

THE JEWISH JOURNAL

November 8, 2007

Teen makes a difference for orphans in Kenya slum

By Sharon Schatz Rosenthal

http://www.jewishjournal.com/bar_and_bat_mitzvahs/article/teen_makes_a_difference_for_orphans_in_kenya_slum_20071109/



Ryan shaking hands with one of the orphans

Instead of splurging on a Wii or a state-of-the-art laptop, Ryan Silver, of Manhattan Beach, donated a portion of his gift money to orphans in a Nairobi slum.

"I think the best thing you can do is help another person," said Silver, 13. "I have a better life than the kids [in the orphanage], and I wanted to help them."

Silver's inspiration stemmed from a 2006 family vacation to Africa. Silver, his parents and his younger sister went on safari and explored Kenya and Tanzania. While the incredible sights of wild animals and tribesmen remain with him, Silver's most memorable moments were meeting the children in the Nyumbani Orphanage in Mukuru, a slum in Kenya's capital. The orphanage houses about 100 children whose families have been affected by AIDS/HIV.

Silver and his family had traveled with Micato Safaris and chose to

participate in the New York-based tour operator's nonprofit AmericaShare program, which allows travelers to spend time with the orphans in Nairobi.

AmericaShare supports about 2,000 Kenyan children, many of whom have been affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic sweeping the continent. The organization places underprivileged children in schools and orphanages throughout East Africa. Through Lend a Helping Hand, a subprogram of America-Share, travelers can meet local children and offer financial support if they so choose.

It's "main accomplishment is travelers hooking up with children whom they now support," said Dennis Pinto, Micato's managing director. "Many of these children were homeless or living on streets, and this gets them out of that situation."

Often, this means living in the safety of the orphanage and getting a boarding-school education.

For Silver, Mukuru was a far cry from the clean, upscale neighborhood he knows in Manhattan Beach, where he surfs daily and plays on the school lacrosse team. Home to about 700,000, Mukuru has no infrastructure and little access to water and electricity.

"It was shocking," Silver said.

After walking through narrow streets filled with mud, past large piles of trash and tiny, rundown shops, he arrived at the orphanage.

When Silver entered the facility, two toddler orphans, a brother and sister, took him by the hand and showed him their play area and vegetable garden. The juxtaposition of the devastation and the happy children was overwhelming. Silver says he was overcome with emotion.

"They were the cutest kids I'd ever seen, and they were so excited to see us," said Silver, his soft-spoken voice evoking a mixture of sympathy and enthusiasm.

During Silver's visit, the children and their caretakers sang songs for him in Swahili and played games. Although he only spent about two hours there, the experience changed his life.

"It definitely made me realize how lucky I am to have a home and a family and have the food and the water I need," said Silver, who is in the eighth grade.

According to Pinto, Silver is not alone. For many children, especially teenagers, a trip through the slums of Africa can be life-altering.

"It is an experience that reaches quite deep into the psyches of teenagers," Pinto said.

When Silver returned home, he began preparing for his bar mitzvah. Without hesitation, he knew that his mitzvah project would involve helping the children in the orphanage.

When it was time to send the invitations for his March simcha, Silver enclosed a letter about the cause and asked guests to donate money to AmericaShare at the reception. At the party, he played a video of the children from the orphanage and gave guests handmade decorative pins and bracelets that they bought from the women from the orphanage. Between the guests' donations and his own, Silver raised more than \$2,700.

In addition to completing a Jewish rite of passage, Silver was pleased that his celebration helped educate others about the plight of the children in Africa and to ultimately offer financial support.

"Instead of just coming for a party, [my guests] came to see what Mukuru is like and how they can help," he said.

Silver now sponsors a teenage boy from the orphanage named Evans. The donated funds cover Evans' \$1,500 tuition for one year, and the remainder of the money will go to help support an additional orphan.

Silver says he plans to continue to support Evans and other orphans in the years to come.

"Ryan is quite a special kid who is sensitive to the world beyond him," said Rabbi Mark Hyman of Congregation Tikvat Jacob in Manhattan Beach, who officiated at Silver's ceremony. Hyman said that becoming a bar mitzvah means one becomes responsible for transforming the world -- something the teen has certainly taken on.

Silver said his experience in Africa continues to influence him.

"It has definitely given me a more positive look on life," he said. "We can make a difference helping kids less fortunate."

For more information, visit <http://www.americashare.org/>

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