

Africa fundraiser in Carnegie Former resident now works to bring water to Kenya

By Dave Zuchowski

Kristen Kosinski recalls childhood visits to her grandfather's house in Peters, where she looked through his copies of National Geographic and became inspired by photographs of Africa.

"Since the age of 6, I had this dream of visiting the continent, but put it on hold for quite some time," Ms. Kosinski, a Pittsburgh native, said.

After graduating from Penn State University with a major in speech communication, she applied for the Peace Corps, but halfway through the application process, she was offered a position with Teach for America, an organization committed to affect change in troubled urban and rural public schools. In 1991, Teach For America placed her in Houston, but eventually she ended up in Los Angeles, where she spent 11 years in the entertainment industry.

"I kind of forgot about my early dream of going to Africa when I worked for Paramount Studios in a number of jobs, including my last move as programming executive overseeing television shows like 'JAG' and 'Girlfriends,'" she said.

Ms. Kosinski reached a life-changing crossroad in 2005, when Paramount underwent a regime change. Offered a new contract by the new management, she instead decided to "follow her heart" and pursue her early dream of visiting Africa.

Told that Kenya was visitor-friendly by friends who'd taken safaris there, she flew to Nairobi, where a driver picked her up at the airport. Telling him to take her to a place "where the indigenous people lived," she ended up in Samburu, a district about 430 kilometers north of Kenya's capital city.

Arriving in Samburu, she stumbled on a woman's village and connected with the village founder, who worked with women's groups throughout the district. In her first meeting, she sat in a hut with 35 other women and discovered that the area's lack of water ruled their daily lives. She also learned that women and children walk as many as 12 miles daily searching for water. Sometimes they return with nothing at all or with water that is contaminated and unfit to drink.

"The Samburu are a pastoral, nomadic people who tend cattle, sheep, goats and camels," she said. "Their wells are hand-dug, open pits which are used by the livestock and wildlife as a source of water, which contaminates them with feces and urine."

Traveling throughout the district with the village leader, she said she heard the same story of the impact the lack of water had on lives of the inhabitants. Three months after her arrival in Kenya, she flew back to her home in Santa Monica, Calif., and established the Samburu Project as a nonprofit and began raising money to drill wells.

In June 2006, she was able to hire a hydrologist and a contractor to drill Samburu's first four wells. Since then, her organization has drilled 40 wells, improving the lives of an estimated 40,000 Kenyans.



Rudi Dundas

Kristen Kosinski connects with the women in the Upper Margwe community in Samburu.



As a member of the Blue Planet Network, an organization that works with experienced water groups to bring sustainable, safe water to people around the globe, she connected with San Francisco photographers Rudi Dundas and Chris Majors. The two photographers had recently completed a photo project for Blue Planet in West Bengal, India, and, through a grant provided by the ADOBE Foundation, they were able to accompany Ms. Kosinski to Samburu to document the installation of 10 additional wells this past summer and fall.

"I decided to use the photographs as a fundraising tool to raise money to drill wells in Africa and create awareness of the world water crisis in which 4,500 children die every day due to the lack of clean, safe drinking water," Ms. Kosinski said.

After opening at the Manny Silverman Gallery in Los Angeles on Nov. 12, the exhibit of 30 photos titled "The Face of Water: An Exhibition of Photography" will be at the Papa J's Garden Piazza, 200 E. Main St. in Carnegie from 7 to 9 tonight. The event will feature a music performance by the Ron Wilson and Jeff Grubbs Duo and a video that explains the Samburu mission.

"At the exhibit, we'll sell limited edition prints of the photos for \$750 each and also offer a photo book, note cards and a calendar based on the photos in the exhibit," Ms. Kosinski said.

After the Pittsburgh showing, the exhibit will move on to New York City in February, to Washington, D.C., in March and to New Orleans in April.

"Everyone in the world has a right to clean water, but people don't seem to realize how significant the world water crisis really is" Ms. Kosinski said. "However, I do think it's a problem that's solvable."

Admission to tonight's show is \$25. Details: www.thesamburuproject.org .

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