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news & notes

Profiting from Purses

France Griggs Sloat

One of Lissa Knue's newest possessions is a purse made of banana leaves. It reminds her of the day she was walking with one of her new African friends, a middle-aged woman from the village of Arusha in Tanzania, on the road to St. Lucia. Knue, a 1988 clinical psychology graduate, had to jump over a stream to get to the road. But when she jumped, she fell and the woman turned to her and, with a big smile on her face, said, "Ooh la la." Knue just burst out laughing. It's funny how things come to be, she thought.



For three weeks in January, she worked with a group of about 20 Swahili-speaking women, survivors of the AIDS epidemic, teaching them how to knit and crochet strips of colorful material into handsome purses. Then she helped sell them to tourists and volunteers for about \$17 apiece—a lot of money in Tanzania. Every time a woman finished a purse, Knue would marvel at it, saying, "It's beautiful. Ooh la la!" and take a picture of the woman with her purse.

"Ooh la la is what I say with my grandchildren," she says. "Then the women started saying that, and they even started calling me Ooh la la." Though she's been back in the states for months, Ms. Ooh la la isn't finished with Tanzania or St. Lucia Nursing Home where some of the women live. St. Lucia was founded by a Tanzanian nurse who started it as a hospice to care for women with AIDS. But most of them died, so she turned a portion of the hospice into an orphanage for the HIV-infected children the women left behind.

When Knue's friend, Connie Naber, met the nurse during a volunteer mission, she was running out of money and couldn't pay rent on the home.

So Naber started the non-profit Karama Connection in Cincinnati to support purchasing land and a new building for St. Lucia, which now houses about 15 orphans and several women. Knue joined the group that went in January to help build the new home.

“I went specifically to help women who had been deathly ill from AIDS to make money on their own so they can sustain themselves,” Knue says. “It reinforced to me that people are people no matter where they are, and you have to respect them in their culture, you have to help them help themselves, and then they have pride. It’s not about you feeling good, but about them feeling good about themselves.”

Knue went back in May for the dedication of the new St. Lucia and to visit her purse-making friends. No doubt as she showed off her banana-leaf treasure, a gift from one of the women, they cooed approvingly, “Ooh la la.”

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