

LIVING POSITIVELY IN KENYA

by Stephanie Harnish

Torn lace covering a doorway. It was the only decoration in Karen Achien's mud house. Her walls were bare and bulging. We sat on wooden slats where cushions used to be in her sofa and two chairs. I could see sunlight in different places through her thatch roof. Every other home we visited before had lace or crocheted doilies over the chairs. But the only decoration in Karen's house was the torn lace over the doorway to the other room in her two-room house. I saw the lace and wanted to cry. It was her one attempt at beauty.

I'd seen Karen twice before, I think. The first time I saw her tall, thin, smiling beauty was on a Sunday morning at Kenya Mennonite Church, the church I attended during my seven weeks in Kenya in the summer of 2008. Three other girls and

I used to think there was an end to problems – and that I could make a sizeable dent if I really sacrificed. Now, I feel like I'm staring at a lake. Or a bottomless well.

I had traveled to Songhor, Kenya with Eastern Mennonite Missions to work with a program called Kenya East Diocese HIV/AIDS Project, or KEDHAP. The second time I saw Karen, she was chairing a support group for people living with HIV/AIDS. When she introduced herself at the meeting, she said, "My names are Karen Achien, and I am living positively." I didn't grasp the layers of meaning behind the simple words "living positively" until later. In Kenya, if someone is positive, they are HIV positive. Living positively could merely mean having the virus.

But Karen and many others I met are also living. They have HIV, but they are living for their children and tomorrow. Like Karen, they have turned a curse into a blessing.

Karen welcomed us into the coolness of her mud house and began to show us her life. She has been a widow for four years. Her husband probably died from AIDS, but he was never tested for it. Karen was sick for a year and seven months before she was taken for voluntary counseling and testing (VCT) to see if she had the virus. She was counting the hours until death claimed her. Some home-based care workers from KEDHAP cared for her, paid for her transportation to the hospital for VCT, and built a new house for her. Her old house had holes in the walls big enough for a person to walk through. Karen tested positive for HIV and started taking anti-retroviral drugs (ARVs). Today she is healthy. Karen says she is alive today because of home-based care, one facet of KEDHAP.

Kenya East Diocese HIV/AIDS Project (KEDAHP) began in 1999 with two men, the money in their pockets, and orphans who couldn't go to school. Education isn't free in Kenya. Children need uniforms and have to pay school fees. There are so many orphans who want education but can't afford it. Some of them came to Kenya Mennonite Church. Seeing the need, Bishop Clyde Agola and Gordon Obado decided to do what they could with what they had. They started with fifteen uniforms for fifteen orphans.



The author, Stephanie Harnish (second from right), at the Mennonite Guest House in Nairobi, Kenya, with her Eastern Mennonite Missions team: (l. to r.) Amanda Roland of Peach Bottom, Pennsylvania, Megan Fisher of New Carlisle, Ohio, Stephanie and her sister, Joan Harnish, both of East Earl, Pennsylvania.

Over the years, KEDHAP has expanded to do so much more. They have a home-based care program for people living with HIV/AIDS, in which some church members have been trained to care for sick and bedridden individuals, like Karen, and help them get back on their feet again. They have paid transportation to a hospital so people can go to voluntary counseling and testing for HIV. KEDHAP initiated a support group for people living with HIV/AIDS that has about 50 members. Overall, KEDHAP has provided over a thousand orphans with school uniforms. This year ten students can go to secondary school because of KEDHAP, and five are receiving vocational training. Congregation members bring some of their harvest every year to KEDHAP to distribute to widows. Recently they provided 98 widows with a pair of goats each.

Karen had received a pair of goats, and we stepped into her yard to see them. Her two goats are now seven. The goats are to Karen what money in the bank would be to us. She has security. If she is ever sick, she can rest knowing that she can sell a goat if she needs money for food or transport to a hospital. She can sell a goat and pay school fees for her children, or buy school uniforms for them. Her goats mean she doesn't have to depend on KEDHAP, and KEDHAP can support other widows.

After talking a while, Karen took us to visit her sister Monica. We walked down the dirt path between fields of sugar cane and admired the beauty of Nyanza Province. The mountains rose up all around us and clouds pillared above our heads. The rain would come later that afternoon, but the sun shone brightly that morning.

We turned off the dirt road and walked toward a corrugated tin house. Monica was outside in her garden and rose to meet us. I stepped into her house and glanced around before we prayed. It was one room and bare except for a



This young man earned money to pay for his schooling by hauling and selling water. However, he had to rely on a borrowed bike, and didn't always have access to it. Eastern Mennonite Missions provided the money to purchase his own bike.



Bishop Clyde Agola, left, and Gordon Obado, far right, founders of Kenya East Diocese HIV/AIDS Project (KEDHAP), in northwestern Kenya with three team members, (l. to r.) Joan Harnish, Amanda Roland, and the author.

bench along one wall, a couple of blankets by another, a few cooking pots, and a Raila Odinga poster. We prayed and then took our seats along the bench. Monica sat on a doorstep. A small cat came up and started purring around our feet.

Monica is also a widow living with HIV. Her only daughter has left home. After her husband died, Monica moved to her parents' house, where we were. First we talked about light issues: how she's doing physically, how she feels free to share and talk in the support group because there are people like her, and how she is waiting for the Second Coming. In fact, that is how she introduced herself to us: "My names are Monica and I am waiting for the Second Coming."

When there was a lull in the conversation, Karen, who had remained quiet until then, spoke up. Monica's life had a troubled side none of us knew about, personified by her uncle, who lives next to her. He hates Monica for two reasons: land and his daughter. He wants the land Monica lives on. He also had a daughter Monica's age. She was sick at the same time as Monica. Karen advised both of them to go for VCT to know their status. Monica went; her cousin didn't. Monica survived because she started taking ARVs; her cousin died. Every time he sees her, her uncle remembers his daughter. His anger explodes. Monica has come home to find her ARVs thrown out. Sometimes he comes and beats her.

While Karen was quietly telling us this, Monica sat on the doorstep, crying and wiping her tears with her skirt. She has no way out, because the house she and her hus-



Karen Achien and her youngest son, outside their home in Songhor. Karen says she is “living positively,” and that she is alive today because of home-based care, one facet of the work that Kenya East Diocese HIV/AIDS Project (KEDHAP) does.

band had lived in was burned in the post-election violence. She has nowhere to go. But still she says that God has been faithful to her. Every day she praises God because he has always been on her side. Her uncle beats her, yes, sometimes even with knives, but he hasn’t killed her. “I am living in the shadow of the LORD,” she told us. She has more faith and trust than I do.

I left Monica’s tin house, sobered. I had taken my notebook along so I wouldn’t forget anything. Later,

I wrote in my journal, “We put ink scratches on paper—the reduction of their struggles—and carry them away. I used to think there was an end to problems—and that I could make a sizeable dent if I really sacrificed. Now, I feel like I’m staring at a lake. Or a bottomless well. I don’t know how deep either goes. Part of me wants to dive in and try to find the bottom, to see the worst, and another part wants to stand with my feet firmly planted on the ground and with my back to the lake. It’s too big. All I can do is lay my burdens at the foot of the Cross and rise to do my Master’s bidding. And that will be enough.”

During our few days of training before going to Kenya, the words to the song “Praise to the Lord” kept running through my head. One phrase stuck out to me more than the others: “Ponder anew what the Almighty can do.” And one quote from CS Lewis: “Our problem is not that we desire too much but too little.” Too often I don’t think God will really do what I pray for. I know that He parted the Red Sea, brought water from a rock, rescued Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the fiery furnace, and rose from the dead, but somehow the stories seem to be stuck in Sunday school. I don’t want to ask God for too much, so I don’t dream big.

Thankfully, Bishop Clyde and Gordon aren’t afraid to dream the impossible. Someday they hope to have a health clinic in Songhor. They have blueprints. We saw a four-acre plot of ground they hope to buy for the clinic. They would like to start a day care for single parents. They want to open a guest house in Songhor where they could hold seminars on how to start a project similar to KEDHAP. The guest house would be a resource counseling center to generate income to support KEDHAP,

and, together with the health clinic, would create jobs in Songhor. Bishop Clyde and Gordon would like to write a booklet to sell as well. And they want to provide small things that could make such a difference to people: a sewing machine, or a machete, or some seeds, or a pair of goats. Simple things, but those simple things are the road to generating income.

I thought at first that we left nothing with Karen and Monica, but that’s not true. We didn’t give much. We carried away our ink scratches on paper, but we left behind us the realization that someone cared enough for them to sit in their homes and listen to them. We are their sisters in Christ, waiting for the Second Coming just like they are. We are praying and desiring the impossible from God.

I pondered anew what the Almighty could do. It’s amazing how he uses a woman who was at death’s door to encourage others to live positively. It’s amazing how he uses a woman who has no way to escape to help others focus on the Second Coming. It’s amazing how he used four American girls to show his care to our Kenyan brothers and sisters. It’s amazing how he uses the impossible dreams of Bishop Clyde and Gordon to accomplish just that: the impossible. **BB**

Stephanie Harnish graduated from Rosedale Bible College with an Associate of Arts degree in 2008 and is serving as Women’s Resident Director at the school this year. She has also gone on mission trips to Mexico and Guatemala (13 months), and hopes to pursue a master’s degree in education.

If you want to donate to KEDHAP, you can make a check out to EMM, earmark it for KEDHAP, and send it to Eastern Mennonite Missions PO Box 458 Salunga, PA 17538.



Penina, a woman who received a pair of goats from KEDHAP, with her goats and their offspring outside her home in Songhor. Recently, EMM gave money to provide 98 widows with a pair of goats each. In addition, congregation members bring some of their harvest every year to KEDHAP to distribute to widows.