



COURTESY OF MARLENE JOHNSON

NAFSA Executive Director and CEO Marlene Johnson speaks with students at the Kakenya Center for Excellence in Enooasaan, Kenya.

IE: What inspired you to pursue your higher education in the United States?

NTAIYA: The opportunity to study in the United States came when I met Dr. Ole Ronkei, a man from our village, who was then studying at the University of Oregon. He had supported a few other men from our community to study abroad. I asked him if he could also help me go to the United States like the young men he had helped. He agreed, but the challenge for him to support me was the fact that I had an arranged husband waiting to marry me. I remember telling him not to worry about the husband and that I would handle that situation if he would just show me how to go to the United States. I applied to the Randolph-Macon Woman's College where I was accepted and given a scholarship.

IE: Why did you decide to return home to your village to start your school for girls?

NTAIYA: I was the first woman from my community to go to college and get an education. I was fortunate, as I avoided getting married at an early age, but many girls in my community undergo the ritual of female genital cutting and thereafter are forced to marry at an early age. Their dreams end when they get married. From my education in the United States, I learned about child rights, and I

Visiting Kakenya's School

BY MARLENE JOHNSON

FOR THE PAST FEW YEARS, I have served on the U.S. board of Kakenya's Center for Excellence (KCE), helping raise financial support and providing Kakenya with guidance as she implements her vision to educate the girls of Enooasaan. Visiting the school has been on my "bucket list" so getting on the airplane to Nairobi was an exciting adventure.

The seven-and-a-half-hour drive from Nairobi to Enooasaan proved to be an exciting and perfect orientation to visiting the school. The drive through the Rift Valley—lush mountains, hectares of corn, potatoes, kale, onions, and other vegetables and fruits of all kinds, cattle, goats, and sheep grazing along the roads and on the hillsides, children and adults walking for kilometers to tend the animals, carry produce to market, attend school, or jobs—provided a view of the daily lives of the people in this region. The road from Nairobi to Kilgoris is paved; it's a six-and-a-half-hour drive.

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VISITING KAKENYA'S SCHOOL

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The road from Kilgoris to Enosaen is unpaved, untreated dirt—or mud after a rain—full of rocks of all sizes. The 25 kilometers trip took an hour, and the driving was not for the faint of heart.

We arrived at the KCE campus in the midmorning. The campus includes a dormitory, five classroom buildings, a cooking house, and plenty of space for outdoor physical activities. The girls were all in class, so Kakenya introduced me to the eighth grade and the seventh grade classes, where I was invited to visit with the girls on my own. What a pleasure! They had lots of questions for me, but the first was always: how old are you? Then, where are you from? How old is your husband? How old is your mother? Do you go to church? What is your job?

My first question for them was this: what do you like about attending Kakenya's school? In every case, the response was "we get to study in the evenings with the other girls" or "we are learning so much" or "because we're all girls, we can talk about personal things." To the question "What do you want to do when you complete your education?"—the answers included "doctor," "surgeon," "lawyer," "police officer," "accountant," "teacher," and "airline pilot."

When I learned that one of their evening study strategies is a student-led study discussion, I asked them to show me how that works. Within a couple of minutes a leader was chosen by consensus, and the

discussion proceeded using the model they employ in their evening study periods. The discussion leader asked a question, called on a classmate to respond and another to comment on that, and so it went. The girls' engagement, enthusiasm, and focus was heartwarming and exciting!

Later, to my question, "do you like that this is a boarding school and if so, why?" The girls answered "because we can study from early in the morning to late at night, rather than spend so much time walking to and from school!" Their day starts at 4:30 a.m., with studying beginning at 6 a.m. and concludes between 9–9:30 p.m. In 2013 this discipline resulted in the eighth grade class scoring second in Transmara in the national exams, and eighth in the county (out of 520 schools).

Kakenya's is but one story—of a young woman with a dream and a commitment to her village, and the tenacity to take advantage of the opportunities at Randolph-Macon College and the University of Pittsburgh. Our opportunity as international educators is to encourage and support in whatever way we can to allow these young leaders, from wherever they come and whatever their dreams, to make a difference in their part of the world. It's hard to imagine more inspiring or important work.

IE

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