

## SEW KENYA

by Denise Dias

It is amazing where your sewing skills can take you. I recently had the opportunity to travel to Kenya, in southeast Africa, through my job with



Kansas State Research and Extension. My plan was to go and teach sewing skills to a group of women who have disabled children. In Kenyan society, people and their families are often shunned because one of them has a disability. The goal was to teach these ladies the skills to construct a canvas shopping bag which they could sell to support themselves, their families, and CTC (Comfort the Children) International, our host in Africa. Little did I know that it was going to be more of a sewing adventure than I had planned!

Our group arrived at Maai Mahiu which is a town of about 30,000 people on the "AIDS Highway." It is a main truck route between Nairobi and Kampala, Uganda. Conservatively, about 60 percent of the population is HIV positive. Maai Mahiu is one of the poorest towns in Kenya. The population is primarily Kikuyu. The greatest problems in Maai Mahiu include: lack of jobs/economic opportunity; trash and waste management; the cost and shortage of water; the prevalence of AIDS; and lack of educational opportunities. A large portion of young people do not complete secondary school. They speak mostly Swahili, some Kikuyu which is their tribal language, and a bit of English. Joseph, a wonderful Kenyan interpreter, and Donna, a willing volunteer, gave me a hand.

I visited the "sewing room" which I was to use as my classroom for the

next few days and was shocked to see only one pair of dull scissors, a few cones of thread, four treadle sewing machines, and a treadle serger! The sewing room was an 8-

by-12-foot space with one door, one small window, and two burned-out light bulbs. The electricity works most afternoons. Outside the sewing room door, goats and donkeys wandered aimlessly by. This was not going to be like the classes that I taught back in Kansas!

A few of the ladies had used scraps of canvas to "practice" their sewing skills over and over again. None of them had ever sewn before. Teaching them how to use a manual sewing machine, along with some sewing basics, was going to be a challenge. I had planned to have at least five to six days to work with them, but to my surprise, I had only three days. It was time for a new game plan.

### Day One

I was told that I would have two small classes of four ladies to teach, but the ladies were so excited to learn to sew that we had thirteen of them show up an hour early the first day of class. We spent time talking about sewing notions, how to use a sewing machine, and quality standards of construction. No one took a lunch or break of any kind except to check on their children. We sewed pillowcases, and all of them stayed until the last one was finished. We did not have an iron, so we pressed seams on the edge of the sewing tables to make them lie flat. It was touching to see their sense of pride and accomplishment growing with every stitch they took! We

took a photo to commemorate their work and called it a day. Oh, they do have pillows in their part of Africa, in case you were wondering.



### Day Two

I went back to my room to make a new game plan for Day Two. Because one of the ladies felt they would benefit from having an apron, that is what we chose for our project. That meant re-cutting our fabric from our planned drawstring bag project so we could teach them how to make straps. We sewed like crazy on Day Two. It was a long day of sharing sewing machines, ripping out crooked seams, and scorching heat. But it really didn't matter to any of us; we were sharing our passion for sewing with our new Kenyan friends and loved every minute of it. They all finished their aprons and, after another photo, were off to make dinner for their families.



### Day Three

Day Three came and we used some black canvas which was purchased at a market in Nairobi to make canvas

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shopping bags. We showed the women how to lay out and cut the pieces, and with a bit of instruction and some crude drawings on tracing paper, they were sewing bags.

It was a rewarding feeling to stand back and watch them sew their totes with little assistance. These ladies were becoming acquainted with each other and beginning to form friendships through thread and needle.

Many of the residents had heard of the sewing classes and stopped by to check us out. Still others asked when we would teach another class, but I could not make any promises, since I was only there for a few more days. We finished sewing our totes and the ladies gave us hugs of gratitude as they left with big smiles and a new skill.



### Giving Back

The future for these women and their families is much brighter since they learned how to sew, but there is still a need for ongoing support as they continue to develop their skills. Some of the ways in which I am continuing to support them is through resource materials via the Internet.

In the near future, this group will need to develop more skills in sewing production, so they can expand their production capabilities to gain sustainability. This would best be accomplished by having another teacher/teaching team spend some time with the women to expand their sewing skills. They also need marketing support, both locally and abroad. Having people who can work on both the U.S. and Kenya side on this project would help sales of their bags to increase!

Every little bit of help these ladies

can get will go a long way in making their future bright. Any amount can be donated to help defray the costs of supplies and materials needed for their business. For as little as \$50, your chapter can pay the monthly "salary" for any of our volunteers who care for the disabled kids in the daycare. This would allow their moms time to come and sew. A \$100 donation would buy a new sewing machine for the shopping bag project.

To learn more about CTC International, visit [www.ctcinternational.org](http://www.ctcinternational.org). If your chapter or Neighborhood Group would like to learn more about getting involved on a personal level, contact me at [ddias@asg.org](mailto:ddias@asg.org).

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