

in which Cheryl Cousins from the One World Centre talks to people about travel experiences with a difference...

Have you ever been in the situation where you think you've almost completed a task, just to discover that in fact it's hardly begun? For some of us life can feel like that almost daily, but for Mary Stewart of Onchan, who worked for many years at the IoM College, a long term completion date seemed to be finally on the horizon... when a whole new world started to open up beyond!

Mary has been involved in the Koru hospital programme in Kenya for 18 years, initially going to Kenya in 1991 to take part in an African experience together with three students, Jane, Andrew and Reiner. She returned to Kenya in 2007 to live there for a period of time, becoming part of the Executive Committee of the Hospital Board to oversee the completion of the 2nd phase of the hospital development plan. This new block, consisting of the 12 – bedded male ward, kitchen, laundry and reception, has been built to a really high standard and is finally complete. “it's very satisfying” says Mary “the facility will enhance the care of the sick in the Koru area and its surrounds and the funding for all this work has come from the IOM Overseas Aid Budget plus private donors here on the IOM.”

For most people this would be a major achievement and they would return home well satisfied, knowing a task was completed.

But instead, in May 2008, Mary reopened the Koru College of Technology (which had been in operation previously but closed some 5 years ago.) Mary explains “I have become aware that without education and financial security it is almost impossible for people to survive here. ICT is the first of the courses at the college to run on a full and part-time basis, and it is hoped that these courses will enable young people to acquire skills that will lead to future employment.” The Computer Lab is equipped with modern machines funded by a private donor from the IOM, and the College graduates have achieved a high level of learning.

The future progress of the College is dependent on the necessary funding that will allow it to reopen the old building and once the refurbishment programme is complete the College will offer vocational courses in Joinery and Carpentry, hair dressing, construction etc. “It is our aim to extend the courses being offered in order to provide the students with a broad range of skills.” says Mary. The College is fortunately eligible for funding from the Kenyan Government and will be allocated the appropriate grants that will allow it to begin the refurbishment Programme.

And so Mary moves on!

This month she returned to the Island with Okwaro Joseph Okinyi who she has known for eight years. He is a leader in his community neighbouring the Koru district. Joseph is Kenyan by birth and married with two children and living in small rural village called KOGUTA. They come to the Isle of Man with a new vision. The Koguta Empowerment Project.

“Its basically about enabling people to join the 21st century” says Mary “to free women from the drudgery of being the water carriers of the world, to bring an end to the water

born diseases they are subjected to because they have to drink polluted water; to give them the opportunity of having a strong economic base to their lives.”

This project was conceived and started last August. It combines the introduction of micro finance schemes with community empowerment. “I am one of the officials of the Project” says Joseph, “through work and discussion we are seeking to improve the lives of all the people within the village community; here women may still have to walk for up to two hours a day just to get clean water” Worldwide over 6000 people die each day as a result of drinking unclean water; for those in Koguta their water supply is polluted by the local sugar cane factory.

“We believe that the way forward to achieve these aims is through community involvement.” says Joseph. Together the people of this rural community have identified their own needs, issues of health care, lack of clean water, training, educational needs of children and adults, farming practices, cash crops, passable roads; savings and loan scheme, the roles of different members of the community, power, provision of potable water and its benefits... and the programme of development and improvement has begun! The major stake holders in the movement will be involved in all stages of the decision making.

“Of all my projects this is the one that I feel most passionate about” says Mary “if successful it will alter and enhance the lives of so many people. This project could act as the required catalyst to show other communities what can be done if the collective will of the people is invoked.

Joseph said to me... “ I would like to find out how the people on the Isle of Man copes with the different challenges of life that they are faced with on a daily / long term basis...” in the light of the issues of peak oil and climate change maybe we have lessons to learn from the Koguta village project. Is it time that, as a community, we too identify our own needs and begin to implement the programme of development and improvement? “We believe that the way forward to achieve these aims is through community involvement.” Joseph said... I found myself wondering, how do we, the people on the Isle of Man, cope with the different challenges of life we are faced with; are we as a society at the point of feeling we have reached our goal when in fact we have only just begun?

If you would like to support Mary in her work or would like more information about this project please contact: Mary Stewart on 07624451408 or mary_stewart@manx.net or father Brian at St Mary’s Church Douglas with any donations towards this project