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New films chronicle impact of education, empowerment on Kenyan girls

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins

"A girl has legs to walk beyond the kitchen; a girl has eyes to see beyond the village; a girl has energy to fetch more than firewood; a girl has the ability to carry more than water."*

So declares a Kenyan teenager at the beginning of the new short film "School of My Dreams." She is a student at the Daraja Academy, a boarding secondary school for girls that welcomed its first class in February 2009. The school is located four hours northwest of Nairobi in the valley of Mount Kenya, also known as the Mountain of God. The campus is surrounded by traditional Maasai and Turkana villages.

"School of My Dreams" is a follow-up to the earlier short film "Girls of Daraja," both of which were directed and produced by Emmy-winning filmmaker Barbara Rick through her 501(c)(3) documentary nonprofit Out Of The Blue Films, Inc. Rick's husband, accomplished cameraman Jim Anderson, served as cinematographer on both films. Out of the Blue is dedicated to socially conscious filmmaking and exceptional storytelling that explores, articulates and celebrates humanity.

If Rick's name sounds familiar to some progressive Catholics, it may be because she also directed and produced "In Good Conscience: Sister Jeannine Gramick's Journey of Faith." The 2004 feature documented the life of Sr. Jeannine Gramick and her quest to dialogue with then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who in 1999, as the head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, silenced Gramick for her work building bridges between the Roman Catholic church and gays and lesbians.

In her two most recent films, Rick again focuses on bridge-builders. "Daraja" is Swahili for "bridge," and the academy's founders, Jason and Jenni Doherty, see the school as a connector that links "who the girls are now to who they can become."

While all of the students accepted to Daraja rank among the highest in their primary schools and exhibit leadership qualities, they also come from abject poverty, sometimes going days without food and living in deplorable conditions. Many are orphans, victims of AIDS, and survivors of domestic abuse and sexual abuse.

"It is as if they were standing on the other side of a river. They wanted to be on the other side, but they just didn't have access," Jason Doherty said. "We're not just giving these girls their education; we're giving them their access. How they cross that bridge is up to them."

For every student, access begins with basic needs like uniforms, notebooks, pens and pencils. Like most other boarding school students, they live in shared dorms and enjoy three meals per day, health care and counseling. Daraja liberates these young women of the basic barriers of poverty so they can focus on their academic and personal potential.

More than 140 million children around the globe lack access to secondary school because their families cannot bear the financial burden. Not surprisingly, girls make up the majority of this population, and many of them live in sub-Saharan Africa. Daraja is one of the only free secondary boarding schools in Kenya.

Doherty began traveling to Africa with his family in the 1980s. "It was in Africa that I learned that I loved education," he says in "Girls of Daraja." "Seeing that hunger and that need for education was inspiring, but also worrisome, because at that time I knew there was no free secondary school" for the poorest students.

While teaching in California, Doherty met and married Jenni, who shared his dream of moving to Africa to start a school. Daraja Academy is the first project of the Carr Educational Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to creating sustainable educational models in struggling communities.

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Though Jason serves as principal and Jenni is the administrative director, all other staff members are native Kenyans. The teachers, who are both female and male, were educated at Kenyan universities.

In February 2009, the academy welcomed its first class of 26 girls chosen from a pool of 100 applicants. Currently, 128 students are enrolled in Daraja, representing 30 of Kenya's 42 tribes, many of which have historically been in conflict. They are "brought together by love," says one student, and taught "to live in peace."

Daraja is equally committed to a respectful treatment of the land. Sustainable environmental practices are a priority for the school. Students are shown techniques for not wearing out the soil, how to compost, and how to produce a bounty of food. Animal conservation is also an important topic in this place, where the rich and varied wildlife population has been decimated by habitat loss and poaching.

One of the funders of the school is the Do A Little foundation, created by author and philanthropist Deborah Santana. Named after a quote from Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Do A Little was founded on the

principle that women are powerful and strong leaders and is devoted to helping support women's health, education and happiness around the globe. Santana was also the executive producer of both "Girls of Daraja" and "School of My Dreams."

A commitment to women's empowerment is evident in the school's curriculum. In addition to traditional courses in English, geography, chemistry and government, all girls take a class called WISH, which stand for Women of Integrity, Strength, and Hope. In these sessions, they are given the skills essential for leadership. The girls, many of whom are quite shy, learn posture, public speaking skills and, most importantly, confidence.

"What is integrity?" a teacher asks in one scene.

"A state of being whole and not divided," one student answers, peering up from a dictionary.

"Completeness," another students chimes in.

"Unbroken," another girl says.

While the girls speak of a variety of careers that interest them, from teaching to dentistry, many aim to pursue medicine and law in the hope of ending the oppression faced by women and girls in their country and globally.

"Girls are considered inferior, not worthy of education," one girl says. "In my tribe, they treat girls like nonsense."

Most of these students were raised to believe women should not speak in front of men. "I learned that I have a voice, and people have to listen to my opinions," another student says in "School of My Dreams."

According to the Daraja website, a 30-year study by the U.S. Institute of Food and Nutrition has demonstrated that women's education is the single most important factor to combating levels of hunger and malnutrition in the developing world. And a girl who receives secondary and higher education beyond grade 7 has, on average, 2.2 fewer children.

Though Rick's subject matter in these films is not tied directly to religious topics, I viewed both pieces with the knowledge that Kenya is an overwhelmingly Christian nation, with one-third of the population being Roman Catholic.

Both "Girls of Daraja" and "School of My Dreams" are moving testimonies to why it is so important for church teaching to evolve beyond the idea that a person's anatomy dictates what his or her role must be in both church and society.

While the current pope and his predecessors, John Paul II and Benedict XVI, assert that women are of equal worth and dignity to men, they also believe the differences in the physical makeup of male and female bodies were reflections of the different roles, purposes, strengths and weaknesses God intended for us.

The female anatomy, the popes insist, dictates that a woman's primary role in church and society is to be a nurturing mother. This is not simply a metaphor. It is declaration of the nature and purpose of women's very beings, and it is one of the fundamental principles behind the Roman Catholic church's continued exclusion of women from ordained ministry.

The exclusion of women from the leadership in the church and the development of doctrine reinforce the

deleterious ideas with which women, like the girls of Daraja, have been raised: Women's voices are not to be listened to, and their opinions are of no consequence.

"I feel that and believe that I am a source of power in my society and in my country," says one girl in "School of My Dreams."

Through education, empowerment, and physical and emotional support, Daraja Academy is working to undo the harmful effects of the traditions -- Christian, tribal or both -- that have constantly told these girls that their anatomies limit their capacities to serve, lead and influence their communities.

Rick's films capture powerfully the impact true equality and women's empowerment can have on hunger, poverty and the health of children and families. Although each film is only 15 minutes in length, both pieces manage to compellingly chronicle the girls' realizations that their bodies do not dictate who they are, what they have to offer, and how they might change the world.

"Educate a girl, educate a family, educate the world," is phrase used often at Daraja Academy. With a little hope, one day, these girls will educate the church, too.

"Girls of Daraja" can be viewed in its entirety on YouTube. A trailer for "School of My Dreams" is also currently available. The films are on the film festival circuit, but they will be broadcast nationally on Link TV (DISH Network 9410 and DirecTV 375) at 7 p.m. Eastern time June 20.

**An earlier version of this column misquoted the Kenyan teenager.*

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her *NCR* columns have won numerous awards, most recently second prize for Commentary of the Year from Religion Newswriters (RNA).]

Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Jamie Manson's column, "Grace on the Margins," is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert sign-up.

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