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on a Mission



Richmond

magazine

A BONANZA
OF ETHNIC
BAKERIES

ROUTE 1'S
INTERNATIONAL
FLAVOR

BOLLYWOOD
ON FRANKLIN

TOTAL
IMMERSION
IN ELEMENTARY
SCHOOLS

NINE
IMMIGRANTS'
STORIES OF
TRIUMPH

LITTLE
BAGHDAD:
IRAQIS SETTLE
IN RICHMOND

THE GLOBAL ISSUE

THE WORLD
AT YOUR
DOORSTEP

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PLUS:

27 GIFTS

FOR TOUGH ONES
ON YOUR LIST

REFLECTIONS

Back to Africa

A charitable connection to the continent has one Richmonder ready to return

Andrea Loewy decided to follow her heart, and it took her halfway around the world. "It was the picture," she says, holding up a photo of Tony Owuor, an 11-year-old boy with wide brown eyes and a solemn smile. Owuor, who lives near Rangala in western Kenya, has been supported by Loewy since December 2006.

"I had seen the Christian Children's Fund commercials many times," she says. "It's tough to choose one child out of all those available, but when Tony's face popped up, I knew he was the right one."

The CCF, with corporate offices located in Richmond, helps supporting families set up debit payments for their child and provides photos and information about the children and their families. In its most recent fiscal year, CCF spent \$185.4 million on program services for children.



Andrea Loewy (center) in Kenya with Tony, the child she sponsored through CCF, and his parents, Alfred and Rose Odhiambo

"I cried when I read the family's first letter," Loewy admits. "They asked blessings on me and thanked me for sponsoring Tony. It's just \$24 a month," she adds quietly. "To know that little bit could make such a huge difference in somebody's life was overwhelming."

Owuor's parents are farmers. His father is also a volunteer minister for a church. Tony has eight siblings. For Loewy, the tug on her heartstrings over time proved too great.

"I distinctly remember saying to my husband, 'I'm going to Africa. I don't know how I'm going to get there, but I'm going.' He didn't believe me. When I borrowed money from my 401(k) to buy the tickets last March, he said, 'Oh my God, you're serious.'"

Loewy, a senior project assistant who writes contracts and

change orders for general contractors Kjellstrom & Lee in Richmond, believed she could assist in other ways. Prior to leaving, she offered her construction expertise to the Ugunja Community Resource Center, an agency two miles from Rangala.

Once settled, Loewy taught a class on project management to the resource center's staff and also developed a business plan for the South Ugenya Women Construction Company, a group of widows and older women whose goal is to build homes for themselves and earn money building for others.

Then, a few days after her arrival, two CCF staff members drove Loewy to meet Tony.

"I was struck by how neat and picturesque the compound was," Loewy says. "The family lived in a thatched hut with dirt floors, with no running water or electricity. Tony had been waiting for us since 6 a.m."

Loewy was excited, too.

"We were so overtaken by the moment that we didn't really know what to say. We sat on a hard bench with cushions on it, and I just held his hand. He sat quietly until I suggested he go out and play with the soccer ball I'd given him. He ran outside with a wide grin on his face."

Loewy's visit included a traditional meal of a variety of fruits, vegetables and meat.

"They probably could have fed their family for two months with that much food. I was overwhelmed at this huge outpouring. You read about the CCF, but going there and seeing people with the same hopes, fears and dreams that we have made me realize I was doing the right thing. We're all the same; they're just not afforded the opportunities we have in America."

This won't be the last visit for Loewy.

Speaking to the widows and seeing their desperation inspired her to start the Women International Construction Education Program (WINCEP), which will train women in various construction skills. "I hope to start classes in Kenya," Loewy explains.

She wants to partner with a nongovernmental organization with 501(c)3 status, which will qualify the project to enlist the help of construction professionals and college students. The program will pay their expenses, although all workers will volunteer their time.

"I'm going back," Loewy insists, "when husband and funds line up right." ■

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