

Overcoming odds makes Kenyan a hearty American

By Kathryn Reed

Hellen Barclay could be the poster woman for Soroptimist and the American Dream.

She survived being born in Kenya in the 1970s when daughters were the less desired gender – and in many ways still are. She survived an abusive marriage – which many women are still trapped in. She survived the humiliation of being a single mom in a culture much less accepting of those circumstances than the United States is. She overcame moving to a foreign country 10 years ago and feeling like an outsider.



Hellen Barclay

Barclay, who is a member of Soroptimist International Tahoe Sierra, spoke to the group last week about her life, her struggles, her triumphs and her dreams.

“My father said he wanted to empower his daughters. (For them) to be a voice in the village,” Barclay said.

Her father ignored the village leaders who brought women to their home for him to marry, saying his wife – her mother – was bad luck for giving birth to so many daughters. Men could have multiple wives. Daughters were and are still seen as a burden.

It was unusual for girls to get an education. But all the boys did. It was even more rare to go to college. But that's just what Barclay did. She went to India, earning a master's in business administration.

Today is she is manager of the Wells Fargo branch in Round Hill.

"I don't know how I could have lived in Kenya. You are supposed to be seen and not heard," Barclay laughs.

Though her accent is still strong, her English is impeccable. Her self-deprecating nature is combined with a self-assuredness that makes one believe she could make her native continent be full of women to be reckoned with.

Each year she goes home to visit her family. She talks to groups about standing up for themselves, against girls being used as instruments of income, against rape and for equality.

"Men do things they can't do here," Barclay said. "There are so many organizations here to help you."

When she was growing up it was a right of passage from girlhood to womanhood to have the lower six teeth removed. It happened to her mother. Her father would not allow it for his daughters.

"I want to advocate and educate girls. I want to tell them not to take the abuse – that you can't just be raped," Barclay said.

At the meeting last week, a basket was passed around to collect money for the Dolphin organization that helps fight rape and to control AIDS in Africa. It's a group this Soroptimist club is giving \$1,000 to. It's also been a beneficiary of the local Vagina Monologues troupe.

Barclay hopes to visit the non-governmental organization later this fall when she visits her family in Nairobi.

Though life has improved in her homeland, it was just last year that her parents got electricity. The village doesn't have it. Her parents have a pump for water in the house. She grew up having to haul water on her head.

Today, when Barclay returns to her village she said she is a role model for girls. On this day, she was clearly a role model for the women listening to her.