

Published in Buzz in the 'Burbs, Nov. 2004

Joanne LeClair lives two lives for a common cause

By Janet Reese

Joanne LeClair lives two lives -- one in Centennial, Colorado, the other in Kenya, East Africa. Though the United States and Kenya are as far apart culturally as they are geographically, LeClair has linked the two countries through a common cause: Kenyan Children Foundation (KCF).

LeClair, 61, founded KCF in 1994 to “impact people’s lives through compassionate involvement with Kenya’s street children.” Since its inception, KCF has constructed children’s homes and schools, refurbished orphanages, and provided famine relief and funding for children’s education in Kenya.

LeClair and volunteers work in Kenya between January and April, and June and September each year. The remainder of the year, LeClair lives in Centennial, spending time with her family, raising money for KCF and recruiting volunteers. She hosts several local and national volunteer groups who travel to Kenya – at their own expense – to work on a variety of construction projects and assist in orphanages. Volunteers have the opportunity to make a difference not only in the children’s lives, but also in their own lives by experiencing the Kenyan culture.

Since childhood, LeClair thought some day she would go to Africa and do something meaningful for the people there. “In Catholic school, nuns showed us mission movies once a week and I loved them,” she recalls.

But Africa was not LeClair’s immediate life mission. She earned a bachelor’s degree in education from the University of Dayton, Ohio. In 1970 she moved to Denver where she married Art and spent 10 years as a homemaker and mother of two sons, David and Jeff. In 1980 she earned a master’s degree in pastoral counseling from Saint Thomas Seminary and practiced psychotherapy and spiritual direction for 12 years before founding KCF.

“In my 40’s, I realized that I wasn’t going to live forever,” she says. “I asked myself: What do I need to do before I die so I can die well? At the end of my life I want to be able to say I did everything I thought life asked me to do; I gave it my best shot, to the best of my ability.”

Pondering what was left for her to do in life, thoughts of Africa came looming over the horizon like the sun, she says. “With a 15-year-old son still at home, Africa seemed impossible --

at least at that point. So I decided to try to fulfill a mission closer to home, in the Caribbean. I went to Haiti. There for three weeks, I knew it wasn't right."

Africa was the answer. "I didn't know what I would do in Africa, I just had to do something to answer that call," she says. "I planned a safari with some friends and traveled to Kenya in 1991. When I got off the plane I knew it was right. Something about the energy of the place clicked in my soul."

LeClair grappled with leaving her family, psychotherapy practice and parents for an extended period of time. "I realized that I don't belong to my family, practice, or extended family," she says. "I belong to life, which is asking me to do this. I decided to do it."

For a year, LeClair contemplated how she would tell her family about her decision. One night, she called her family to the table. "I think I really have to go to Africa and do something over there," she says. They replied, "What took you so long? We've been waiting for you to tell us." Her family was completely supportive.

LeClair's sons asked her how soon they could visit her in Kenya. The family engaged in counseling; they discussed all the family issues surrounding her absence for months at a time. Her son David wrote a personal essay, perfectly written, saying, "My mom is the pioneer of the family. Perhaps she will give us the courage to pursue our own dreams."

In 1993, LeClair went to Kenya and lived for seven months, learning the Swahili language, meeting people and considering projects that she could undertake. The Safari guide from her 1991 trip helped her make living arrangements. She met with the archbishop of Kenya and worked with him seven months, making connections with orphanages.

"I realized that one of the most pressing things I could do is work with street kids," she says. "In 2000, one million AIDS orphans had no homes. That number will double by 2005."

Building schools and homes for orphans is LeClair's paramount mission and continues to be the goal of KCF, celebrating a decade of service this year. Since 1996, 130 volunteers have helped her build a school, a home as well as refurbish other educational and living facilities in Kenya.

"Our greatest accomplishment is giving a home and education to more than 300 street children," says LeClair. "Relationships I've built with people are equally significant." A young man who heads an orphanage said, "KCF empowers people to have the best life they can have."

Spending time with us, telling us we can do more than what we are, and collaborating with us to accomplish our goal is a legacy that KCF gives us.”

When not planning and constructing facilities, organizing volunteers and buying materials, LeClair spends time with the orphans, holding and comforting those dying from AIDS. With others, she plays, rides bikes and swims.

When in Kenya, LeClair lives alone in a small four-room house at a retreat center compound. “My life is real, simple and earthy. I see life and death every day. I read, listen to music and travel the country for recreation. I love the lifestyle, though I miss my family.

LeClair views herself as a humanitarian with no religious agenda. She simply wants to see people become better. “I’m immersed where I’m at,” she says. “I can’t imagine a day when I no longer go to Kenya.”

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