

Together we are changing lives... one girl at a time.

How I Met Joy

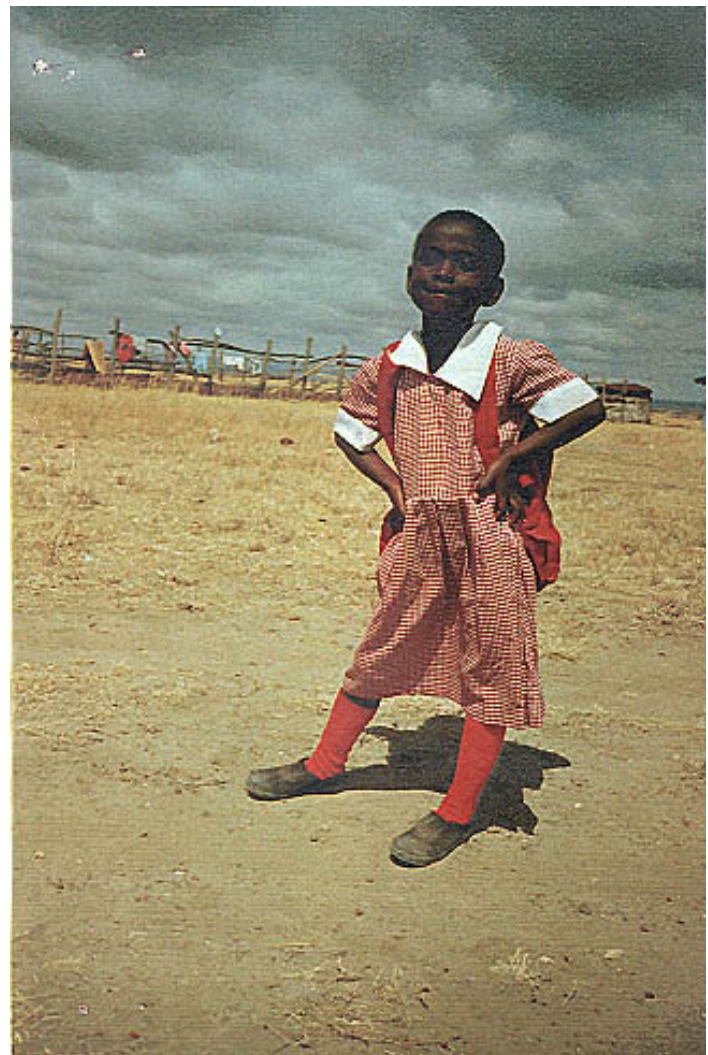
BEADS Co-founder Lisa Stevens tells how she met her sponsored girl

I met Joy through a photograph.

For several years, I'd sold Maasai beaded dog collars to indirectly support the education of Maasai girls. The project was growing... attempting to link sponsors in the United States to Maasai girls who were in immediate need of school tuition; young girls who would otherwise be married in their early teens via arranged circumstances.

Consequently, Debby sent me a selection of photos of the project, which I intended to use as a display while selling the collars. Among the photos was one of Joy standing confidently on the wide savannah, legs firmly planted with hands on her hips. The caption said that she wanted to be a doctor and needed a sponsor. This girl had attitude! I knew I had to sponsor her.

I was going to be on safari in Kenya and Tanzania in October '01 and decided I must visit the project and meet Joy. I arranged my visit through Debby, with lots of assistance on the ground from Zippy, who was working with BEADS through the



African Conservation Center. After the safari, I stayed on at the Norfolk Hotel and arranged for a car and driver to take me and my friend, Craig Sholley, to Isinya. It was planned that we would go to Milimani Academy first to meet Joy. Milimani Academy is a private school about ½ hour outside Nairobi along the road to Isinya.

I had no idea what to expect when we arrived at the school. Several small, plain buildings painted blue were loosely arranged around a dusty schoolyard. A big tent dominated the yard, and a classic old school bus was parked nearby. We were met by Mr and Mrs Matua, the owners and principals of the school. Leah Moses, the Dupoto Women's Group president was also there, and she introduced me to several members of the group in a flurry of faces and names.



Lisa and some of the Women's Dupoto Group visit Joy's classroom. Oct. 2001

After warm and enthusiastic hellos, Joy and her mother Gladys were introduced. We also met Rebecca Nasoore, Gladys's mother-in-law. Nasoore is a founding member of the beading mamas, and is determined to see Joy and Florence, her youngest child, get an education. We all crowded into a small office to have a cool drink and get to know



Lisa visiting Joy in her classroom, Milimani Academy, Oct. 2001

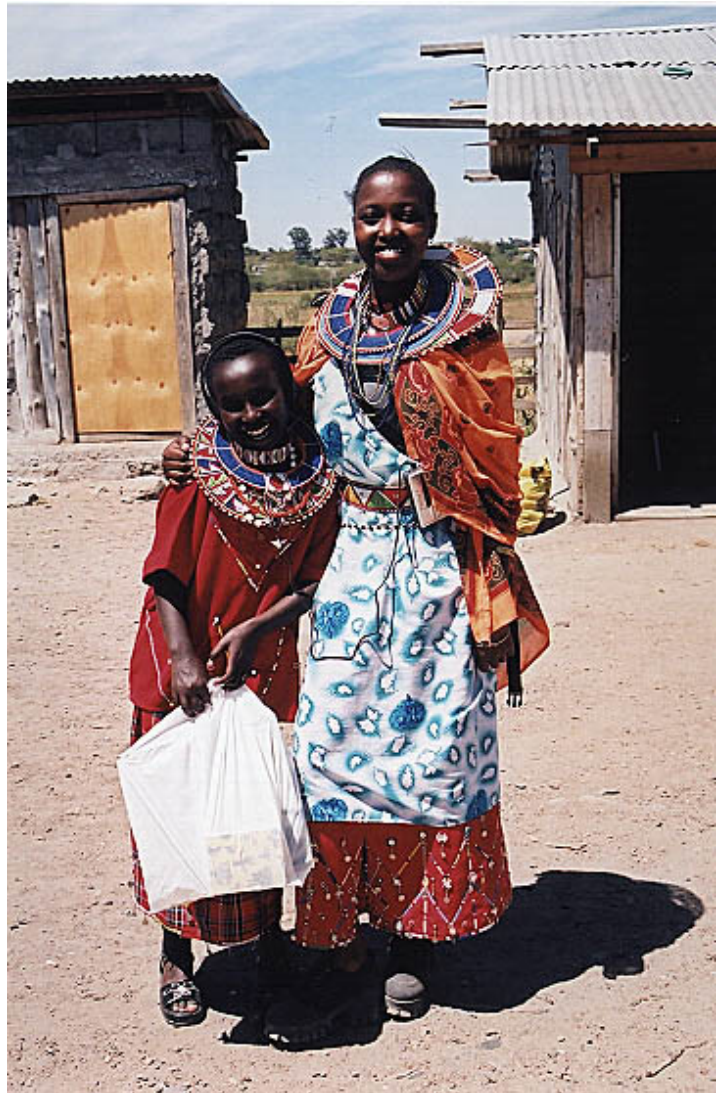
each other. I soon discovered the reason for the large tent. After changing into beautifully beaded, red outfits we were ushered to seats. Under the shade of the tent through the heat of the day, each class from kindergarten to standard six performed their best songs, recited poems and acted out short skits.

Each presentation ended with a formal group bow or curtsy, along with the charmingly spoken words "welcome visitors". Also,

participating in the assembly was a music and dance group from Kenyatta University. They performed traditional dances from the diverse ethnic groups of Kenya. This was all done to thank me for sponsoring Joy!

I cannot begin to express how humble I felt in the midst of this outpouring of generosity and thanks. The three-hour assembly ended with Joy and Gladys presenting me with a gift, and then everyone went back to their classes. In a meeting room, a lunch had been set by members of the DWG. It consisted of traditional foods... ugali (boiled plantain), chicken, corn, and sukamawiki (kale). Completing lunch, we toured the school and said thank you by visiting each class of students before the day came to an end. Soon thereafter, I realized that visiting Joy's home, meeting more of the group members, and seeing the BEADS workshop would require a second day.

So, the next day we went directly to Joy's home. Joy stayed home from school that day so that she could show me her home. Her family of four lives in a very small, tidy, wooden, tin-roofed house, with windows and doors open to the dry savannah. The kitchen and living room are the heart of the house and account for all of the space except for small sleeping alcoves off of the kitchen. We sat around the coffee table on upholstered furniture that contrasted dramatically with the dirt floor. A few chickens and an increasing number of dogs hung



around the front door as a meal was served. I finally got to taste nyama choma—traditional roasted, blackened sheep—which was served with cabbage and rice. After eating, we visited the sheep and cattle paddock areas and walked to Nasoore's traditional mud and dung home. We met her husband, a tall and formidable looking, elderly man who rested his hand on my head in the traditional respectful Maasai greeting and then smiled. His smile melted his otherwise severe face.

We also met the rest of the family and neighbors, who all stopped by to meet Joy's American sponsor. From Joy's home we went to the Moonlight Hotel, home to the office and workshop of the Dupoto Women's Group. I was overpowered with an intense shopping frenzy when I saw all the beautiful items for sale! Leah Moses, as group leader and hotel manager, treated us to more food and drink. Another day quickly came to an end. We headed back to Nairobi after long good-byes and promised returns. Along the road, we dropped several women off to shorten their long walk home. I reflected on change within the Maasai culture as evidenced by urban sprawl, and this was accentuated when one of the women pulled out a cell phone. We are helping women young and old alike have choices as the modern world unfolds around them.



Girls with Sponsors Meeting at Top Ride Academy. January 2003

It is February of 2003, and I have just returned from my second visit to Isinya. This time I met Debby Rooney in Nairobi so that we could spend time together on the project. A lot has happened in the past year and a half. BEADS is now a non-profit organization under the sponsorship of the International Women's Democracy Center. We have orders coming in from Smithsonian gift shops, boutiques, dog training and rescue groups. There are now over 40 girls going to school due to our (your) tuition support. We are engaged in long-term business planning and organizational issues, new turf for both Debby and me—co-founders of this venture. Pat Judy, who sponsors Florence, joined us for our weeklong stay at the Moonlight Hotel this time.

We met all the girls in Isinya who have sponsors and more who need support. We gave out letters and gifts from sponsors, which heightened everyone's spirits! All the girls wanted to see what had been sent before it was quietly and shyly placed back into its bag or box. We talked about grades and goals. Optimism was high due to the recent democratic and peaceful elections. The new president, Mwai Kabaki, mandated free elementary education and promised better funding for teachers and schools. Economic recovery and jobs hold a promise for a better life for all. Girls are beginning to think beyond today and have dreams. We held a town clean-up, and an HIV-AIDS workshop with the help of Peace Corps volunteer Paul Polling.

Debby and I make lots of contacts with the African Wildlife Foundation, Green Belt Movement and Peace Corps in order to broaden our scope in Kenya. We talked about tree planting and sustained harvesting for fuel. We ordered dung stoves. We talked about the expansion of the project to Amboseli and selected 15 more girls as scholarship recipients. We visited many schools and homes and were thanked with sodas, chai, food, and beaded gifts. We worked with Rukia Kadidi...the backbone of the project in Nairobi to outline the schedule of activities for the year.

I feel overwhelmed by what we have created and how much more there is to do. My relationship to these girls and women has been reinforced. Small projects can make a difference. So many great memories!

Lisa Stevens , Co-founder of BEADS February 2003