

# The Story of Orkeeswa



## Local Rotarians Support Innovative School in Tanzania

Orkeeswa School overlooks vast African plains in a remote part of Northern Tanzania — home to the noble Maasai people. This is the story of how local Rotarians came to be involved with an innovative school that is transforming lives of Tanzanian youth through the power of education.

On January 22nd, Chuck Berghoff and Lorena Tuohey of the Morgan Hill Rotary Club (photo with Sue Berghoff on left) will join other Bay Area Rotarians on a trip to Tanzania. They are going to meet the students who inspired their Rotary service project in support of the Orkeeswa School. These young people are the first in their families to attain secondary and university level education.

*Written By* **ROBIN SHEPHERD**

**T**he beauty of this service project is that it not only connects people across nations and serves a humanitarian need, but it also supports a holistic, community-based model of education that happens to align with Rotary International's credo of "service above self." At Orkeeswa, students learn that life is about more than self-betterment. It's about learning to lead and to serve one's community with an attitude of respect for the dignity of its people.

### Tanzania's Need

While education can break the cycle of poverty, in some parts of the world, poverty is the biggest obstacle to obtaining an education. Orkeeswa School opened its doors in 2008 to break this cycle. In the underserved Maasai community of northern Tanzania's Monduli Hills, the traditional Maasai way of life as nomadic herdsman is vanishing, leaving many

in extreme poverty. Secondary school education is out of reach for roughly 90 percent of Tanzanian youth. School fees are upwards of \$500 per year for families whose income may be as little as \$1 per day.

At Orkeeswa, education is free, to all students. Girls learn side by side with boys, promoting gender equality. And unlike boarding schools, Orkeeswa's students attend day school in their village and return home in the evening to share what they're learning with their families and neighbors. True to its mission, Orkeeswa's holistic, community-based model of education balances academics with extra-curricular activities, life skills classes and community service.

### Orkeeswa's Founding

Orkeeswa School was co-founded by Peter Luis, a California native whose early career as a teacher took him to far-flung

corners of the world. About 12 years ago he went to work in Tanzania where he met Raphael Robert, who would become Orkeeswa's co-founder, and other passionate educators. There was no secondary school for miles in any direction and they wanted to build one. They shared their vision with local village elders and asked for their endorsement.

"We walked the village with the elders, who showed us a 20-acre tract of their land that they graciously offered to donate as a site for our school," Peter said. "From the beginning, we've made it a priority to engage with community leaders and students' families. We're bringing educational opportunity to a community that traditionally counts on children to work and contribute to the family's welfare, and practices arranged marriages for its young daughters for a dowry in the form of cattle.

"For the potential of secondary school



education to be fully realized requires a socio-cultural shift,” Peter said. “Parents must allow their teens to attend school and do their homework rather than working in the fields. Girls must persevere in their pursuit of education. Boys must learn to see girls as peers who possess capabilities and potential just as they do. Schools must foster in their students a sense of commitment to their culture and community. Communities must be open to change as a new generation emerges. The change comes from within, and it takes time.”

Peter also established the Indigenous Education Foundation of Tanzania (IEFT), a nonprofit organization to raise funds to support the construction and operation of Orkeeswa School and the education of its students. One of its early board members, Anne Cross, is a friend of Chuck Berghoff, a Morgan Hill Rotarian. Their friendship is the genesis of this story.

## Chuck Berghoff . . .

Chuck might never have connected with Orkeeswa if it weren't for the fact that he plays in a Bluegrass garage band with Anne Cross's husband Jon.

As Chuck explained it, “When our band gets together to perform gigs, our wives often come along. On several occasions, Anne and Jon talked of having served as volunteers at the inception of Orkeeswa School and having been moved by the needs of the kids and the vision of its school leaders. Later Anne was invited to join the IEFT Board. My wife Sue and I were deeply touched and we decided to sponsor an Orkeeswa student.

“In 2014, Anne asked if I thought local Rotary Clubs would be interested in raising funds to support the needs at Orkeeswa. I mentioned this to Brad Ledwith, Morgan Hill Rotary Club President at the time, and he took it to Lorena Tuohey, who leads our club's international service projects. Literally within hours we got the ball rolling. We met with Anne Cross and members from other Bay Area Rotary Clubs. An international service project was born with the support of the Saratoga, Los Altos, Morgan Hill, Gilroy, Gilroy Sunrise, San Juan Bautista, Hollister and Almaden Rotary Clubs.

“In keeping with Rotary International requirements to work through an in-country Rotary Club, we partnered with Rotarians in Arusha, Tanzania. We shared their interest in making secondary school

and university education more accessible to their local youth, and we began to develop a response to that need. They were instrumental in moving the project forward and working with Orkeeswa School leaders.

“So many people want to give back but they don't always know how. Everyone has unique gifts and talents to offer. They just need someone to help them get started. Part of our process in Rotary is to find ways to allow people to participate and have a positive impact on the lives of others.”

In 2015, Chuck and Sue learned that their sponsored student, Neema Jonas, and her basketball team had qualified for regional play-offs on Africa's East Coast. They were very excited, but also in need of new athletic shoes. Chuck and Sue gladly donated the proper footwear for the team. For these young athletes it was a triple play: their first airplane flight, first trip outside of Tanzania, and first time to see the Indian Ocean.

Currently, Neema is finishing 7th grade with solid academic performance and looking forward to 8th grade. She's learning leadership as captain of her basketball and soccer teams. Also an aspiring musician, she plays the guitar and drums and leads the Orkeeswa School choir. Neema has kept up a correspondence with the Berghoffs and is eagerly awaiting Chuck's arrival at school this month.

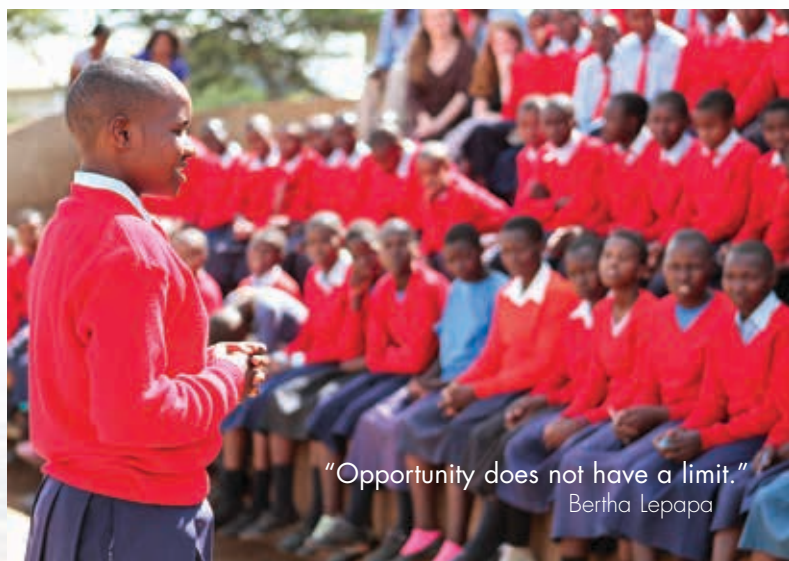
## Anne Cross. . .

“When I saw the parents streaming across the hills and valleys toward Orkeeswa School to see their students graduate with the Class of 2016, it touched me deeply,” Anne said. “Proud parents arrived in their finest tribal attire, adorned with exquisitely designed beads and swathed in bright shukas of red and blue. Students performed a traditional Maasai dance, surrounded by their families, schoolmates, teachers and local villagers.

“These first-generation high school

students had a host of academic, athletic and other achievements to their credit. The parents had no way of knowing the opportunities awaiting their daughters and sons going on to university, but they've seen other students who have brought their education home to their family and neighbors, and they have hope.

“I attended the graduation both as an IEFT board member and an ambassador for Rotary. It was an honor to represent a group of inspired Bay Area Rotary Clubs whose members banded together to understand and respond to the needs of kids halfway around the globe.”



“Opportunity does not have a limit.”  
Bertha Lepapa

## Bertha's Story

Bertha wanted an education. Her father believed his children should be working the fields, not sitting in school. He died when Bertha was 13 years old. According to local tradition, she was to be offered in an arranged marriage in exchange for a dowry of cows, a staple food and primary source of income for the Maasai people. Bertha felt her destiny could only be fulfilled through education, so with permission from her mother, she returned to school instead. She shared her story in a video produced by IEFT, summarized here:

One day, Bertha asked her mother, “If I graduate from Standard Seven, what will I do? Will I go to secondary school?” Her mother said simply, “No.”

“I was lacking hope,” Bertha said. “I told my mom I will not get married. I better die. I want to study. I am going to do a certain exam there. She told me, ‘Go.’”

Bertha never dreamed she'd have the opportunity to attend Orkeeswa Secondary



School. “After I came here, everything changed,” she said. “I’m studying hard to reach my goal to be a teacher. Everyone is given a chance to express herself and we get to share ideas. We are learning how to be visionary leaders.”

She said that after school each day, she went home and shared with her mother what she was learning at school. “. . .we educate our mothers, we educate even others around the community. Now, because I am a student, anything is possible for me through my hard working at school. Opportunities are open. I would like one day to see all of them, everybody, to get education, to see girls and boys, going to school together.”

Bertha is now in 12th grade and studying Chemistry, Biology, Geography and Math. She is scheduled to go to University in the fall of 2017!

## Positive Outcomes

Through the leadership of Rotarians Lorena Tuohey and Chuck Berghoff of Morgan Hill, Bella Mahoney of Saratoga, and Allan Varni of Los Altos, eight Bay Area Rotary Clubs (mentioned earlier) have funded a \$57,815 grant to cover much-needed additions to the school campus. A new mobile “TabLab” provides students with tablet computers so they can access high quality educational content online, offline and off the grid—a critical advantage in remote communities. TabLab comes with 20 tablets, a server with a terabyte of content, and two years of teacher training. Students can work in groups, and pursue project-based learning, using the tablets at custom desks built by local tradesmen. The school was also retrofitted with modern solar

panels, sourced in-country and installed by local tradesmen, to provide a continuous natural source of electricity. Washing stations were installed to deliver clean running water to support daily hygiene.



Anne Cross, LEFT board member and an ambassador for Rotary



**Today**, Orkeeswa provides secondary school education to more than 250 youth, more than 55 percent of whom are girls. According to its 2015 Annual Report, Orkeeswa is one of the highest performing schools in Tanzania with a pass rate of 100 percent for 8th, 10th and 12th Grade students. It has 18 graduates now enrolled in college/university degree programs, and 21 undergrads serving as volunteer teachers and coaches in local primary schools. Orkeeswa students performed 12,262 hours of community service through student-led projects.

