

Teaching Girls for Equality Is Her Role

(The following story was sent to the Courier-Journal by ACTION, the Federal agency that administers programs involving volunteers)

Kakamega, Kenya — Officially, Sharon Wilbert of Webster, N.Y., teaches biology and math at a girls' high school in the East African country of Kenya. Her unofficial goal, however, is to convince her students that they are just as intelligent and capable as men.

"For the most part, women are very subservient to men in Kenya. A wife is considered a piece of property with so many cows," said the 29-year-old Peace Corps volunteer. "I am trying to make the girls believe that women can do anything they want to. I think, though, that they fail to believe it."

The volunteer is the daughter of Arthur and Mercedes Wilbert of Salt Road, Webster, and a Mercy High School alumna. A 1969 biology graduate of St. Bonaventure University, she worked as a research technician at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston for three years and at the San Francisco Medical Center in San Francisco Calif. for another two years before joining the Peace Corps in late 1975.

She is assigned to teach at the Musoli Girls Secondary School, established in 1971 by the Musoli Catholic Mission near Kakamega in western Kenya. It is one of many non-government Harambee schools developed by local communities through self-help efforts. "Harambee" means "self-help" in Kenya's national language of Swahili.

About 250 girls attend the school which is supported almost entirely by student fees. Most of the students, who are from large rural families, didn't score high enough on the national exams to be admitted into the more prestigious government-run schools.

"It took me a while to learn to teach. In fact, my first six months here were pretty much of a waste. I had to get used to the responsibility of teaching a subject to 40 very attentive faces," she continued. "I was very nervous at first and had to get over the fright of talking before a large group of people."

"The students also had to get used to my American accent," said Ms. Wilbert, who teaches in English, but uses Swahili occasionally to get the attention of her students. "It amuses them



Ms. Wilbert in Kenya.

to hear a misungu (white person) use their language. It brings them alive and makes class that much more fun."

The students are highly motivated and very grateful for the opportunity to go to secondary school, according to the volunteer. "It wasn't so very long ago, just since the late 1960s when the Harambee schools started developing, that only the wealthy and very bright could go to secondary school," she related.

Most of the students are not attending school for educational advancement, she said. "A lot of the parents are pushing their daughters to get a secondary education because they will get a higher bride price when the girls marry," explained Ms. Wilbert. With a secondary

education, they are worth about 12 cows and 1,000 shillings (about \$125); without it, the parents would get a much lesser dowry to live on in their old age.

"A lot of the students, however, have a dream that education will get them to the big capital city of Nairobi, give them wealth and a better place in life than their parents have back on the farm," she said. "Most of this is false. It doesn't happen. Last year, out of the 40 students who graduated, one went on to the university, two went to secretarial school and the rest went back home where they started from."

"I feel that to a large extent they go back home very frustrated and very angry because of the system that exists. They really should be getting more of a technical education, including sewing and cooking," said Ms. Wilbert. She has taught some of the students how to cook and bake bread in a makeshift oven consisting of a tin can and chicken wire that can be placed over a charcoal stove. She also emphasizes diet and nutrition in her biology course.

"Good or bad, I also try to teach them that women are just as intelligent and capable as men," stated the volunteer. "This is one of the reasons why I teach math. The girls in Kenya feel that they cannot do math, that only men or boys can do it. I have tried to instill the fact in them that they are capable of doing it and I try to make them like it instead of thinking they can't do it."

"I tell them that in the United States, a husband and wife share the laundry, cooking, shopping and other chores, especially if both of them work. I explain that usually they are both educated and both have

careers. When they come home, they are tired and share the work," said Ms. Wilbert. "I think they believe me, but to what extent it will affect their lives, I don't know. At least they will think about it."

"One thing that has changed is their acceptance of polygamy, which still exists here. Men can have up to four wives. Most of the girls, however, say that they will refuse to allow their husbands to marry more than one woman. They have been thinking about this for a time," she continued. "With education forcing them to think, I believe that some of them are starting to have a concept of self-worth. I reinforce this."

Ms. Wilbert thinks her students find it strange to see her riding and repairing her motorcycle. "They don't quite understand how I can be a mechanic and a cook at the same time. And I want them to feel that they don't have to be stuck with domestic duties like their mothers," she said. "The brighter ones who are able to understand what I am saying and think about it will end up wanting a little bit more than mouths to feed and clothes to wash."

"Hopefully, they will generate this to their children. By that time, hopefully, Kenya will have grown with more education, more jobs and more opportunities to get out of its rut," concluded Ms. Wilbert.

"I have enjoyed being here very much. It has been an enriching experience to learn and live with a society that isn't helter skelter. There is always time to stop and say hello. And it is beautiful to watch the helpfulness the extended families give one another," said Ms. Wilbert. "I have really enjoyed being here and I don't want to go back to the rat race."

National NFP Organizations Merge to Strengthen Movement

Washington, D. C. (RNS) — Two organizations devoted to the development and promotion of natural family planning methods have merged into a single research and educational agency called The Human Life and Natural Family Planning Foundation.

According to Edward B. Hanity of Boston, chairman of the board of the Human Life Foundation of America since it was established in 1969 by the U.S. Catholic bishops, the merger with the Natural Family Planning Federation of America became effective Nov. 1.

He said the merger of the research-based foundation

with the education and program-oriented federation would result in a more versatile national organization. Plans include many new national, regional and local programs in the rapidly expanding natural family planning field, he noted.

Dr. John J. McCarthy of Pittsburgh, founding president of the eight-year-old federation, said he believes the new organization will serve as a crucial link between teachers, practitioners and scientists working with natural methods of fertility control.

The new organization will

promote all effective natural methods of family planning and all valid means of teaching these methods, Mr. Hanity stated, adding that all research and educational programs started earlier by the foundation will continue with stronger emphasis on delivery systems being developed by the federation.

He said a priority effort will be launched to encourage existing programs in the public and private sectors to collaborate in efforts to certify teachers and establish minimum program standards.

"Without duplicating efforts of veteran organizations, we will seek to serve existing units and those planned for the future through the development of a full range of teacher and couple training materials," he said. "These include curriculum guides, examinations and training aids sponsored by the Health Services Administration of the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW)."

The foundation, an outgrowth of the 1968 encyclical by Pope Paul, Humanae Vitae, which called for research on fertility control, was launched by the U.S. bishops with an initial grant of \$800,000. Since then, it has sponsored more than \$750,000 in research and education programs and had almost \$3 million in HEW and World Health Organization (WHO) funds go into research it has endorsed or developed.

A teacher training curriculum the foundation developed has become the basis for a curriculum now being tested in 20 other countries by the WHO.

Business in the Diocese

Former Rochesterian and parishioner at St. Lucy's Church, Gary Spoleta, vice president of Shoney's Inc., has become the first executive in the company's history to be elected group vice president.

Spoleta joined the Nashville, Tenn., company in 1972. He now has the responsibility for all functions of the Shoney's Big Boy Division and will continue his responsibilities for all national purchasing by the entire Shoney's organization and for all the parent company's commissary operations.

He is a graduate of Jefferson High School and Cornell University.

Kathy Palokoff of Laburnum Crescent, a former newspaper woman, has been named assistant director of publications at Nazareth College. She succeeds Robert Hartung, who has gone to the SUNY Agricultural and Technical College at Delhi as public relations officer. Palokoff has a journalism degree from West Virginia University and is enrolled in the master's degree program in urban administration at SUC Brockport.

Spanish Retreats Set For Students, Adults

Three events for area people of Hispanic background are planned for the weekend of Nov. 25-27 at the Cenacle Retreat House on East Avenue.

On Friday, Nov. 25, a retreat for high school students from the St. Patrick's community and from St. Peter and Paul parish will be conducted by Brother Mark Knightly, CSC, a theology teacher at Cardinal Mooney High School, and his colleague, Brother James Martin, who teaches Spanish.

A day-long retreat for adults will be conducted in Spanish on Saturday by Father Kenneth Smith of the Northeast Regional Pastoral Center. There is no charge, but reservations should be made no later than Nov. 19 so that meal plans can be made. Anyone interested may call Sister Julia Norton at 546-6543 or 454-6766.

On Sunday, Nov. 27, the Northwest Spanish Groups of Families will meet from 2 until 6 p.m. for prayer and a workshop of thanksgiving with Father Smith and Angela Rodriguez. Those planning to attend should notify Mrs. Rodriguez at St. Peter and Paul, 328-5680.

THE BACK PAGE

The Back Page, a feature magazine put together last December by journalism students at St. John Fisher College, has been awarded a first place in the 54th annual competition sponsored by the Columbia Scholastic Press Association. Judges at Columbia University gave the publication 914 of a possible 1,000 points. Producers were the 10 students in Robert A. Minzensheimer's journalism workshop.

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