



Six years ago, I began a journey on a path I never expected to explore. This odyssey took me all the way to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro, yet the most elevating part of the entire journey has been the lasting relationships built along the way.

Empathy creates better social problem solvers, and that is what our world needs.



Mombasa Take One: Summer of Service

In summer of 2012, I partnered with Yellow House Children Services to provide speech and language therapy in Mombasa, Kenya. I spent six weeks that summer serving with clinicians at Mombasa Children's Therapy Centre and teachers at Sirio School in Bamburi.

When my six weeks were up and it was time to come home, I left feeling like there was more to be done; more help to be offered. It was unfinished. I knew I would return to Africa, but I didn't know when. Two years later, the journey continued.

Mombasa Take Two: Creating Sustainable Support

In 2014, I made my way back to Mombasa. This time would be different. In a country with less than 15 licensed speech-language therapists, I knew the temporary therapy I could provide was simply not sustainable. The goal this time was to offer more education to parents and professionals in order to equip them with the tools they would need to support their students beyond my time there.

During the trip, I was invited to facilitate a training for nearly 30 professionals from Pwani Occupational Therapists Regional Group on effective communication strategies for children with autism. In addition, I offered training at Angels on Earth Special Needs Center in Nyali.

Upon my return home, I realized how strong my ties to Kenya felt, and I longed for this impact to keep growing. Over the next three years, I sought ways to serve this community from Texas.

In Spring of 2015, I was honored to present at the Texas Speech and Hearing Association Annual Conference in San Antonio. My presentation featured information about voluntary speech and language therapy services in Kenya, with the goal of raising awareness of the needs of individuals in East Africa and how SLPs can help.

World to World: Connecting with Kids

Back at home, I never lost touch with my colleagues at Sirio School. In January of 2016, Head Teacher Jack Elvan Gichana and I began exploring the idea of connecting our students virtually.

Sirio School reminds me of The Joy School. It is also a private school serving students of similar ages and abilities. They offer smaller class sizes, outdoor play areas, fine arts and extracurricular activities. Even their mission statement and vision seem to align with ours.

Each time I visited Sirio School, their students were constantly asking about TJS and what it's like where I live. We could close some of those gaps by creating relationships via email, video chat and more.

One of my greatest goals at The Joy School is to widen our students' view of reality. Developing their ability to take on another's perspective and their understanding of cultures and people different from them is crucial. Empathy creates better social problem solvers, and that is what our world needs.

Worlds Apart, Working Together

We knew connecting the schools would not be an easy task due to technological and financial challenges. Yet we were passionate about this idea, and we believed we could make it happen.

At that time, Sirio School did not have the internet capabilities to sustain quality, long distance video communication. They had some computers, but none with webcams, and there was no wireless internet connection available.

Back in Texas, I met with Christine Dinh, Instructional Technologist at The Joy School, who offered a wealth of knowledge and creative ways to make this dream a reality. Mark Stites, our Director of Technology, provided me with three TJS-donated laptops, which I brought to Kenya the following summer.

It has been a great joy to witness these two groups of students who are worlds apart engage with one another as they gradually realize they're not as different as they once thought.



Mombasa Take Three: A Partnership Blooms

In July 2017, I was thrilled at the chance to go back to Mombasa, reconnect with my Kenyan friends and family and visit Sirio School. Thanks to donations made by friends, family and colleagues, we installed a wireless modem to provide internet access to the entire school.

In two short weeks, we taught three groups of students in 5th-7th grade how to use the TJS-provided laptops to video chat using Skype. Successfully Skyping with my mom in Houston was the most exciting moment – we were connected! With working technology, I began exploring what this partnership could look like throughout the year at The Joy School.

JOY Around the World

When I returned home in August, I was given the opportunity to teach a seventh grade elective class called "JOY Around the World." The goals were to connect with individuals living in a culture different than our own, to create a deeper mutual understanding and to grow empathy, perspective taking and compassion.

Using SeeSaw, an online student portfolio, we were able to easily connect with students and teachers at Sirio School. We eventually used Skype for live communication to further build these relationships.

TJS students spent time thinking of questions to ask the other students in an appropriate and culturally sensitive manner. They also considered how to share information about their own lives and experiences in an expected and empathetic way.

After introducing ourselves and exchanging photos and videos on SeeSaw, we officially "met" on Skype in early October. It has been a great joy to witness these two groups of students who are worlds apart engage with one another as they gradually realize they're not as different as they once thought.

Together We Can

An eight-hour time difference, limited technological and financial resources, different school calendars and language barriers were real obstacles, but we knew we could work through them. I'm grateful for everyone's support in both schools and on both continents in making this dream come true.

I'm looking forward to taking the next steps in our partnership with Sirio School and am eager to see this project grow to new and greater heights. I am humbled to be part of a community that allows us to take leaps of faith and carries us each step of the way.

"Pamoja tunaweza... Together we can."