

<http://www.ozaukeepress.com/images/012413/africaSM.png> **That's how Port High graduate Bekka Grady felt during her trip to Kenya on a mission to improve the houses, lives of poor but happy people of Bura Tana**

Three weeks ago, Bekka Grady left her home in Port Washington bound for Africa to see for herself what the people of Bura Tana, Kenya, need to make their lives better.

She returned Saturday most impressed not by what these residents of east-central Africa lack but by what they already have.



“The fact is, the kids of Bura Tana live in mud houses surrounded by a lot of sickness and without a lot of clean water or good nutrition, but they are so happy and well-behaved, more so than many kids in the U.S.,” Grady said.

That discovery has prompted Grady to rethink her mission, but it has done nothing to undermine her goal of lending her energy and education to the people of Bura Tana.

“It was just an amazing experience,” she said.

Grady and her traveling companions, who included her college professor and two Mequon residents, presented 18 specialized laptop computers to students at a Catholic mission school in Bura Tana.

At home in Africa

Written by BILL SCHANEN IV

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“This was the first time these children and many adults in the village saw a computer,” Grady said. “Actually, the adults were as excited, if not more so, than the children.

“But this is a school of 300 children, so they will have to find a way to share the 18 laptops until we raise money for more laptops.”

It wasn't computers, however, that led Grady to Africa.

By the beginning of her third year in college, Grady, 21, a 2010 Port Washington High School graduate who is studying interior design at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, found herself searching for meaning in her future career.

“I don't want to just design houses,” she said during an interview before her trip. “I want to be involved in something that makes a difference in people's lives.”

Grady thought she found that opportunity in a class project that required her and her classmates to design cardboard houses that could easily be shipped to disaster sites and used as temporary shelters.

The design drafted by Grady and her team was used to build a full-sized cardboard house that was exhibited at the Modern Museum of Contemporary Art in Madison.

That set in motion a series of coincidences triggered by photos that Paul and Donna Grady took of the house their daughter helped design.

At the time, Mr. Grady, a behavioral health therapist for Ozaukee County, was working with Mequon resident Susan Miller, who was an intern in the county's Department of Human Services.

Mr. Grady showed the photos to Miller, who knew of Bura Tana through her friend, a Guatemalan priest who works in the Catholic mission there. More specifically, Miller knew that one of the problems in Bura Tana is that houses in this area of Africa, where there are few natural resources, are built of sticks and mud and are frequently destroyed by floods.

Grady and Miller, along with Grady's interior design instructor Lesley Sager, instantly saw an opportunity to put the cardboard house project to good use. But before they sent a prototype to Bura Tana, the trio wanted to visit the region to make sure their concept would work.

“I'm so glad we decided to visit Bura Tana before sending a house,” Grady said. “A cardboard house might work in an emergency, but after meeting the people who have lived in mud and stick houses for generations, it seems they would have a difficult time getting used to a cardboard house.”

So Grady has shifted her focus. Instead of introducing a new type of house to Bura Tana, she intends to use her skills to help them build their traditional houses better.

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“There is one house in Bura Tana that has been standing since 1988, which is pretty amazing, because it was built on a foundation and with a drainage system,” she said. “Most houses aren’t built that way and last a couple years at most.

“I think now I want to focus on education, on teaching the people there how to build stronger houses.”

Grady said she also wants to work with a priest at the Catholic mission in Bura Tana who is developing a type of sand and mud brick that could be used to build everything from office buildings to houses.

If it’s one thing Grady knows for sure it’s that her trip to Bura Tana touched her deeply and cemented her resolve to continue working with the people of this African village.

“A lot of people in Bura Tana had never seen a white person, much less a white woman, so they were very excited to see us,” Grady said. “I got a lot of stares, but everyone I met was extremely nice.”

Grady continues to work with the nonprofit organization One Laptop Per Child and the UW-Madison student chapter of the American Society of Interior Designers to raise money for specially designed, rugged laptop computers for the children of Bura Tana and plans to return as soon as possible.

“I was happy we could bring 18 laptops to Bura Tana, but 18 just isn’t enough,” she said. “I plan to go back as soon as I can raise the money for more computers.”

Donations to Grady’s laptop fund can be made through www.gofundme.com/olpc-BuraTana.

Image Information: PORT WASHINGTON HIGH SCHOOL graduate Bekka Grady (middle) didn’t have a hard time convincing students at the mission school in Bura Tana, Kenya, to pose with her for this photo. “The kids absolutely loved to have their pictures taken, then look at them,” she said.