

Peninsula Journal

Making a difference by changing lives

by Eric Feldman

As our jeep lurched over one muddy pothole after another, the orphanage seemed very far away. Looking out the window, I saw immense poverty in the slums of Mukuru. We were on the outskirts of Nairobi, Kenya, and although our guide assured us that we were safe with him, I felt uneasy. Many of the older inhabitants glared at us as we watched the younger children run and play among heaps of garbage. The stench of sewage mixed with rotting vegetables permeated our space. Witnessing the utter destitution of thousands of people crammed into a few square miles left me feeling hopeless and depressed.

My initial aim was to meet the two children that Allison Eckert and I had sponsored. What transpired in the next 24 hours was beyond my imagination, as it would change six children's lives forever.

In the Beginning

More than a year earlier, my parents were considering a family trip to South America to work in a medical clinic. Each had spent a part of their

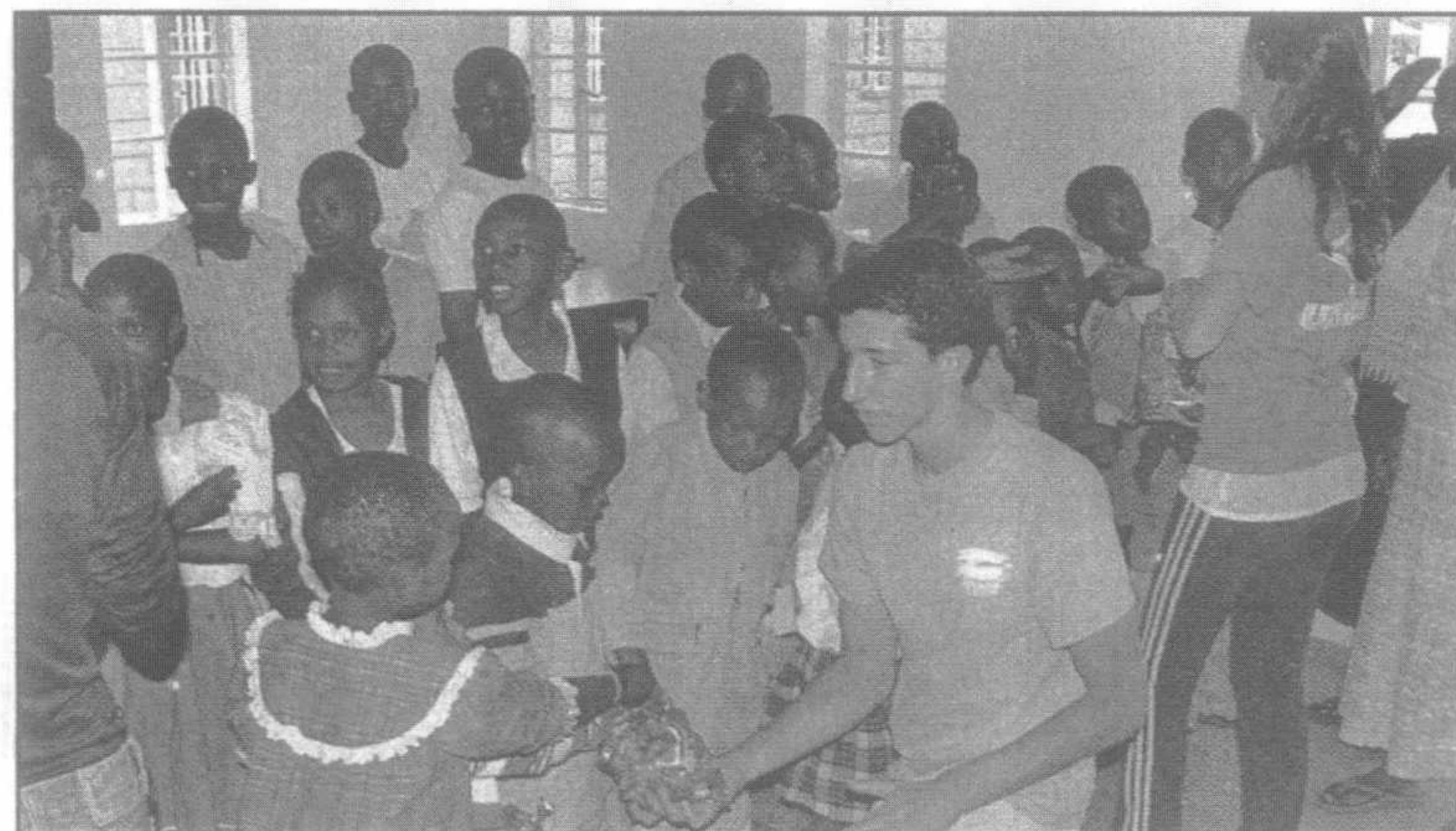


The slums of Mukuru, Africa

high school summers in medical clinics and orphanages outside the U.S. They hoped to show us kids another facet of life. Allison, a friend of mine, had traveled with her family to Africa a year before. She told me of her experiences on safari, and it sounded very exciting. One company in particular, Micato Safaris, offered a chance to spend extra days building a school or working in an orphanage as part of its "Lend-a-Helping-Hand-on-Safari" program. Micato also offers the opportunity to sponsor a needy child through its nonprofit arm, AmericaShare. Once I encouraged my parents to choose this destination, I asked Allison if she would help me raise funds so that one of the orphans could go to school. She found the idea appealing and was eager to help.

Calling upon the talents of our friends, Allison and I organized a musical fundraiser and called it "Just One Night." Michael Murata, a good friend of mine since Town and Country Preschool, immediately volunteered to play classical piano for our event. Sammy Miller and his sister Molly offered to bring their jazz quartet. With such a positive initial response, we felt confident that we could find more musically talented friends to help put together a special night. The invitation to the event stated our goal clearly...we wanted to raise enough money to support one child in Africa for four years of schooling, including room and board.

We were overwhelmed with the generosity of our guests, who gave over and above the suggested amount. Cordon Bleu-trained Chef Kathy Capellino decided to donate not only her services but also the food. In the end, we raised almost \$11,000! This was enough money to sponsor two children to attend boarding school, gaining an education right through high school. I was so excited about it that I shared the news with the Saldo family, who would be traveling with us to Kenya. Inspired by the fundraiser given by my friends and me, they enthusiastically decided to sponsor a child of their own.



Eric Feldman gets acquainted with some of the children at the orphanage.

At the orphanage

And so, it was with the hopes of meeting these (now three) children that I traveled through the Mukuru slums to get to the AmericaShare Orphanage. Children on both sides of our van lined up to chant "how-are-you!" in the hopes that perhaps one day they would be the recipients of someone's atten-

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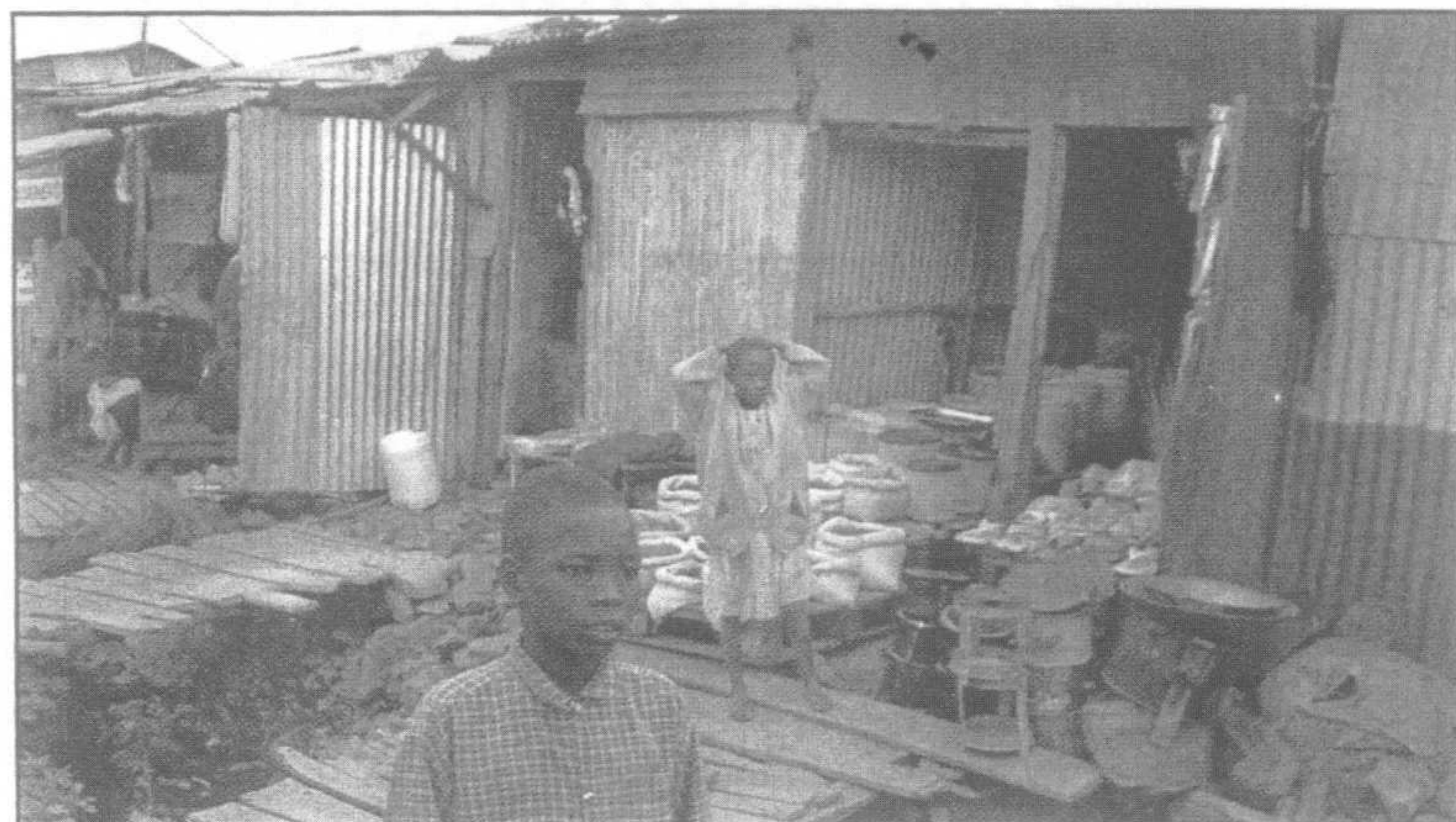
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tion. It made me sad to hear from our guide that 23 percent of the children were HIV positive. I can only imagine the AIDS prevalence among the adults; I seldom saw someone who looked over the age of 30.

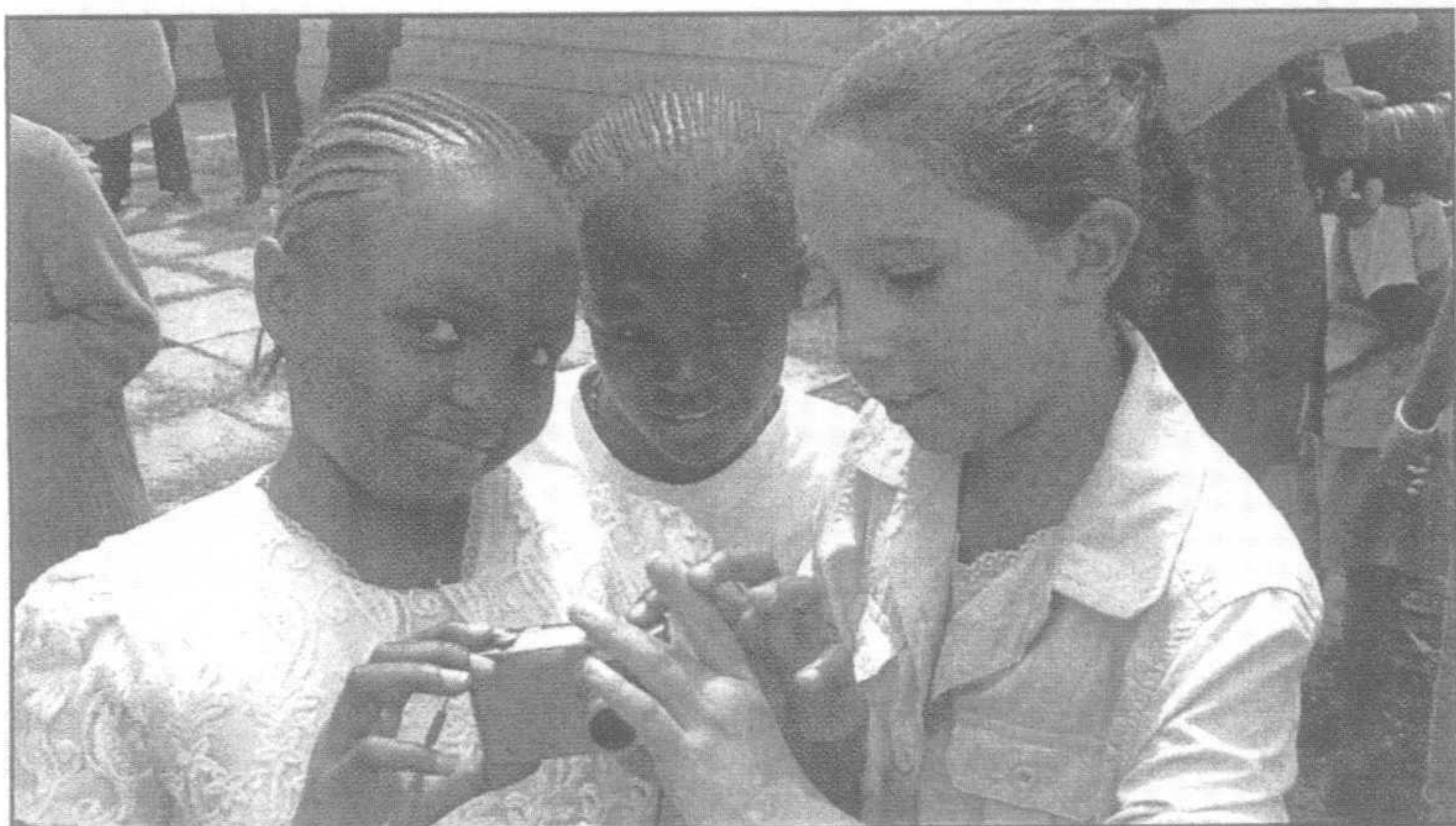
Though it seemed like the road would never end we finally arrived at the orphanage. The joyful atmosphere stood in stark contrast to that of the slums. Only a chain-link fence separated us, yet there was a sense of security. Children were playing soccer on a large field. Vegetables had been planted in neat rows and huge pots of food simmered on the stove for lunch. We had brought four heavy duffel bags stuffed with clothing and supplies given to us by our neighbors and friends. Now it seemed like a drop in a bucket when I looked at the sea of faces greeting me in song.



Homes made of corrugated metal.

Meeting our Children

Before meeting Justus and Veronica, our chosen children, I was given a short bio of the two. While it discussed the tragic circumstances of their past, it didn't begin to describe their personalities. I found them intriguing. Justus was a very serious young boy, and tried his best not to smile. It seemed he was afraid of being interviewed, as if the dream of boarding school might evaporate at any moment. He walked around with his arms crossed, afraid to let me in, cautiously asking questions about me and my life. It was clear that he had been chosen to go to school because he was very bright. He told me that he had hopes of becoming a physician. When my dad told him that he was an eye doctor, Justus found it difficult to comprehend that there could be a doctor for just one part of the body. He asked several times if this were really true. Justus also asked if my house was made of corrugated metal. I thought of my two-story home on a leafy street in Palos Verdes, and quietly answered, "no."



Elizabeth Feldman shows a picture of the girls after taking their photo.

Veronica was as shy as Justus was serious. She watched with fascination as my sister took her picture, and immediately showed Veronica her digital image. She simply could not fathom how her likeness was captured inside the silver box. She told us of her dream of becoming an accountant some day, and beamed when we spoke of the boarding school she would soon be attending. When we handed her a framed family photograph, she clutched it as if it were a lifeline to a family of her own. In the middle of

our discussion, a 16-year-old resident named Irene approached us and introduced herself to my dad and me. She told us that her goal also was to become a physician, and began asking tons of questions in fluent English. It turned out she had been sponsored years earlier by Sharon Ryan, our travel agent in Palos Verdes! Although Sharon had never met her, this young woman told us to "tell Sharon I love her." The gratitude was clearly evident as her eyes quickly welled with tears.

The Domino Effect

The Saldos, our family friends accompanying us on safari, were mesmerized with the children in Mukuru. At the same time that we had the chance to meet Irene, Justus and Veronica, they were meeting Katherine. We handed out backpacks, candy and school supplies. Amidst all the hugs, gifts and heartfelt gratitude, two families from Kansas City came to the orphanage to visit. Noticing all of the commotion, they asked what was going on. I looked up and saw them surrounded by children.

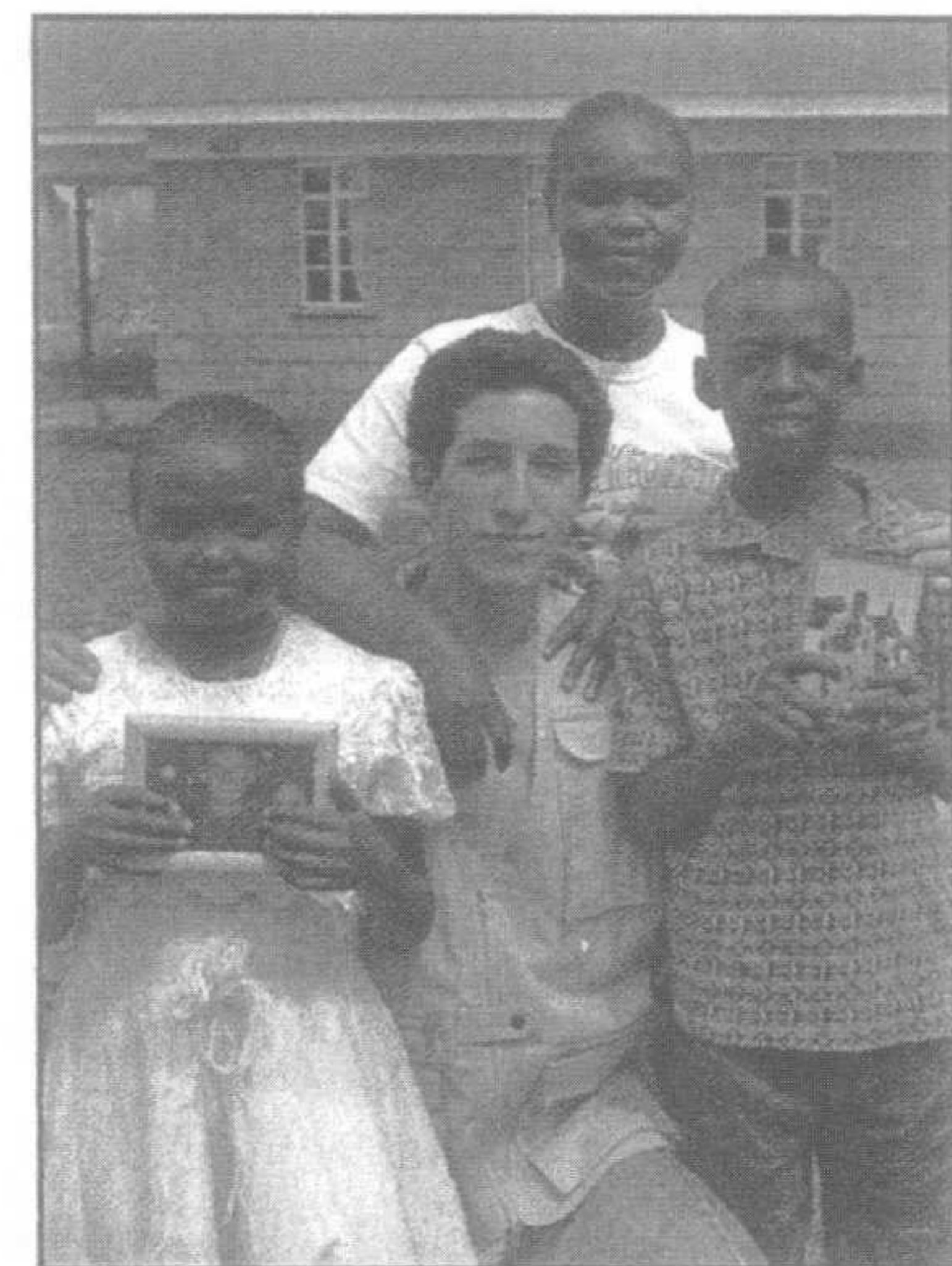
The next night we were invited to dinner at Felix and Jane Pinto's home. They are the patron saints of the orphanage and school, paying all of the administrative costs so that 100 percent of the donation money goes to the kids. Quietly, and without fanfare, they have sponsored over 2,000 children in schools and orphanages all over Kenya. I felt proud of the three orphans we helped sponsor, but humbled when meeting people who had done so much. We were finishing a delicious meal when suddenly the lights went out. Out of nowhere, a joyful procession of African dancers appeared and weaved their way through the candle-lit tables. I was stunned when the lighted cake ended up in front of me—it wasn't my birthday! The Pintos were celebrating the fact that three *more* children had been sponsored the day before. When the families from Kansas learned that teenagers in California had put on a musical concert to benefit a child, they were very moved. Over the years, thousands of children had been sponsored by AmericaShare, yet not one of them had ever been sponsored by teens. Besotted with the children they were visiting, these two families told the administrators they wanted to add three more children to the sponsored list. They wanted to meet them right then and there. I wished at that moment that my friends could be there to see what we started one evening in July.

The night continued with the Pinto's telling story after story of the humorous, lively and unusual adventures that their safari guests had encountered. As I listened I pictured myself in similar predicaments. But by the end of the week I had my own completely different set of tales to tell.

On safari

The safari that ensued provided exceptional exposure to the animals of East Africa. Zebras, wildebeests, giraffes, elephants, cape buffalo, warthogs, cheetahs and ostriches — and this was just the first two hours on safari! A couple of days later, I was falling asleep in a hammock right outside my tent in the Maasai Mara. I woke up, startled by a large snorting sound. As my eyes focused, I located the source of the grunts. I was amused and a bit intimidated by a large mother warthog and her three babies, feasting on the grass directly beneath the hammock. Although I was hungry for my own lunch, I chose to wait it out for another half hour for fear of being impaled by the protective mother's large, gnarly tusks.

No matter how nicely furnished our rooms appeared, we were reminded again and again that we were still in a wild and untamed environment. On another occasion my brother and I returned to our room after lunch, only to see a large black and white flash of movement in our bathroom



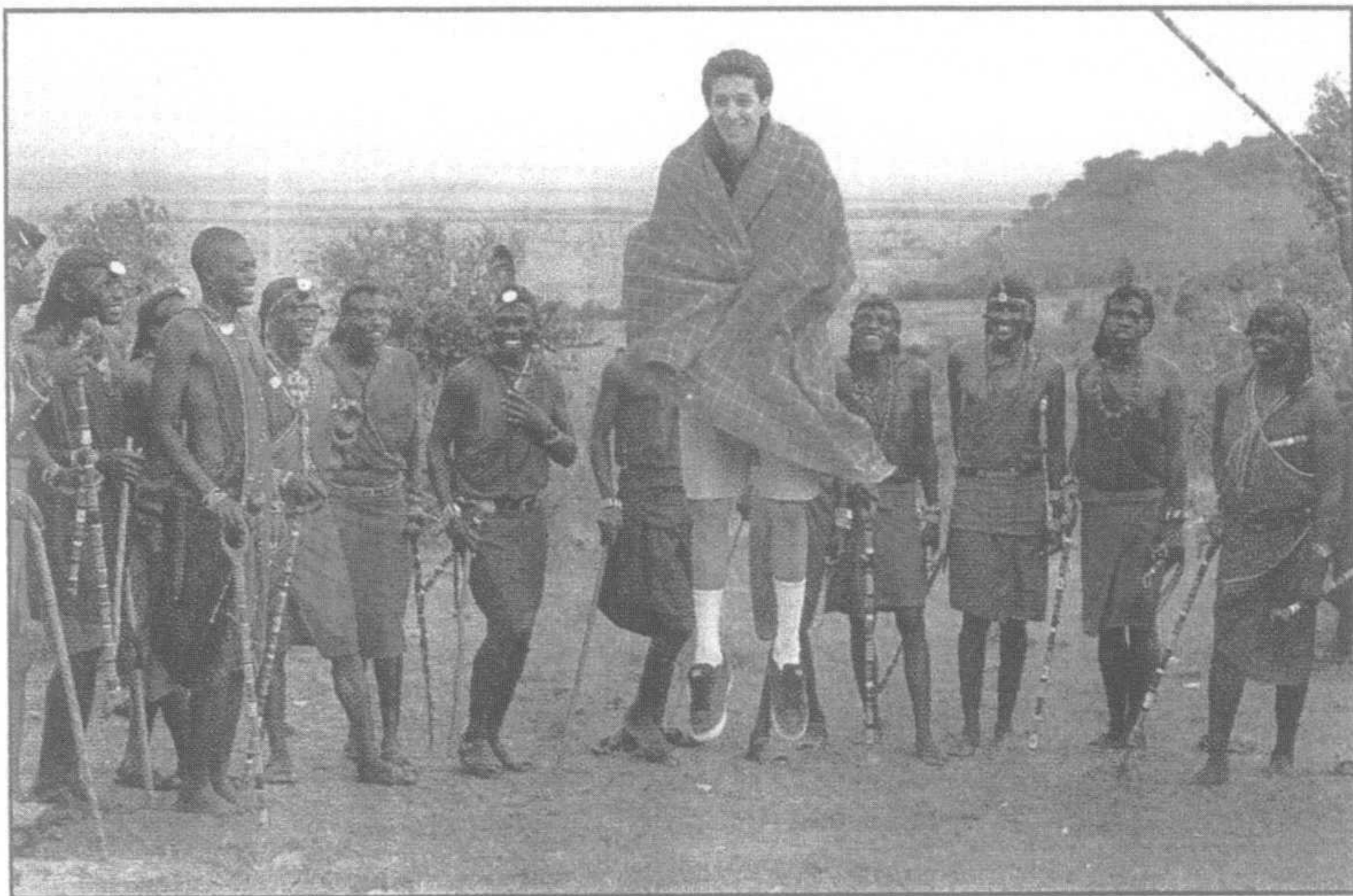
Eric with his chosen children, Veronica and Justus, and Sharon Ryan's chosen child, Irene, hold photos of their American families.

We had inadvertently left our window open and a curious monkey had found his way into the room. I don't know who scrambled away faster; my brother Jonathan or the banana-stealing monkey.

The Maasai

The safari also gave me insight into a different way of life that still exists today. The Maasai Warriors are a nomadic people clinging to their culture and customs even though there is mounting pressure for them to change. They live in much the same manner as they have since the 15th century. They could be spotted tending their cattle throughout the Maasai Mara and the plains of the Serengeti. They depend on cows for almost all aspects of their lives. Maasai villagers drink cow milk and eat beef every day and drink the cow's blood on a weekly basis. This provides them with additional nutrients that their simple diets would not otherwise provide. Their homes are built from a mixture of mud and cow dung, and their beds come from cowhide. My sister Elizabeth was surprised (and disappointed) to learn her value as a wife would be counted in cows, nine for the first wife. Actually, the Maasai wives imagine that Western woman must think very little of themselves not to even have cows exchanged in their behalf!

One young man, the son of a Chief, welcomed us to visit his village. He showed us which tree the medicine man used for arthritis and which one gave heart relief. As I hunched over to enter a village hut I strained to make out the different rooms in the darkness. I couldn't figure out how anyone could see with such small windows to let in the light. Later that night I had an opportunity to participate in one of the Maasai ceremonies. The young warriors compete in a jumping contest to prove athletic supremacy. Since volleyball and basketball are my two favorite sports I eagerly accepted the challenge. Although I was by no means the highest leaper, I felt that I represented my village (Palos Verdes High School) very well.



Eric learns to leap with Maasai warriors.

Toward the end of our safari we had scheduled a hot air balloon flight. Awakening at 4:30 a.m., we hurriedly got dressed and raced over dirt roads in time to see the balloons fill with helium. As we drank hot chocolate the moon was setting to our right and the sun was rising to our left. We scrambled into the woven basket just moments before it lifted. The scenery from above was breathtaking, the pure beauty of looking out high over the Serengeti plains at the hundreds of grazing zebras, giraffes, and wildebeests below. It was utterly quiet and peaceful as I gazed over the plains dotted with acacia trees and wildlife. Spectacular moments such as these left indelible impressions of Africa on my mind.

Reflections

At the end of the day my thoughts would return to the six children



The Feldman family, including brother Jonathan, sister Elizabeth, and parents Ken and Camille with the six chosen children that began with "Just One Night."

who I'd met at the orphanage. The days I spent with them convinced me that their lives will be on a completely different course than just six weeks earlier. Initially I started this endeavor thinking that I would like to "make a difference." Although the desire was there, I always thought that the phrase itself was cliché. After meeting the orphans whose chances of a better future literally depended on us, I no longer felt or thought this way. Africa had changed me. What my friends and I started — a simple hope to change one child's life — had changed six lives, not counting my own. Who knows if Justus will be a physician one day, treating the children of Nairobi? If so, it will be because of the many people who gave for "Just One Night" last July.

For more information about the AmericaShare program, visit www.americashare.org or call 212-545-7111. **PEN**