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## **CHANGING AFRICA, A SUITCASE AT A TIME**



Article by Marla Newhook, a journalist and mother of two. She is West Island Citizen Advocacy's publicity representative and a resident of Pincourt.

Last week, I saw a video of two women physically fighting over a TV at Walmart on Black Friday. Later that same day, I was told a story about two men in Kenya who fought to the death over a two-kilogram bag of flour.

That story and many more were recounted by Darlene Anderson and Wendy Buchanan of Suitcases for Africa, two women who have seen more heartache and joy in the past seven years than we'll probably ever see in our lifetime.

For Anderson and Buchanan (who has just returned from Kenya to follow up with the many projects started by Suitcases for Africa), it's difficult to reconcile the two vastly different cultures; one where people stand in line to buy expensive gadgets for no other purpose than entertainment, with another where people stand in line for hours for a morsel of food.

Meanwhile, we waddle up to buffets to glut ourselves on all-you-can-eat fare, wasting far more food than many African communities will ever see. We can boast one well-stocked grocery store after another, while Anderson and Buchanan have personally witnessed starving refugees leaving a feeding station empty-handed when there is absolutely no food left to distribute.

They speak almost reverently of their driver, John, whom they trust with their lives when they make their regular treks to Kenya. A man who has kept them safe in a country where bribery and corruption are commonplace. They've seen him feeding a disabled child with as much compassion as a nurse or caregiver. Perhaps it's because he has five children of his own and sleeps only three hours a night so he can earn enough money to take care of them. He takes his young daughter to the airport to watch the planes take off and land and he tells her that one day she'll have the opportunities to travel to places he'll never go.

In the communities where SFA helps, hundreds of children squeeze into dilapidated buildings to get an education under the most dire circumstances, without pencils, books or supplies, often on empty stomachs. Teachers do what they can with what little they have and then patch together the latrines when they're starting to fall apart.

With a meagre budget, SFA has to prioritize the projects they're going to fund. Imagine having to choose between building a well for a community sick from drinking contaminated water, a feeding program for children and providing medical supplies for needy communities? You don't, because clean drinking water comes pouring out of your tap with the twist of your wrist, food is readily available and medical supplies are a sneeze away.

Yes, there are heartbreaking stories, but there's hope as well. Community wells have been built, orphan hostel dormitories have been renovated, latrines have been replaced, agricultural and farming programs have been started and, more recently, a fully functional medical clinic and resource centre was established which will help a community of 6,000.

It's easy to get discouraged by the news of tragic events and become paralyzed with a sense of inability to make a difference. The problems are too big, the devastation too overwhelming. But that's where you're wrong.

Suitcases for Africa is a perfect example of how a small group of dedicated volunteers is changing one corner of the world, one suitcase at a time.

For more on the organization, go to [www.suitcasesforafrica.com](http://www.suitcasesforafrica.com).