

## **Kenyan International Village Offers Hope and Meaningful Exchange**

### **To Change the World, We Have to Change How We Think**

Deep in Kenya's Rift Valley Province, situated on the edge of the bustling markets and thriving tourist economy of the capitol city of Nakuru, lies an impoverished and largely forgotten community. Barut does not register on most maps, has very little infrastructure, limited drinking water, and a high unemployment rate. Its 45,000 people primarily live in mud-houses thatched with grass with no electricity, and use firewood on a hearth to cook small rations of food. Yet, it is here that a wonderful story of hope and perseverance is unfolding.

Barut will soon be home to a new International Village that will be managed and operated by the local people. The eco-lodge will provide travelers with ample opportunities to engage in volunteer projects, immerse in the local Kenyan culture, and visit the area's astounding environmental attractions. The International Village is different from other volunteer tourism hubs in Africa because it will serve an important and permanent role in the Barut community as a vocational training and job placement center for the local residents. To fully explain the significance of this new venture to the Barut community, one must start at the beginning of the story.

In Kenya, families must pay for their children's high school education, which is about \$84 a term at the most cost-effective public high schools. In a country where 60% of the population lives on less than \$1 per day, the fee is impossible for most families to afford, especially those in urban slums and rural areas such as Barut. As a result, many children stop attending school after the eighth grade, and they are left with limited employment prospects in menial jobs that do not require any skills or professional training. The proverbial cycle of poverty is perpetuated, and the poor become even poorer.

Kenyan Vitalice Kahendah is working to alleviate this trend by offering free and reduced rate education to the impoverished children of his country. He comes from a very poor family himself, but his academic excellence in the primary grades opened doors to full scholarships at the high school and collegiate levels. Recognizing the value of education, Vitalice decided to focus his attention on this issue after his graduation from college: he created a low cost high school where poor children would be provided with the resources they need to realize their academic potential and make a contribution to national development.

Vitalice opened Hopewell High School in 2000 as two makeshift classrooms inside a Nakuru community center with college friends and volunteers donating their time to teach the children. Word quickly spread about the new education center, and its enrollment rates rapidly grew as it garnered attention among the Kenyan communities.

In 2004, the school moved to a larger space in Barut, but conditions there were mediocre at best. Classes were held outside under a tree or inside corrugated aluminum shacks with dirt floors and thin walls that had no doors or windows. Water was unfit for drinking, and there was no food available for its desperately poor students. Vitalice, as the school's director, needed money to improve the deteriorating infrastructure and respond to the burgeoning growth in demand for the school's educational services.

Meanwhile, back in the United States, Wrestling the World (WTW) a non-profit organization based in Wisconsin that is comprised mostly of teachers, was looking for projects to support in Africa. It learned about Hopewell High School and, inspired by the tremendous resolve of the Barut community, contacted Vitalice to offer aid and support.

WTW, along with other aid organizations and non-profit groups, raised money for the construction of a brick-and-mortar school featuring five new classrooms, a library, and a clean water supply that benefits both the school and area residents. School supplies were purchased and a 48-acre farm was rented to help meet the nutritional needs of Hopewell's community.

In 2006, six members of WTW traveled to Kenya to meet the staff and students and participate in the building of the new classrooms and the farm inspection. WTW and Hopewell furthered their relationship with a school pen pal program, a food and clothing donation process, and grant-writing support, among other things. Today, Hopewell High School provides free and low cost education to 800 of Kenya's poorest children, and is recognized as one of the top schools in Kenya.

Bernard Kirui is a shining example of how Hopewell High School has changed lives. Before Hopewell opened, Bernard worked as an undertaker in the local government hospital and earned pay that was well below sustenance levels. He enrolled in Hopewell, graduated with a degree, and went on to study computers. Bernard is now a long distance *matatu* (passenger vehicle) driver who has provided well for his wife and 4-month old child. He saved his money and recently installed electricity in the comfortable home in which he and his family live.

James Yegon used to spend his days in the nearby Lake Nakuru National Park, harvesting and bagging grass, and selling hay and livestock feed to farmers around town. He also religiously drank the locally-brewed liquor that has long set many youths in the area on a path to self-destruction. He enrolled in Hopewell High School when it opened and gained the education and skills he needed to turn his family's fortunes around. When he graduated in 2005, he became an expert farm manager. He saved enough money to buy land and put it into cultivation, build his parents a home, and purchase a bike for one of his brothers to use as a bicycle taxi. He is now attending evening classes to achieve his dream of becoming a tour guide.

The area is largely inhabited by the Kalenjin tribe. Education was once not much of a priority for the Kalenjins and many of its young people used to idle away their days in the sand and stone quarries and waste their meager earnings on alcohol. The opening of Hopewell has brought the promise of a better life, and today, the Kalenjins are getting a Hopewell education and positively influencing change within their community.

The inspiring story of Hopewell does not end with the high school. The Barut community, Vitalice, and Wrestling the World are now working to bring to life a revolutionary new concept that combines altruism and education with community development: a locally-owned and operated eco-lodge that will serve as both a volunteer tourism hub for travelers and a permanent job-training center for residents of Barut and graduates of Hopewell.

"The International Village-Hopewell will serve as a base of operations for international guests traveling to Kenya who are seeking volunteer opportunities and meaningful cultural exchange with the local people," said Phill Klamm, co-founder of Wrestling the World. "It will provide a significant source of job and vocational training for residents, and make an important contribution to Kenyan tourism."

The International Village-Hopewell will open its doors to volunteer travelers in June, 2009. The facility will host up to 24 guests in eight guest cabins of African design. The eco-lodge will be powered with solar electricity, derive heat from bio-gas, and source water from a borehole well with natural de-fluoridation and rainwater harvesting. Plans also call for a self sustaining farm with vegetables, trees, and grass- fed livestock.

International Village-Hopewell will offer an extensive menu of volunteer projects that meet the varied skill sets and ages of its guests. In addition to volunteering, guests will explore the area's extensive

environmental riches with locally trained tour guides. “Big 5” game safaris in Masai Mara National Park, bird-watching in Lake Nakuru National Park, day trips to Amboselli National Park, and hikes on Mt Kenya, are just a few of the many opportunities available. All accommodation bookings, volunteer program management, and tour operations will be fully managed by WTW and International Village-Hopewell staff.

There will be many opportunities for cultural engagement as well. Traditional dance groups within Barut are already perfecting their art, hoping to secure entertainment slots at the International Village on selected days. The students at Hopewell High School come from all corners of the city and beyond and will regularly play a major role in orienting and introducing the guests to community life throughout their stay. This includes visits to local homes to experience the ‘Kenyan’ way of life, and regular immersion with the greater Barut and Nakuru environs. The community will also benefit from the positive exposure and cultural exchanges and friendships that are sure to develop from this cooperation.

Barut residents and Hopewell students will be hired and trained to oversee and manage the facility, and all revenues generated will be invested back into the International Village.

Locals will use the facility’s educational resources to support personal and professional growth in tourism, hospitality, event planning, general administration, and other disciplines. Once they are trained, the International Village staff will assist them in finding jobs in the community and in greater Kenya.

“The International Village-Hopewell is poised to become the economic equivalent of Hopewell High School in terms of influence on this community,” said Vitalice. “This once-in-a-lifetime project is the spark that the community has been waiting for to light Barut’s economic development.”

The International Village-Hopewell takes volunteer tourism to the next level with meaningful, cultural immersion for its guests and a promise of real social change for the local people of Kenya.

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