

KATHY'S CENTRE by JOHN PARSONS

Uganda is a fascinating country. I worked there for sixteen days on a humanitarian project for Soapbox Trips. Our base was the town of Mayuge, in the south-east.

Our team of five came from all walks of life in the UK. It was 19 year old Rachel's first trip to Africa. I saw the road journey from Entebbe International Airport to Mayuge through her eyes: the sky over Kampala filled with giant maribou storks; pick-up trucks laden with water melons and pineapples; plots of cassava overlooked by towering termite mounds of red earth.

The focus of the team's activities was Kathy's Centre, a community building offering health, educational facilities, HIV testing, sexual and reproduction advice, micro-finance, enterprise training, counselling and kindergarten, all under one roof.

The Centre is named after Kathy Smedley, a British women with a heart for Africa. 'She was a people-person,' my project leader said, 'A woman with a vision to improve the quality of life for the needy. The centre will be a lasting tribute to a courageous woman.'

Three of our team members were already known to me. It was like a family reunion to meet them again. I reminded Shaun (project leader) and Sylvia of building chicken coops together for Moslem families in Kosova with UN peace-keepers in armoured cars patrolling streets to deter ethnic violence. Fiona remembered our weekend in a Zambian game park with zebra staying just outside the camp-fire glow.

Kathy's Centre is located in a shallow valley on the outskirts of Mayuge, amid tracts of sugar cane and millet. On the valley flanks there are shacks built of home-made red bricks. Vivid green bananas flourished but other crops were wilting through lack of rain.

The building is modern, environmentally designed with the frontage being higher than the rear, enabling rain water to be diverted to a storage tank. The bricks for the walls were made on site using a simple hand-operated steel device giving bevelled edged interlocking bricks so cement was not required in the construction. When we arrived the local workers were building latrines, digging drainage trenches and fixing fascia boards to the edges of the roof. Our task was to decorate the interior. Each day the local workers came to see our progress and to admire our painting skills. The rooms were emulsioned in ivory with red skirting and canary yellow coving. The brilliant colours blended wonderfully.

The Centre will be completed in March 2017 and officially opened in the September. Most days we worked from morning until late afternoon in searing heat. On the walk back to our guest house a group of children would be waiting by the roadside. We stopped. In the shade of a clump of bamboo we showed them how to play various games. The children's parents hadn't got time for games of youthful

activities; the fathers were away in the cities while the mothers tilled the land, to feed the family.

One afternoon we left work earlier than usual and were taken by minibus on dirt roads, past rice fields and isolated villages, to the RAVO Orphanage where children whose parents had died of HIV/AIDS were cared for. We were delivering second-hand clothing and footwear donated by friends in England who wished to support our organisation's mission. It was a joy and privilege to see the children's faces as the garments were matched to them. They felt like royalty. We were humbled by their joyful gratitude.

The orphanage is largely self-supporting in food production. Goats roamed the recreation ground. Each evening they were corralled to protect them from thieves. The turkeys had their own house constructed of wooden stakes.

'We have ten acres of land,' the manager told us when we were seated in his office. 'The biggest expense is to build a perimeter fence to deter trespassers.'

On Sunday we worshipped at a local church only minutes from our accommodation at Betty's Guest House. We hoped our support and fellowship would give Kathy's Centre a higher profile in the community and encourage local Christians.

I will remember the guest house for its friendly staff and fresh fruit on the meal table each day: mango, papaya, pineapple. The establishment was not luxurious but it supplied basic needs. Each room had a double bed and mosquito net; we hung our clothing on nails in the wall.

One afternoon I chatted to a church member. I am familiar with the African culture of ritual murder. I asked if it was prevalent in Uganda. 'Big problem,' Sarah said. 'Children are kidnapped from the streets, their hearts, livers and blood is used in sacrifices to the spirits.'

To foster relationships with the local people we walked each morning to our work-site using back tracks. It gave us a graphic initiation into the local way of life. Even at an early hour children carried containers of water from the nearest well; traders were sweeping the front of their lock-up shops with besoms. One elderly weather-worn lady in a colourful dress rushed from her shack and knelt in the dust to shake our hands. Her respectfulness was touching.

Mayuge is not on the tourist trail. It is accessed by dirt roads, busy with a lot of local traffic. Trucks loaded with sugar cane raised clouds of dust as they passed by and workers sitting cross-legged on cab roofs gave friendly waves. Looking back, I was amazed by our reception. Africa is often referred to in negative terms. Yet we met inspirational people who were building a better community to empower people to make decisions that would benefit their lives and those of future generations. I am proud to have contributed to that effort. I look forward to another opportunity to serve the hard working people of Mayuge.