

THE SCHOOL OF ST JUDE

Margie and I left the busy metropolis of Nairobi, our baggage train minus porters, including twenty donated digital cameras and art gear, safely loaded on the roof of our bus and secured by frayed rope and tattered tarpaulin. Day was dawning and the growing city traffic was bedlam, a gladiatorial contest, every driver for himself with not the slightest margin for error. Nai-robbery has grown considerably since we were last here in 1994 with our daughter Miranda and no doubt the crime as well. It is now a far distant cry from its quiet, leisurely, gin and tonic, sweating lines of porters and white-hunter colonial days.

Once out of the city we headed helter-skelter, south through Kenya, our destination Arusha in Tanzania, some five long hours away. The bus was full of black people and the constant chatter on 'cell' phones would continue almost unceasingly for the journey. Surprisingly, mobile phone coverage in Africa is far better than in Australia and everyone seems to have one. The highway has been tarred since we last travelled its bone-rattling gravel surface but some sections are still under final completion. These surfaced but unfinished strips are barricaded off and traffic directed along rutted gravel side tracks, layered with bulldust. However amongst the road workers are entrepreneurs of the new black Africa who will remove the heavy stone and pipe barricades and let you through onto the newly laid bitumen for an appropriate fee. Our seasoned bus driver was wise to the lurks and alone we merrily sailed along in comfort at a nail-biting 120 kph. Beside us, the rest of the traffic was at snail's pace, negotiating the uncomfortable and dust choking detours! At the other end a timely black figure would appear from out of nowhere to remove the stone and wicked thornbush roadblock. Another fee would be palmed and we continued on, like everyone else, down the highway.

Long exasperating queues at the border posts made the crossing slower than usual. Officials were experimenting with the new eye identification cameras, a new age gimmick and a most unnecessary technological leap forward in a land of spear wielding cattle barons. Unfortunately, the delay meant our driver would maintain his lead foot.

We were soon approaching Arusha with Mt Meru gracing the skyline while the snow-capped giant Kilimanjaro coyly hid in a white mantle of cloud. A taxi had been arranged to pick us from the bus station and deliver us to the School of St Jude situated some fifteen minutes out of town where we will be accommodated in one of the visitors' blocks during our stay here.

We arrived at the entrance of the main school with its impressive and substantial iron gates and high security walls, boldly blazoned with the name The School of St. Jude – *Fighting Poverty through Education*. As we entered under escort and issued with identification tags we were both overwhelmed.

In 2002 Gemma Sisia a girl from Northern N.S.W., opened The School of St Jude with just three students and one teacher. At the time no one could imagine that within ten years it would have three well-equipped campuses, around 150 teachers, almost 1500 students and that its kitchens would provide over half a million meals per year. It now employs a total staff of over 350 people.

Caught in the enveloping magnetism of Africa from previous volunteer work at a school in Uganda, the experience nurtured Gemma's belief that accessible high quality academic and moral education should be the right of all children in the world. In 2001 the gift of a small plot of land in Arusha from her father-in-law enabled her to fulfil her dream in hand with her unceasing energy, passion, dedication and enthusiasm.

And so now before us was the vision of one woman, risen from the African bush like a giant phoenix from humble beginnings to become a school equal in structure and quality of learning to many private schools in Australia. Set in spacious, tree-shaded grounds and grass lawns, the large two storey buildings of concrete, brick and render, which made up the huge administration section, classrooms, computer rooms in both the lower and upper primary sections of the Mosi complex, were impressive to say the least.

It was recess, and the playgrounds were alive with happy black face children in their royal navy blue uniforms, playing soccer, skipping or brandings with a soft ball or soaring unfettered to the sky on one of the many swings that surround the large playground area. Two huge open-sided skillion roofed sheds with attached kitchen facilities served both the lower and primary schools. Repeated around the walls were pertinent bold lettering reminders of RESPECT, RESPONSIBILITY, HONESTY, KINDNESS.

Our room was basic but comfortable and people were water conscious and perhaps more aware here of the value of a limited natural resources. We were reminded by a sign in the toilet that water was precious, *'If its yellow let it mellow, if its brown flush it down!'* The hot water tap was run and saved in a bucket for flushing until warm enough for a shower.

The next morning Margie and I rose early before sunrise. This was the morning we were on assignment to film the pickup of children from around Arusha. We would be taking the pink bus, one of twenty different coloured, battered but serviceable buses which set off like an armada every morning at 6.15 am to gather up the happy children of St Jude's. Each bus has its designated district and as we passed along many atrocious, narrow dusty rutted roads to pick up children, we would stop at designated meeting points along the way. The road was lined with corrugated iron, mud-brick or concrete walled one room hovels, without electricity or running water. Remembering, the school provided free education only to the brightest of the poorest. From these places proud parents and their children stood waiting beside the road, spotlessly clean and dressed in their given uniforms and shiny shoes. They were a credit to the School's philosophy and none the least to themselves. As the kids entered the bus at the various pickup points they would politely greet the driver then seeing Margie and myself, would acknowledge us in unison with "Welcome and good morning Visitors, how are you today"!

The children with happy faces sat quietly like mice, huddled together on every available seating space – so well behaved. They loved being filmed and having their photos taken and posed accordingly.

We arrived back at school at 7.40 am to join one of many buses disgorging their loads of laughing, energetic black children of Africa now noisily filling and colouring the playgrounds in a restless sea of blue! In the background the throb of an oversized 150 KVA diesel generator brought uninterrupted power to the campuses during the usual daily, mains power failure.

My duty over the week was to teach the art of pencil drawing in three hourly classes in the morning at the primary school, assisted by the permanent indigenous teachers Lucy or Kawaka. In most cases I supplied many drawing materials kindly donated by Hay and Canberra art people. At 2.00 pm each day I would be bussed with fifteen or so other teachers for a forty minute ride to the secondary campus at Usa River. This is of more recent construction and its buildings and facilities, including soccer fields, as impressive as the main campus at Mosi. Adjoining are two storey, well appointed boarding facilities for about 400 girl and boy students. Construction is already well under way for more two storey classrooms.

At Usa I took one of Ian's classes of older mixed sex students for two hours. Ian is from Ireland and one of a number of overseas teachers who teach full time here with their family. Lessons would finish at 4.50 pm which would give me time to catch the school bus for the long ride home, dropping teachers off all over the place along the way to the main campus. The children are a pleasure to teach, although the attention span for art does tend to drop off after fifty minutes. At the primary school the mixed sex class size is around fourteen or so children whilst at the Usa campus I had thirty or more depending on how many students volunteered from different age groups to attend Mr Chris's art class. I would return home exhausted each day.

While I was teaching, Margie was recording on film everyday life at St Jude's for the school's ongoing and vital promotion campaign. We would meet for lunch in either of the huge open-sided pavilions for the upper or lower primary students and teachers. After grace, 400 or more children would sit down to a wholesome meal prepared by a contingent of cooks and kitchen helpers – probably the only one they got with clean drinking water daily except for the boarders of Grade 4 and above who receive three nutritious meals a day. The children once finished, would be orderly dismissed to the playground in their class group.

Without the generous financial and physical support from people of Australia and around the world, all this would not have been possible. One of the great advantages for the longevity or permanency of funding to keep future needed capital development and the essential annual working expenses flowing in, is that the essential contributions largely come from many individuals around the world. If a few pull out then it is not a serious problem. There is no support from Government although the school has to submit to some regulation. The administration places great importance in replying to all supporters no matter how small their contribution and keeping them well informed of where their money is spent and/or the progress of children they may be supporting. It is a full time job designated to selected staff, usually volunteers. All the tax deductible money donated is accountable and goes towards giving these kids an education and better chance in life, unlike most other top heavy world aid organisations. It is becoming a huge and well-oiled body of largely highly experienced international volunteers backed up by paid and qualified indigenous people. Progress since 2002 has been swift and the school board has had the foresight to already start planning ways to support those students who will be leaving school and facing the harsh world of life in a third world country. Coming from poor families without the resources to give them the opportunity of a tertiary education, job opportunities and chance of a professional career, the vision of producing the future leaders of Tanzania stagnates and flounders if some sort of follow up system is not in place.

Sadly, none of this could have been achieved so easily here. It would have been emasculated by bureaucracy and government regulation and our obsession for safety, even with the tenacity of the instigator.

Margie and I left the school for eight days to go on camping safari to lake Manyara, the Serengeti and Ngorongoro Crater with Richard Sisia, Gemma's husband. Richard drove the backup vehicle while his brother Raymond was our very able and knowledgeable driver and qualified guide. Raymond like his brother married an Australian girl, and believe it or not lives with his family in Griffith. He returns to Tanzania each year during the peak of the safari season to help his brother.

We returned to St Jude's to give a few more days of volunteer teaching before catching the bus back to Nairobi. The next morning it was a long drive by taxi out to the Jomo Kenyatta International airport. After breaking through the challenging early morning rush hour unscathed, we were soon speeding along the southern divided highway and within sight of the airport. Suddenly all engine noise ceased as generally happens when the gas tank runs out and we silently came to a stop in a most isolated industrial area. When questioned by the apprehensive passengers, the mumble received was, I expect, the equivalent of "No worries mate". Before reaching for his cell phone, the driver commandeered some passing workers to push the taxi off the highway to the safety of the grass verge. As if by magic, out of nowhere two soldiers suddenly appeared and with AK 47's unslung, stood guard over our taxi directing the procession of passers-by well away from the vehicle until another taxi arrived from the airport.

Eventually, we flew off to Windhoek, Namibia to tackle the most gruelling and horrific challenges of them all - the 90 kilometre Fish River Canyon walk with Ken and Tertia Butcher and family. Ah, but that is another story and another tough day in Africa where my porters have stuffed me around and I need my pink gin!

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