. There’s John Lazarou (The Coffee Club), Peter Murphy (Davidson Recruitment), Damian Wright (BDO), John Tyquin (goa), Geoff Rodgers (Rowland), David Waldie (Frontier Networks), Rachael Trihey (Avantgarde Recruitment), Andrew Kelly (Clayton Utz) and Melbourne photographer Madeleine Chiller.

The aim of Gone Fishing – an initiative of the Edmund Rice Foundation, which provides financial support for development projects in Australia, Africa, East Timor, Philippines and Papua New Guinea – is to connect decision makers in corporate Australia with the people of Africa. The invitation to “teach each other to fish” is pivotal – it’s not about handouts, but a hand up.

“Each of you will be moved to take action, in some form, to effect change here and back home in your own communities,” says organiser Anthony Ryan, 44, the CEO of the Melbourne-based Edmund Rice Foundation.

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.

Brother Frank is an agitator. He needs to be. Side-stepping bureaucratic corruption and ineptitude, he has turned two humble classrooms into a nursery and primary school for 1900 children.



Picture Madeleine Chiller



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As director of the non-profit Ruben Centre, a gated oasis in the Mukuru slum, he also oversees a medical clinic that treats 58,000 people per year and an HIV clinic that gives free antiretroviral injections to 300 children. He also has established a vocational training unit, a market garden, and education campaigns to reduce the incidence of rape in the slum. A micro-finance scheme helps the unemployed set up small businesses, while another inspired initiative rescues slum kids from child labour – and gets them in 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 currently a \$350,000-a-year enterprise, with \$230,000 provided by the Edmund Rice Foundation and other sums from private donors.

International aid programs often cop flak for squandering donations on operating costs, but O’Shea’s administration runs lean, and he says when people visit the slum environment and see how many thousands of lives are benefitting, they’re sold. It helps that the ERF has capped operating costs at 10 per cent for the first \$25,000. 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