

If you ever need proof that you can make a difference – read this. These Melbourne

Pictures: MADELEINE CHILLER



New hope: Tereisia Wavinya, 5, is going to nursery school thanks to the fundraising efforts of St Bernard's College and students such as Sam Woods, Zachary O'Halloran and Daniel Allison (right). Pictures: MADELEINE CHILLER, TONY GOUGH

STANDING on the edge of a sprawling chasm, thick with refuse, our throats raw from the fumes of burning plastic, is like being in the midst of an apocalypse. In this east African wasteland, people are eking out an existence amid the squalor and stench.

This tip, like others in Kenya, is ruled by the Marabou storks. The creatures are nicknamed "undertaker birds". With their scrawny white legs and heavy, cloak-like wings, they feed on death and decay.

At a menacing 1.5m tall, the storks tower over the children who scavenge alongside them.

The faces of the children are grubby with soot and stained with tears from the smearing smoke. If not for the lottery of birth, these children could be anywhere else in the world.

For days now we have walked with the poor, dodging noxious open sewers as we've negotiated the precarious tracks of Nairobi's slums.

We've become so accustomed to "flying toilets" – plastic bags filled with excrement and flung into ditches – that we no longer flinch when we tread on them.

Yet the dump in Mukuru, in the capital's east, leaves us crushed. How can human beings be allowed to live this way?

There is wealth in Kenya, a country of 43 million, but it is concentrated in the hands of a few – notably politicians who are reportedly corrupt and until recently have refused to admit that slums such as Mukuru, with its 600,000 inhabitants, even exist.

They exist, all right. Fly over Nairobi at night and they're the patches in darkness.

Electricity, like paved streets, piped water and sewerage, are services the government chooses not to provide.

From the rim of Mukuru dump, shanties of mud, sticks and tin form an ugly labyrinth. Families cram into shelters no wider than a parking space at your

boys have raised thousands to help girls like five-year-old Teresa Wavinya go to school

MISSION POSSIBLE

She proudly wears her uniform, loves doing homework and gets a hot lunch every school day – often her only meal. KYLIE LANG travelled to Kenya to see how a group of amazing Australians have left their lives here to try to give hope to one of the world's poorest places

average suburban shopping centre. Australians would not keep livestock in such hovels, so it beggars belief these people pay rent to slumlords.

An uneducated Kenyan would be lucky to earn 200 shillings, about \$2.30, for a day's casual work, but monthly rents can be 15 times that amount.

Every morning you see them, streaming out of the slums in one long procession, the men with sleeves and trouser legs rolled up to reveal able limbs, the women immaculately dressed.

They trudge kilometres to stand by a main road in the hope someone will pick them up for a spot of homework or gardening.

Unemployment in Kenya officially stands at 40 per cent. In Mukuru, the figure is rumoured to be double that.

Most Kenyans have no access to social security. Basic healthcare is out of reach for the 60 per cent of the population living in poverty – they're the ones plagued by dysentery, malnutrition, malaria, typhoid and AIDS.

In Mukuru, emphysema is rife, caused by inhaling smoke from the burning plastic.

Children as young as four are put to work, hunting for plastic items they can melt and sell to the companies that dumped the items.

For each kilogram, they earn 13 shillings (15c). Every shilling helps. Families pull together to survive. One day at a

time. Astonishingly, through it all, the Kenyan smile endures, big and wide, welcoming us mzungu (white people) to their world.

A gangly bloke squatting on a mound of refuse spots us and scrambles to his feet. "Karibu," he shouts – Swahili for welcome.

AM one of 10 Australian professionals on this inaugural Gone Fishing immersion in East Africa. There's John Lazarou (The Coffee Club), Peter Murphy (Davidson Recruitment), Damian Wright (BDO), Andrew Kelly (Clayton Utz), John Tyquin (goa), Geoff Rodgers (Rowland), David Waldie (Frontier Networks), Rachael Trihey (Avant Garde Recruitment) and Melbourne photographer Madeleine Chiller.

The aim of Gone Fishing – an initiative of the Edmund Rice Foundation, which supports development pro-

jects in Australia, Africa, East Timor, the Philippines and Papua New Guinea – is to connect decision makers in corporate Australia with the people of Africa.

The invitation to "teach each other to fish" is pivotal. It's not about handouts, but a hand up.

"Each of you will be moved to take action, in some form, to effect change here and back home in your own communities," says organiser Anthony Ryan, 44, a former Brisbane school teacher and now CEO of the Melbourne-based Edmund Rice Foundation.

Taking time out to digest so much that is disturbing is vital, he says. So it is that two-thirds of the way into our immersion, a few nights in the Maasai Mara puts

us in touch with the Images of Africa with which we're more familiar – elephants, giraffes, rhinoceros, lions and the most unforgettable of sunsets.

It's in these moments of distance from the suffering in the slums that we unload and find the strength to push on.

If we ever needed proof that one person can make a difference, we find it in Frank O'Shea. Think Mother Teresa meets Crocodile Dundee.

Brother Frank is an agitator. He needs to be. Sidestepping bureaucratic corruption and ineptitude, he has turned two humble classrooms into a primary school for 1900 children.

As director of the non-profit Ruben Centre, a gated oasis in the Mukuru slum, he also oversees a medical clinic that treats 58,000 people a year, and an HIV clinic that gives free antiretroviral injections to children.

“Everyone in Kenya is busting their gut to get somewhere . . . if people have energy and desire, that's a great starting point for a mission

FRANK O'SHEA

He also has established a vocational training unit, a market garden, and a micro-finance scheme that helps the unemployed set up small businesses. Another inspired initiative rescues slum kids from child labour – and gets them in school – by employing their parents.

At 59, O'Shea is not finished. Next on his list is Ruben's own radio station and a secondary school on a prized patch of adjacent land.

The Ruben Centre is a \$350,000-a-year enterprise, with \$230,000 provided by the Edmund Rice Foundation and the rest from donors, among them the Melbourne-based Planet Wheeler Foundation and one of its trustees, Mark Cubit.

International aid programs often cop flak for squandering donations on operating costs, but

O'Shea's administration runs lean.

He says when people visit the slum environment and see how many thousands of lives are feeling the benefits of the work, they're sold.

It helps that the ERF has capped operating costs at 10 per cent for the first \$25,000. Any donations of more than \$25,000 go in full to the cause.

It also helps that Frank O'Shea is such a character. From teaching physical education at St Patrick's Primary School in Ballarat in the 1970s to the slums of Kenya in 2010, it's been one wild ride.

It begins with a naughty boy who was expelled from Christian Brothers College in Warrnambool in 1968, who, a few years later, fronted up to the same Brothers who kicked him out and asked to join them.

A science degree followed.

Since leaving Australia in 1983 to work in Tonga, Tanzania and Sudan,

O'Shea has, among other things, taught Sudanese prisoners in leg-irons to read and write in their own tribal language (Zande), taught English to Congolese refugees fleeing Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army, and suffered temporary brain damage after a giraffe crashed into a bus in which he was travelling. Oh, he's also survived anthrax.

In Kenya, working out of a tin shed with barred windows, O'Shea is fired up, buoyed by the optimism of the people he serves.

"Everyone in Kenya is busting their gut to get somewhere – what a place," he says.

"They just need help; they don't want you to do it for them. If people have energy and desire, that's a great starting point for a mission."

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