

From Port Washington to Swaziland. . . A mission of hope

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On Father's Day, Katy Schueller gave her father Paul a big hug and extra special thank you and boarded a plane for her third visit to Swaziland in southern Africa.

Her luggage was filled with 10 laptop computers that her father and his company, Franklin Energy Services in Port Washington, and her mother Jan donated for a computer lab in a rural school for orphans built by Give Hope, Fight Poverty.

Katy is a team leader for the nonprofit organization's service-learning program. For 3-1/2 weeks, she will work with college students and young professionals on projects to improve the lives of children who have been orphaned because of AIDS.



A goal of the organization is to help the orphans by fostering philanthropy through service-learning programs.

The organization focuses on orphans who are heads of households, taking care of themselves and sometimes siblings after their parents died.

Swaziland has the highest prevalence of HIV and AIDS in the world, with 42% of the population HIV-positive, including most of the orphans.

When Katy went to Swaziland the first time in 2011, she fell in love with the children and was determined to do more to help them.

"The children I was lucky enough to encounter taught me more about life than any teacher or textbook ever could," said Katy, who graduated in December with an elementary education degree from Purdue University in Indiana. She wants to teach in a Chicago public school.

"The first time I went to Swaziland, it was for 10 days. I needed to stay longer. Last year, I went for three weeks," she said. "It's a world that's so different than ours. I feel they have changed my life a lot more than I have affected them.

"I think it makes me a better teacher. The kids just want to learn. School is a privilege for them."

Children who can't go to school will sit outside the broken windows, listening to what is being

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taught, Katy said.

It costs almost \$450 to attend a secondary school and \$350 to go to a primary school. Students must wear uniforms and shave their heads.

Give Hope, Fight Poverty is sponsoring 19 orphans in child-headed households to attend secondary school in the rural village of eLangeni.

The organization also built a primary school in the village. Last year, leaders from the nearby village of Malindza begged the organization for help, so it is building a second school there, which is expected to open in January.

“Give Hope, Fight Poverty is not about giving them things,” Katy said. “It’s about giving them the tools to prosper and survive on their own. It gives them a chance to make something of their lives.”

Whenever they have free time, the volunteers visit the orphans in their homes. They planted avocado and fruit trees in their yards so the children can eat fresh fruit and installed solar panels on some of the houses.

“These children get up before it gets light and do all their chores before school,” Katy said. “They do their own laundry and go into the woods to get firewood. They walk more than a mile to school and back and try to do their homework before it gets dark, all without a lot of food.”

The organization provides periodic food boxes for the orphans who head households, daily lunches to 1,260 children and gives meat and vegetables twice a month to orphanages to supplement the corn mush usually served.

The organization also works with Baylor College of Medicine’s pediatric HIV clinic in Mbabane, a nearby city where Katy and other volunteers with Give Hope stay in a guest house, to get better medicine for the orphans. Government clinics have only two HIV medications for children. If they go off the medication, which they often do because it upsets their empty stomachs, Katy said, they cannot take it again because it loses its effectiveness.

The medicine provided by Baylor is easier to tolerate and doesn’t lose its effectiveness so easily, she said.

The organization hires and trains Swazi teachers, who not only teach academic subjects but also provide factual information about AIDS in an effort to debunk myths.

“In my opinion, HIV is so prevalent because of the lack of information,” Katy said. “There are village men who say, ‘Drink the blood of a cow and you’re cured’ or ‘Have sex with a virgin and you’ll be cured.’ It’s scary because that’s spreading it.”

Katy and other volunteers with Give Hope hold fund-raising events in their communities to raise money for programs.

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Annie Elbe, co-founder and executive director, praised Katy and her parents for the time and support they have provided.

“Some of our programming would not be in existence without them, and I cannot sing their praises enough,” Elbe said.

“Katy is a very special person. She can cross major cultural boundaries seamlessly. She blends in as one of the Swazi kids despite her white skin and American accent. This is attributed much more to her pure, selfless heart than her tiny size.

“The children absolutely love her and always ask when she is coming back to see them. When I have Katy as a team leader, it seems infinitely easier as she is able to put everyone at ease with her bubbly easy-going spirit.

“Katy’s smiles and hugs would warm even the saddest of hearts.”

For more information on Give Hope, Fight Poverty, visit www.ifightpoverty.org.

Image Information: ONCE A SHY BOY, 10-year-old Mazwi, an orphan who is HIV positive, gave Katy Schueller a big hug during her visit last summer.