

Brief history of Majengo Orphanage,

by Lynn Connell, May 2010.

January 2008. Agricultural district of Majengo situated outside the village of Mto Wa Mbu, Arusha, Tanzania hit mercilessly by the HIV AIDS virus, leaving hundreds of children homeless without parents to care for their basic needs, food, shelter, education, medical. These most vulnerable and needy children were living under kindness of overstretched and poor neighbours or in the harshest of cases, found wandering the dusty roads searching for bits of food - hungry, dirty, in tattered rags.

Desperate to help these children, village leaders and community members came together to form a makeshift 'orphanage centre', called Huruma (compassion), where they located 52 children, age 2-6 into the dark and leaking foyer of a donated home. A teacher was brought in to teach the children by day, while neighbouring farmers dropped off maize, sugar, vegetables, their wives volunteering cooking and cleaning. 42 of these children had somewhere to sleep at night, but the other 10 shared one small dark room sleeping side by side widthwise, across the length of two single-sized beds.

Without furniture, the children spent their days on the mud floor, often leaking with puddles of rain pouring through slits in the corrugated tin roof. They had painted one wall black for the blackboard, but were without books, pens, crayons, paper. Conditions were so deplorable that Huruma was refused official status by the government of Tanzania to become an orphanage.

This was the state I found them in.

I had been working in Tanzania for two years with local NGO, ICA TANZANIA, focusing mainly on HIV AIDS virus prevention and education projects. In my spare time, I volunteered at an orphanage with 14 children situated on the busy safari route just outside of town. But in March, 2008, I, along with 5 European volunteers, discovered that the director of that orphanage was corrupt, pocketing thousands of dollars from safari tourists lured by the horrific condition of those children purposely being kept poor, without medical treatment.

I was devastated, determined to leave for Canada; never to return. The next day, Charles Luoga, project coordinator of ICA Tanzania, dragged me to visit the Huruma centre, with 52 children on a mud floor in the leaking dark foyer of a house without furniture. He said, "take what you learned at the 'bad' orphanage, and do something here!" Off the safari route, they truly had nothing. But what they did

have, was a caring, loving community determined to better the lives of these children with song, English lessons, good food and most importantly, with love.

We went into action. We bought benches and desks to get them off the floor. We leased a house down the road, almost built, for four years – and in one year, especially with the help of my two Swedish friends, and a Rotarian from Minnesota, raised \$20,000 to finish the renovations. We built an outdoor kitchen, showers and toilets, desks, benches, tables and beds and outfitted and refurbished the house to meet the needs of 28 live-in kids and 8 staff with an in-house pre-school fully equipped to accommodate 30 kids.

By February '09, a week before I left for Africa once again, we had met our financial goals for the renovations, but shockingly, in retrospect, not once did it occur to me to consider how in earth we would finance the running operations of this place once the kids moved in!!

Enter Matt McKissock, who called to rent my family's cottage that summer. "Great! I said, "but we have to do this quickly. I am leaving for Africa in five days." "Oh." said he innocently, "what are you doing in Africa?"

The following day, along with the cottage contract, he sent a cheque for \$500. Two days later, he called again, imploring me to drive to Warren, Pennsylvania that night, for dinner. "We can help you!!" But with no time to spare, I was swamped, and jokingly said: "Matt, you will just have to come over to Tanzania and see for yourself!", never in my wildest of dreams did I think he would take the challenge!

Matt flew over a month later for one week only, with two great friends and 8 duffle bags filled with clothing and shoes for 52 kids, 2 computer, a printer and overhead projector, office supplies for ICA and the orphanage, world maps, and ABC charts, and fun things to hang on walls... everything we asked for, and so much more.

Charles and I called him Matt the Miracle Man.

The day they arrived, we relocated 28 children into our gorgeous newly-renovated home and celebrated our grand opening with village leaders, ICA friends and neighbours, local politicians. We renamed the orphanage MAJENGO - which means 'building up' in Swahili. In one week, Matt and his friends met first-hand our ICA and Majengo staff, community leaders, worked on Majengo budgets, went on their first safari with the children, made a movie of the kids and had, in their words, 'the trip of a lifetime'. All through that week, they watched, talked, juggled, played and participated, and as they

made their way out of Kilimanjaro 7 days later, promised they would get back to me in a short while, but, no promises.

Matt called a week later with a letter to all his friends, that he and his family had decided to commit themselves to financing our entire operating costs for Majengo : staffing, food, clothing, medical, education and maintenance of the house - to fully meet the needs and requirements of 40 children and 8 staff - for one year!

It was a miracle.

Fast forward - May, 2010. We celebrated our first anniversary a month ago, expanding from 40 children last year to 55 now, between the ages of 3 to 8, with 28 living in, the rest either attending primary school or spending full days and meals at our in-house pre-school. We have 19 kids in primary school, 5 of whom stood top in their class of 132 children this year. In a word, our children are blossoming. Our 9 staff, including a secretary and treasurer in charge of running the day-to-day operations, with two teachers, two cooks and two cleaners and a watchman, and a part time fully-qualified English teacher for both staff and children. We upped their salary this year their honesty, competence, hard work and most of all, continuing love of the children. Our facility is magnificent, surrounded by a flowering fence of bougainvillea, trees and flowers within the grounds, space for the children to play and swing.

With expanding numbers, rising salaries and inflation, our budgets have gone up this second year. In January, Matt established the Warren Majengo charitable foundation, located in Warren, Penn. officially registered by the IRS . We are now able to accept donations and to offer tax receipts to people generous enough to help us grow with this wonderful orphanage.

In March, 2010, Matt and his mother Diana along with two good friends visited again this year, submerging themselves in outings with the children, staff meetings, budget revisions and this year, interviewing 15 new children as possible pre-schoolers, recommended to us by village leaders, as amongst the most vulnerable in the community. Diana and Jamie have taken over the operation of the Warren Majengo foundation. It is, again, a miracle.

Matt told me in the summer, over a glass of wine at our cottage, that this work he was doing at Majengo, was by far the most important work he had ever been involved with in his life. Furthermore, he confided, to my astonishment, that his goal was, in 5 years, to expand from our 55 kids to 1,000 children!!!

I have learned, that Matt never makes promises. His dreams are motivated by expectations and wonderful intention, but, wisely, no promises. But with his intentions and dreams for the future, I can only hold on tight and thank my stars, that I am lucky enough to be along for the road!!! Thank you Matt, Kym and your family....

Lynn Connell, Toronto, Canada..