

Kenyan Connection Rewards Women Beyond Expectations

Reflections by Sally Strusz

In 1999 our Presbyterian Women from Long Valley Presbyterian Church wanted to support a girl from Nairobi, Kenya enabling her to attend secondary school, as it was not the norm for them to attend school beyond the 8th grade. Our request was forwarded to the Newton Nairobi Partnership Committee. Ultimately they connected us with a young girl who had been orphaned at the age of 7, and really wanted to attend secondary school. Rachel Nyambura was selected as our scholarship recipient in 2000 when she was ready to attend State House Girls High School, and we were able to connect with her. The PW voted to support her through the four years. When she graduated in 2007, she asked if we would support her through college. The women took a deep breath, and voted to continue our twice a year rummage sales for 4 more years so we would have the money for her schooling.

During the 8 years of Rachel's schooling our women received reports on her classes and grades, and developed a relationship with her. I, along with many of the women, began to think of her as another daughter, one that we most likely would never meet; but none the less, she become a very important part of our PW group.

A dream came true this May when Rachel arrived in Long Valley for a three-week visit in conjunction with the 25th anniversary of the Newton-Nairobi Partnership Celebration. I met her on May 2nd when Carol Proctor, Rachel and I gathered for dinner and talked for hours. During the next three weeks we had many lunches, dinners and visits learning about each other and our families. Our high school youth group had several chances to meet with her and learn her story, realizing how small the world really is. Our LVPC Presbyterian Women had chances to meet with her at our Bible Studies, before and after worship and at a farewell dinner the night before she departed.

The comments I keep hearing since she left are about the chance we took on someone we never thought we would meet, how wonderful it was that she made it through school and college and still desired to keep in touch with all of us. I believe we are so much richer for the opportunity we had to help her through school and beyond. Rachel left us with so much love and thankfulness for all the support we have given her over the years we have known her.

Reflections by Carol Procter

I've been involved in volunteer work since I was a teenager; and when the Presbytery could not afford to invite Rachel for the 25th anniversary, I got excited about the possibility of bringing her to America myself. How could this celebration have been complete without one of the Partnership's greatest educational successes?

The Long Valley Presbyterian Women were urged to donate toward the partnership years ago, but they didn't just want to give money. They come together each year to create a rummage sale of grand proportion, and it takes weeks of preparation and co-ordination. We wanted to feel connected to a girl who had been affected by the AIDS epidemic, between 9-12, educational motivated, and willing to correspond so we could offer encouragement. The Partnership informed us personalized sponsorship wasn't the way they were managing the scholarship program. We held on to our goals and knew just the right girl was waiting for us to sponsor. It took some negotiating and Rachel Nyambura was the young girl selected. We were able to communicate, but it was slow with large lapses in between. After she finished high school and wanted to go to college, we needed to raise more funds to make her dream come true. We began having the rummage sale twice a year to sponsor her through college. The Long Valley Presbyterian Women working with the partnership were change-making women. In the meantime, Rachel was able to find a new world for which she was suited.

In 2014, I was called to go Kenya to meet Rachel because our president, Sally Strusz, was recovering in the hospital. Sometimes we do things just because we know they are the right thing to do. Rachel with our group traveled to a variety of projects the partnership was working on, which gave us some quiet time alone to get to know each other's story. You see, for me this was personal. My mother was deserted on the streets in an impoverished neighborhood of Appalachia during the Great Depression. She had always told me, "If it weren't for the kind teachers and church ladies, I don't know what would have happened to me." When I had to say my final goodbye to Rachel in Nairobi, we hugged. She felt my motherly hug, as I was feeling my mother's arms wrapped around me. My mother would have been proud. The Long Valley Presbyterian Women would be proud. I told Rachel to get her passport, because she would come to America some day.

At first, I wondered how this 31-year-old would put up with my 68-year-old lifestyle. But we just became closer as the days passed. During Rachel's visit, we did many things; and I am afraid I started giving her advice like a mother. Her education, sponsored 100 percent by the women of my church, had made such a

difference in her life. Rachel is a young woman of gratitude and possibilities. The women of my church had many opportunities to interact, and we grew closer. The Long Valley Presbyterian Women found that making a connection from the very beginning helped Rachel and our group feel invested in the future. Every person encounters challenges in their life; but, when Rachel learned how many of us had for years been praying and paying her tuition, she was moved. It was my privilege to be a huge part of this; and it has brought the women in our church closer.

As for advice about raising money to benefit the Partnership, I will respond as a mother. Be wise with your money, invest in your future and education, and have a plan. Remember that the only thing that matters are the connections we make while we are here. That's what this experience was for me; and I lift up our LVPC women for their involvement in Rachel's education and journey.

Reflections from Rachel Nyambura

The journey within my scholarship opportunity has been filled with manifold learning opportunities, both educational and life lessons. This has enabled me to grow into being a whole person. I believe God gave me this chance to write for looking back to reflect on life and count my many blessings, some that I didn't know I had. I truly appreciate how far that he has taken me. I have made lifetime friends and connected with Long Valley Church Community in a special way.

At the beginning of 2018, an opportunity was placed in my hands and God confirmed his will by enabling me to get a visa to visit the USA. I had a very wonderful visit; and everyone from the Partnership Board and the Long Valley Presbyterian Women and friends took their precious time to show me their love and attention. For this I am forever grateful.

For me this was not only a chance to celebrate the milestones made by the Nairobi-Newton Partnership in the 25 years. The opportunity to visit the United States of America added to my wonderful life experiences, my joy; and it helped me to meet people who had looked after my welfare since I was a little girl. This has opened my heart to seeking to look into the needs of others and help out.

More specifically, I owe my gratitude to Mrs. Sally Strusz and Ms. Carol Proctor of LVPC. Sally was the voice behind the program; and she assured that the LV Presbyterian Women kept interest in my education, even when

I was not in touch much. I received her motherly protection more than 7000 miles away. I will forever owe her and her family for this.

Ms. Carol Proctor has made the whole puzzle complete. She gave me the chance to visit the USA, and offered me room in her home. Without her inner divine instinct to give me this chance, I would not have met the gracious people that I met among them, all the women who contributed towards my education. I am very grateful to have received this mother-daughter experience.

I would also wish to thank the Nairobi-Newton fraternity; Nancy Steiner, Harold Johnson, Antony Wachira, David Ndumo, and retired Rev. Daniel Muritu who brought me out of the shadow into the limelight.

If I could advise anyone who feels they are all alone in the world, I'd tell them that they have much more than they can see or even imagine. Today, I feel very blessed to know that the care I received was genuine and out of love.

When I returned home from America, it was difficult to adjust from the fabulous life I had while there. Though I know it was not an everyday lifestyle; and a lot of people sacrificed their time and resources to make my visit memorable. I have since learned to thank God for every moment, knowing from where I have come and that I have a bright future ahead of me. My life was picked from the slums of Dandora in Nairobi. So I say this with much gratitude and humility. It is said that, you don't know what you have until you lose it; but I think you don't know what you have been missing until you see it.

God bless you. God bless Americans;; you were too kind to me.