

MMS teams with Kenyan school in enriching partnership

# An opening to a different world

*On a crisp day*

in early October, Andrew Preston's sixth-grade global studies class is rapt in discussion over the day's lesson on the Kenyan bildungsroman,

*Facing the Lion: Growing Up Maasai on the African Savanna.*

True to the title, the memoir by Joseph Lemasolai Lekuton chronicles his encounter with a lion in the African countryside and how he gathered the courage to fight in order to protect his tribe and its prized cattle. While Metropolitan Montessori School students aren't encountering real-life lions in New York City per se, Preston used the book as a launching point for students to compare and contrast their own coming-of-age experiences to Joseph's.

For many, it was a moment to consider their own metaphorical lions as they prepare for graduation and the next stage of their academic careers. “The lion is an opportunity to step into manhood,” said one student. “To vanquish it, you need a lot of bravery and courage.”

After visiting Kenya’s Sere Olipi Primary School this past July, Upper Elementary teacher Preston and MMS art teacher Marianne Garnier spent the fall semester identifying ways to weave Kenyan studies into the classroom. The trip was part of a partnership forged this year between MMS and The Thorn Tree Project, a nonprofit, volunteer-run organization that supports educational efforts in Kenya’s Samburu region, located 200 miles north of Nairobi.

The idea to work with Thorn Tree was largely the brainchild of Preston, who previously worked with the organization while teaching at the Ethical Culture Fieldston School. It was made possible with help from the Robert Reveri Summer Grant, which supports faculty professional development to further MMS’s mission to offer an “Education for Life” for students and teachers alike.

In addition to teaching Lekuton’s memoir, Preston has taken lesson plans directly from Kenyan social studies textbooks.

“When teaching about someone else’s culture, we don’t want to insert our own cultural biases,” said Preston. “These books are produced by Kenyans themselves. We’re not putting ourselves into their history.”

As the students explore the textbooks, Preston asks them why certain themes are discussed in detail and what that might say about their importance. For example, a section contrasting different soils—like fertile “Volcanic Soil” versus shallow and dry “Sandy Soil”—shows the importance of the agricultural sector in Kenya.

Other chapters focus on different peoples, such as the Bantu, who migrated through lands that are now divided into five different East African countries. What does this say about the connection between language and national identity?

“I’m asking them to grapple with ideas that they don’t often see in the news because it’s not American culture or even Western culture,” said Preston. “It’s a whole new set of ideas, values, and problems.”

Brenda Mizel, MMS Head of School, said this initiative has a dual purpose: to help provide resources and training to the Sere Olipi school, and to give MMS teachers an experience that will inspire new lessons and inject a global perspective into the MMS curriculum.

“We tend to be very Western-oriented in our studies,” she said. “This is awakening an interest that students just didn’t have access to before.”

While visiting Kenya, Preston and Garnier taught math and English—a language that most Kenyan students start learning in first grade—to a class of 70 students. The days at Sere Olipi were long, beginning at 8 a.m. and wrapping up at 9 p.m. But that time allowed Preston and Garnier to develop a genuine bond with the teachers and students, playing soccer during their free periods and swapping stories about life in their respective countries.

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Garnier also worked with the Kenyan students on visual arts projects, which normally lack resources. At Sere Olipi, she brought paper, pencils, and other tools for drawing projects and was amazed at the graciousness and resourcefulness of the Kenyan students.

“The kids were really excited,” she said. “Some of the drawings were really small because they weren’t used to having so much paper and space to express themselves.”

Back in America, Garnier launched a pen pal program, sharing letters written by Sere Olipi students with her third and fourth graders. The MMS students wrote back this fall and included pictures of themselves. They noted the various similarities they share with their Kenyan peers, like the subjects they’re learning, and various differences, like family size (Kenyan children often have many siblings, not just one or two) and homes. MMS third graders drew pictures of their high-rise buildings and described how homes are often “stacked” in New York City.



For kids, it has to be real and tangible. It’s hard to imagine what something is like if they don’t actually see pictures or write letters . . . and have a real connection.

Garnier said the candor of the letters from Kenya—which touch on issues like police violence and strife in the community, in addition to professional dreams and personal aspirations—has helped foster important dialogues in the classroom about different cultures.

“It’s an opening to a different world,” she said. “I’ve started sharing pictures from the trip with different student groups in the school, and I’ve been watching their reactions. For them, it’s about being open to something that’s different from what they have.”

Moving forward, Preston and Garnier are working hard to maintain MMS’s relationship with Sere Olipi and continuing to raise money for forthcoming trips to Kenya.

“It’s wonderful to have a buddy school that far away, but the relationship can only be fostered with face-to-face interactions. That’s so important to the longevity of the partnership,” Preston said.

Mizel echoed Preston and said MMS plans to continue to foster the program in the coming years, in order to strengthen the relationship with the Sere Olipi Primary School while continuing to enrich the lives of MMS students.

“For kids, it has to be real and tangible,” Mizel said. “It’s hard to imagine what something is like if they don’t actually see pictures or write letters to kids and have a real connection. Having our teachers go every year will keep the program alive.”

## Sere Olipi's Chief George Visits



**Just in time** to experience his first snowfall, “Chief George,” leader of the Sere Olipi community, visited New York last November. He spent one morning at MMS speaking with third through sixth graders. Students were full of questions about the educational system, his community, and his job—the title “Chief” was clearly very intriguing! Queries included: *How did you become chief?* (He applied for the position and was judged by a panel of government officials.) *What changes have you made to the community?* (Increasing school enrollment, among others.) *What does he think about technology?* (It’s very useful for communication and sending money, including to buy cows.) *What kind of weather do you have?* (There’s a long drought, lasting from May to December, a short drought, and a rainy season.) *How do you decide who goes to school?* (Can your child reach over their head and touch their other ear—then they’re old enough to go to school! This usually happens around five or six years old.) And the most predictable elementary school question: *Do you have pets?* (Yes, but dogs don’t sleep inside. They’re too busy watching livestock.) Chief George has 26 years under his belt—though actually “under his bracelet” seems more apt, since he wore a traditional bracelet with “Chief” prominently beaded into it. After 40 minutes of questions, Chief George sat among the students in the UE Commons for a photo. “Chapati!” the group yelled when it was time to snap the pic—that’s the Kenyan version of yelling “Cheese!”