

Sharing the earth, one suitcase at a time

Huntley Addie

Very early in my teaching career at John Rennie Sylvia Rankin, who worked in the Community Office introduced me to an African, Mr. Johnson who wished to speak to students about his native Kenya. She wondered if I could spare a block a week so that he could indeed come in.

He arrived punctually each Friday and after speaking of his homeland for 45 minutes, he would depart as unobtrusively as he came.

He taught us that African spirituality is rooted in the concept that we are all connected to the earth and sun and sky. He explained that dance and song was a fundamental way in which to praise this spirit and worship the connection.

I value these lessons even more today.

Recently, I have been privileged to see how this spirit and connection to Kenya is still very much alive and well on the West Island.

Adrienne Elliott, one of my neighbors in Baie D'Urfe, told me of her involvement in a volunteer project called *Suitcases for Africa*.

Founded in 2005 by Darlene Anderson (who lives and runs a Nursery school in Ste. Anne de Belleview) and seven other West Island women, *SFA* is a grassroots, West Island based, non-profit group dedicated to supporting orphans and vulnerable children in Kenya through education, nutrition and health care.

Ebi Kimanani, an active member of the Beaufort community and former parent of one Darlene's students, was the impetus for the entire project. Ebi, who died tragically of malaria in 2005, had always worked to create links between her native Kenyan community and that of the one established here in Beaufort.

Shortly after Ebi's passing, these eight determined women (store owners, teachers, health care professionals and librarians), visited Ebi's home in Itegero, Kenya in order to honor the memory of their late friend.

"We arrived at dusk," Darlene told me, "after a seven hour drive overland from Nairobi to Ebi's mother's home in Itegero. Suddenly women poured out of the house, singing, chanting, dancing, and embracing us. They sang in beautiful harmony by oil lamp that night of Ebi's spirit being returned home to them by our journey."

Darlene wells up as she recalls those moments. "It put everything into perspective. These women, living and dying in circumstances beyond most of our comprehension, are joyful. They find joy in every day, and they are so inspirational it is beyond words."

Upon their return, *SFA* was fully established. Their website, www.suitcasesforafrica.com, is a testament to their efforts and most informative. If Kenya isn't in your immediate travel plans, perhaps you might consider taking a small trip to their website.

Since its inception, *SFA* has grown and now has a significant chapter of volunteers working here on the West Island. They support a variety of projects such as installing wells, setting up libraries, feeding orphans and funding schools and students in Kenya. If you are interested in taking part in this, volunteers are always welcomed with open arms.

Adrienne finds it a most worthwhile project to be involved in. "SFA always has direct contact with the people and is 'on the ground' so to speak," she told me. "Unlike many government sponsored organizations working in the developing world, *SFA* (rooted in Ebi's family connections) is in direct contact with the people and the projects. Therefore we always know precisely how our money is being spent."

Suitcases for Africa is having a Garage Sale at Beaufort United Church (25 Fieldfare) on the 23rd May from 9 a.m. until 1 p.m. in order to raise more funds for upcoming projects, shipments and a group visit this upcoming July.

If you would be willing to donate goods that can be sold at this Garage sale, or perhaps used to help students in Kenya, or if you'd like to volunteer, stop by Beaufort United this Saturday from 10 until noon or contact Darlene or Adrienne at suitcasesforafrica@yahoo.ca.

We on the West Island have a tremendously charitable spirit. We need to stop thinking of Africa as the 'third world' and its situations as that of another world. In this real world, as Mr. Johnson taught, don't we all share the same sun and sky and earth?

And isn't it all really just a suitcase away?

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