

Orinda Teens Work Hard To Help Kenyan Students

By Cathy Tyson



Alex and Katy with their 8th grade girls' AIDS class at Jora Primary
Photos provided

This summer six Orinda teenagers had the adventure of a lifetime. The current and former students of Miramonte are members of the ABE Club – A Better Education, whose goal is to improve the lives of students in the Mt. Kasigau area of Kenya, by teaching, improving the community and by finding sponsors to pay school fees. Alex and Megan Isaacs, Katy and J.J. Reed, Emily Myers, and Shelby Van Rheenan, along with chaperones Liz Reed, Kathy Macbride and Steve Isaacs spent a good portion of their summer vacation working at five villages near Kasigau, located in the southeast corner of Kenya, about 65 miles from Mombasa.



JJ and Emily enjoy the 6th and 7th graders while teaching them about writing a letter to a possible sponsor

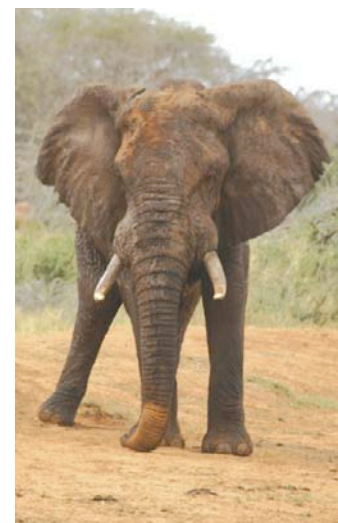
This was not the first trip for most of the students; many have been members since the club was founded in 2004. From July 3

through the 31, these suburban teens taught classes on AIDS awareness, English letter writing, and ecology. Mindful of the being culturally sensitive, the students made lesson plans that wouldn't impinge on local teachers' curriculum.

The ecology class was a big hit. Almost all of the Kenyan students had never seen a movie or television before, so after they carefully hooked the projector up to their car battery, the crowded classroom was transfixed. J.J. Reed, a junior, turned out to be the electrician of the group. "Deep Blue" and "Deep Sea" were projected on white butcher paper taped to the wall. Although only an hour and a half from the Indian Ocean, none of the village children had ever actually seen an ocean. The Orinda students related the ocean habitat to the Kenyan forest habitat, and set up lessons to be interactive. "I think they made a big impression," says chaperone Kathy Macbride. In speaking about his personal experience, J.J. Reed said, "It's so different there. The kids are so happy, energetic. They have a great quality of life – even without running water or electricity. They don't have pressure, there's no race to be the best. Here it's all about your stuff."

Newest member Emily Myers said the best part of the experience was, "just being with the high school kids and having conversations. They were interested in what our school was like. One day I brought a brand new pencil, they freaked. It's something I'll never forget." Alex Isaacs recalls of her experience, "It's amazing to me how different it is there. They don't know anything about life outside of their village. They are much more sheltered, although they think they have freedom. It's so rare to move out of your village. We live in two different worlds."

Because of restrictive school fees, the ABE club has worked very hard to raise money to sponsor the Kenyan students. The \$380 yearly fee is simply out of reach of the parents in this rural community. In addition, many of the students have lost one or both parents to AIDS. The club will be selling handmade baskets that the villagers made to help support the program at the Orinda and Walnut Creek Farmers' Markets. To view additional photos and for more information please see their website, www.abecub.org.



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