



Picture Kylie Lang

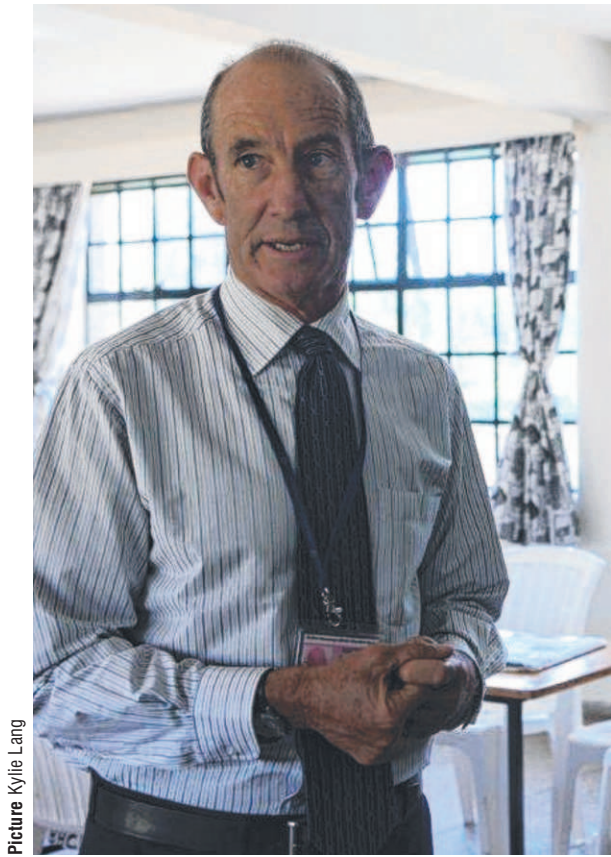
“The **KENYAN PEOPLE** won me over straightaway – I have great **ADMIRATION** for them. They never give up

Kenya in 2010, it's been one wild ride. It begins with a naughty boy who was expelled from Christian Brothers College in Warrnambool in 1968 but a few years later, to the surprise of many, fronted up to the same Brothers who kicked him out and asked to join them.

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), taught English to Congolese refugees fleeing Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army, and suffered temporary brain 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 on-site, and comes bearing two warm rolls 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.



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Top left Primary school students at Ruben Centre.
Bottom left The dump in Mukuru, Kenya.
Top right Children, including Mercy, 11, first on left at back, show the flowers they're growing at Ruben Centre.
Bottom right Peter Shanahan at Brother Beausang School in Embulbul.

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 hand-beaded jewellery. Incredibly, a 200-shilling (\$2.30) bracelet will keep a child in school for another month. We buy up big.

Mercy, 11, is one of many confident, articulate students we meet. She tends flowers in the market garden and would live at school if she could. Mercy adores Ruben and says Brother Frank is "a good man". "I don't like being in the slum," she says softly, "it's very 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 – when patrons stay past closing time the publican hollers, 'Don't you have a home to go to?'"

TICKET OUT OF POVERTY

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 locals. The school of 750 students from prep to Form 4 (Year 12) could be any other in rural Australia – 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 Kenyan 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 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 lives with his mother in a destitute part of the village. 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, around 200 shillings (\$2.30), he says, but his mum is trying to save for one.

Of the 90 children who complete Form 4 at Brother Beausang, three or four will qualify for a scholarship to university. "We are giving kids a pathway after high school," says Principal Shanahan, "and they've never had this. Even if only a few make it [out of poverty], it gives hope to the younger ones coming through."

Hope is alive, too, in Kibera, Africa's largest slum where one million people are sandwiched into 2.5sq km of red dirt.