

South Tahoe women change lives in Kenya

By Jen Gurecki

NAIROBI, Kenya – “This is the most dangerous thing you’ll do all day,” I said to the group as we crossed the road.

No lions or machine guns, just cars, motorbikes and matatus. The traffic lights function, but most people are color blind to the red, green and yellow. Crosswalks should be called *crossruns*.

And Americans make driving through roundabouts look easy.

These are just a few of the realities of Nairobi, Kenya, that turn every single day into an adventure. In January, eight Lake Tahoe women made the 26-hour journey to Nairobi to experience this.

When they stepped onto Kenyan soil, they knew they would be exploring one tiny corner of a vast continent, immersing themselves in a culture far different than their own, and witnessing the work of the Zawadisha Fund. What they didn’t realize is that when they returned home, they would have a new lease on life, inspired to make change locally based on what they saw was possible in a place where most people think everything is impossible.



Julie Lowe of South Lake
Tahoe works with the
children of Kenya.
Photos/Provided

These eight women – Wendy David, Hannah Greenstreet, Doris Groelz, Betsy Williams, Teresa Bertrand, Julie Lowe, Angela Swanson and Pat Papp – are the same women you see in Lake Tahoe at school board and City Council meetings, and contributing to the local economy through their thriving businesses. They are activists building a healthy and vibrant community we call home.

What became clear during our two weeks together is that they had a keen ability to find connections with one another, despite race, class, political affiliation, or location. They were able to hold a space in their hearts and in their heads for those whom they thought they would never meet. And they refused to accept the inequality that other women face simply because of where they were born.

It was the latter that sparked the creation of the Zawadisha Fund, a micro-credit organization started in Lake Tahoe, whose mission is to empower, entrust, and expand opportunities for women in Kenya. Through an intelligent approach to micro-lending, we are improving the quality of life of women through small business loans, savings, education, and preventative health care. For as little as \$60, we can vastly improve a woman's life, granting her the opportunity to enter the job market and provide for her family. It seems nothing short of a miracle, and this is what has drawn so many people to this part of the world.

On the first day of our two weeks together, I shared "How to Write About Africa," a scathing satirical essay by the highly acclaimed Kenyan author Binyavanga Wainaina. He has said that when writing about Africa, sunsets and starvation are solid starting points. Broad brush strokes to define a continent

made up of 54 countries, 900 million people.

Africa is: poverty, HIV, conflict, diamonds.

Africans are: corrupt, destitute, infected, hungry.

The story has been told a thousand times over, fact woven with fiction. When we think about people living in poverty on the continent of Africa these are the images we see in our minds. Yet these sorts of images evoke pity, and pity is an incredibly unproductive and disempowering agent of change.

Enter Winnie and Duncan, the founders of Dolphin Anti-Rape & AIDS Control Outreach. Their energy and passion for ending violence against women through self-defense workshops is contagious and completely shifts pity into power. Zawadisha's collaboration with Dolphin is rooted in our belief that business loans alone cannot empower women. If we truly want to increase their quality of life, we need to look at poverty through a wider lens. Violence is an issue that affects women's status in society, and through Dolphin's workshops they not only learn how to protect themselves, but how to have a stronger voice. In a world where exploding violence against women has threatened the very fabric of many societies, Dolphin has inspired the women and children of Kenya – and South Lake Tahoe – to reclaim their bodies, their homes, their schools, and their communities.



The Zawadisha Fund is helping to provide a better

life for the women and children of Kenya.

Our group spent three days with Dolphin, first being trained on the self-defense skills and then two days in schools working with children.

“I have never taken self-defense training. So actually running through the training and cultural curriculum with the Dolphin team in the Kolping House garden was gift enough. But then we had the opportunity to go with Dolphin into two Nairobi schools and see how they connect, and practice and sing and touch the lives of these boys and girls of all ages,” Julie Lowe said. “It brought tears to my eyes to see how culturally-relevant rape prevention coming from the minds and mouths of smart, energetic Kenyan women and men could transform the culture from the little ones on up.”

Zawadisha’s two-week Service Adventure Tour was designed to provide an experience where people could connect to one another, people whom we often believe are fundamentally different than ourselves. These perceived differences faded away during our two-day financial literacy workshop with Tuinuane Lending Circle. Tuinuane is Swahili for “to lift up,” and that is the name this group of women from Eldoret, Kenya gave themselves nearly two years ago as Zawadisha’s first group of borrowers.

“I loved every part of this travel adventure, however, the 2½ days that I spent with the Kenyan women was a life changing event for me. Seventeen women arrived at 4 in the afternoon and by 7 that evening they were joyfully singing to us and soon we were all singing and dancing together with the camaraderie of being women that truly cared about each other,” Wendy David said. “I was transformed by their warmth, their attitude of joy, their stories of creating small businesses to support their children’s education or to feed their families. I felt proud to be a woman walking, singing, teaching,

learning, laughing and weeping with these strong beautiful women. I look at life through a different lens now, a lens that focuses even more on where real joy is lives. It is in the heart.”

Our time with Dolphin and the Tuinuane women were unforgettable, but the three-day safari in the Maasai Mara was unmatched in beauty and excitement. We found ourselves surrounded by animals most people only see in a zoo: elephants, giraffes, lions, zebras, cheetahs, hippos and even a leopard.

“We discovered the connection between power and harmony in the vast and animal-rich Maasai Mara. The sheer beauty of the giraffes, cheetahs, leopards and lions brought us a deep understanding of the circle of life,” Hannah Greenstreet said.

It was during the safari that our group took on the moniker “Bahati Dumas” or “lucky cheetahs” after witnessing a mother cheetah and her two cubs hunt, kill and feast on a Thompson gazelle.

They made a significant mark on the individuals they encountered, and they too were deeply transformed by their experiences.

Jen Gurecki is a Lake Tahoe resident and the founder of the Zawadisha Fund.

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Note:

The Zawadisha Fund is organizing the next Service Adventure Tour to Kenya on Feb. 1-16, 2014. If you would stare in amazement at elephants, cheetahs, lions and giraffes; walk in humble appreciation through the slums; marvel at the resiliency and grit of our micro-loan recipients; find courage as we assisted Dolphin in teaching self-defense skills to

children; and embrace our new friendships, email jen@zawadisha.org or go online to learn more.