



Makindu Children's Centre

A project of the Makindu Children's Program –

A not-for-profit NGO operating in Makindu, Kenya

Headquartered in Brownsville, Oregon – Established 1998.

September 1999 Newsletter

Brownsville Anthropologist Paul Baxter is currently in Makindu, Kenya, assisting Winnie Barron on the Makindu Children's Center Project. He will be there until October 1, and we know he would love to have mail from home. His address is C/O Makindu Children's Center, P.O. Box 101, Makindu, Kenya. The following is some of what Paul has written home.

I'm sure it must seem like I fell off the face of the earth. Well, I didn't, but you can see the edge from here. I am living with Dianah Nzomo's family, which consists of her, three daughters, a son, and another girl she has taken in. They are a great group and have had a number of volunteers stay here, so they make it very easy for me. The house is L-shaped with the toilet on the end, then the wash room, a bedroom, my room, Dianah's room and the larger living/dining room. Cooking is done outside over a fire.

Each room has a door to the outside, but not to the other rooms, except the washroom / bedroom which are connected. The doors open onto the compound, which has banana trees and Papaya trees. No bananas at the moment, but there are unripe papayas. We walk by fruit vendors everyday to get to the center. Yesterday I bought twenty little bananas and a large avocado for 28 shillings (70 shillings to the dollar) - not much. Our avocados are better tasting, but the little monkey bananas are really good, much tastier than the large ones we get in the states.

My room is about 10 feet square, with a bed on one side, a free standing closet, a table and a chair. The ceiling is corrugated tin roof. By the way, this is a middle class home. I light the room with candles. The cement floor is kept very clean by washing it everyday.

I brought three times or more clothes than I need. The girls wash them for me. I get very very dirty here as the ground is very dry and the red dust gets everywhere, especially when you have two hundred or so little hands patting and pulling at you, and especially when you have read some damn travel book that says to bring only light colored clothing (nonsense). If you sit, the little guys will come and sit next to you, or on you, and being close to the ground, they share it with you. We have them shower and we wash their clothes, but it is a fleeting gesture. These are very tough kids. I put a two-year-old piggyback on her six-year-old brother and

watched them walk off today. It was remarkable. I thought of Trotter's "Bless it and release it" remark.

I pay 1500 ksh per week (\$21 or so) rent and they feed me as well. A good breakfast of fresh fruit and buttered bread and chai, which is tea and boiled milk with lots of sugar. I have gotten fond of the chai--it's the national drink of Kenya. So far I have eaten well, but very plain food. We eat what is cooked by the guardians at the center, which consists of corn, rice and beans and *secuma* (spinach like stuff- you'd love it Quinn) all mixed together. They have plate size bowls, which they heap up with this stuff, throw a banana on top and a cup of instant milk. Today I saw a kid half Quinn's size come back for seconds. It is incredible to watch.

At Dianah's home we eat a lot of different things, including *japaties* (deep fried bread) and spicy vegetables. The fact is that we don't have electricity and eat by kerosene lantern. That means that I often can't see what I am eating. It's good, though plain. The only seasoning is some sea salt, which one applies by the pinch method. And they all eat enormous quantities of it. The thing is, they walk everywhere and work very hard and don't eat much meat (I have had none here) so they are all thin. I think I too am losing weight.

The kids at the center are amazing. They have so little and are often sick, but they eat a huge plate of food and then play as hard as any kids anywhere. And believe me, when it comes to soccer, they would cream any team in Albany, and do it barefoot with a flat ball!

Today Winnie cleaned up a kid's foot because it was swollen. He hurt it a week ago and it was infected, and he had a broken little toe as well. She splinted it and wrapped it and he hobbled off to play goalie. I asked him if it hurt and he said yes, and I said, "Then don't do this" and he just smiled. By the way, he waited a week to tell Winnie about it because he was afraid he'd have to get a shot. It had to hurt worse than a shot, it was really infected and swollen.

I have gone with Winnie to several houses which are all very simple one room wattle and daub structures with a grass or tin roof, dirt floor, no windows--poverty like you have never seen, but since almost everyone is poor it is accepted. Very hard lives here, and often very short. People suffer, but are generally happy here, even though it is so hard. I don't understand that part yet. It is amazing as a white person to be able to walk down the

street and literally make the day for little kids just by saying hello. They all shout out HOW ARE YOU I AM FINE, and then laugh at the oddness of it. So do I.

I see things here all the time, which I know all of you would love to discuss. Domestic animals I have seen include cats and dogs, chickens and ducks, goats everywhere, Brahma cattle, one burro and 2 pigs. Dianah's family has a large dog, Cam, (smaller than Rosie) and one small auxiliary dog named Toto, which means "little". These are good dogs, very friendly and love to play. Most dogs are mistreated and used for guard dogs. (I saw one on the street today that sort of scared me - looked very scruffy and sort of said "rabies" all over it, so I didn't pet him.) Cam and Toto steal things from my room and play chase with them. This morning Lydia brought back one of my shoes and a sock, which I hadn't even missed.

The cat, Lucy, is skinny, so she is always hunting. She comes in, cruises the room, just checking, and then leaves. She's all business. Yesterday I saw her with a big lizard, which she would not let anyone near! Hey, you gotta make a living.

They also have a chicken, a hen, which lives in their living room. It is a nasty old hen that growls whenever you get near her, but she gives them an egg a day to pay her rent, so they put up with her. Caity, there is also a chicken that lives around here that has feathers that are all ruffled out like it's mad all the time. It looks really strange. I will take pictures of all of this.

I went with several volunteers and Winnie on a bus to a place maybe 15 miles south of here where there was a rock hill they wanted to climb. We walked around and around looking for a trail, but didn't want to walk through anyone's compound. Finally we just went up across country and climbed and climbed. It was tiring for me, less for the others since they are in better shape from months of walking.

We got to just below the top and noticed someone looking down at us. It was a woman with a baby on her back. She lived there, and I took her picture in front of her house. As we walked back down I pointed out that someone had to carry water up to that house everyday. Cute baby. So we sat and looked out across the valley for miles and miles and I took a number of pictures of that too. Thorn trees and sisal (yucca) as far as you can see, but Winnie says that towards the edge of the valley there is forest and it's green and beautiful. In some ways it is very beautiful here, and in some ways it is very desolate. They tell me that the trees we could see just south of us have a troop of baboons in them. I want to go see. Wildlife is pretty scarce, at least that I have seen. I think if people can get to it, they eat it.

Friday night we are going to have a slumber party for the kids, whatever that means. It should be interesting if

nothing else. I don't know what they will sleep on, or if they need anything. These are some tough kids, some still live on the street, although they are supposed to have homes.

You need to know that I am perfectly safe and in a strange way that I am still trying to figure out, comfortable here. The health dangers are real, but everyone knows about them and takes precautions. We boil my water everyday, and then when no one's watching I put iodine in it and filter it as well. I take my pills and I don't put my fingers in my mouth. When a grimy little hand pushes into mine, I know it's ok that I am here.

I thought I should try to describe Makindu. It is different than anything you have seen. The first thing that struck me was the trash. There is trash everywhere. Plastic bags are blown by the wind and are stuck in every bush and tree. It is not attractive. Then people throw trash down everywhere on the streets so there are piles of it along the road. In contrast to that, people are very clean and keep their houses and compounds clean. They just don't care about trash. Also they use thorn bush for fencing and that makes it look like it's not taken care of, but in fact they have put a lot of work into it.

The buildings are made of adobe bricks which people make in their yards. You dig a hole and add water to the dirt to make mud of a certain consistency, then you put it in a mold to make a brick about 10 by 10 inches, then you plop it out of the mold and let it sun dry. When you have enough you build a kiln out of them and start a fire inside and bake them for three days.

Many people make them to sell. I don't know what they are worth, but one old woman with one leg sold her cows and goats and started making bricks. She hired the men to do it, in order to have enough money to take care of her grandchildren when their parents died. She's exceptional and very sharp. To make it here as a cripple is tough, and to excel is amazing.

The Latest From Winnie

We have fenced our land now, about 4 1/2 acres just next to the DO's office, court building and police on non-profit allocated land. We hope to begin with a small sacale (CHEAP) building here, so we can officially "claim the land." They can't take it away from us if we don't prove we intend to use the gift. We hope to build a simple structure for the first phase to house an office or two, storeroom, and training room, designed in a "phased" approach so that we may expand and add onto and convert it if future funds are forthcoming.

We need to begin this, as we cannot further expand the program, or hope to offer vocational training - our main

hope for the chance of income generation, unless we build. Our current site that we lease is maxed out space-wise.

The older kids just took a one day trip to Mombasa and the coast. The idea of these kids seeing the ocean for the first time, or simply getting out of their tiny village, seeing museums, and other exciting sights, is pretty thrilling! These kids deserve that vision of a future beyond the harsh reality they face day in and day out.

Cookbook

Rhonda Dietrick, a volunteer going to Makindu next Spring, is putting together a cookbook of the favorite recipes (not necessarily African) of Makindu supporters. Please submit yours on the enclosed insert. It will make a nice Christmas gift for family and friends for \$10.

Pooh