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IMAGES OF CHILD CARE IN KENYA

June Jeremy

It was nearly two years ago that I heard about Alois Letipila, an early childhood Masai teacher-trainer who had suffered severe spinal injuries in a car crash in February 1989. As Co-ordinator of the New South Wales "Contact" project for isolated families (funded by DCS & H) I am also responsible for the Contact Children's Mobile sponsored by the Bernard Van Leer Foundation, which also funds Letipila's early childhood education program. Our suggestion to bring Letipila to the spinal unit of the Royal North Shore Hospital in Sydney was generously taken up and financed by the Foundation.

After five months under the care of Doctor John Yeo, Letipila returned to Kenya, a paraplegic but able to use a wheelchair and hopefully return to his job. During his stay in hospital Letipila spoke a great deal about his program designed specifically for the Masai nomads, who move from place to place with their herds following water and grazing land. The Masai people are well known for their traditional and distinguished culture and we therefore felt particularly privileged when Letipila invited us to visit his homeland region.

I was finally able to accept Letipil's invitation in September 1990, and used my annual leave to take a "working holiday" in Kenya. I was joined on the trip by Gloria King, Director of the Wilcannia Preschool, who received an Aboriginal Travel Fellowship from the Department of Employment, Education and Training.

Kenya has about fifteen thousand pre-schools with an enrolment of around eight hundred thousand children—approximately thirty per cent of children aged 3 to 6 years. There are approximately twenty thousand teachers. The national language, Kiswahili, is complemented by the teaching of English, even in the pre-schools.

* June Jeremy is the Co-ordinator of the N.S.W. Contact Project for Isolated Families, Mary St. Sydney 2010

The spirit of "Harambee" — working and pulling together— is strong in Kenya and parents, teachers and the community work in partnership with each other, discussing problems and solutions at a local level.

The Kenya Ministry of Education recognises the importance of education for the 0-5 year olds and there are hopes that the Australian Government will offer support to Kenya by sponsoring Kenyan students to undertake early childhood education at Australian universities.

I cannot speak highly enough of the professional staff we met at the National Centre for Early Childhood Education in Nairobi. Their energy and dedication were inspiring.

Many of the pre-schools we visited were community built. Parents and members of the general community also helped the teachers by collecting local materials for making their furniture and resource materials. Each



district has evolved its own teacher training scheme that is tailored to the local needs and capabilities.

In the remote villages the preschool facilities were very basic. At one preschool we visited, parents were cooking the maize and beans for the children's lunch over an open fire. There was little furniture except benches and some tables and all resources were handmade. The children were having a ball.

Overcrowded transport, pollution, unemployment, low salaries, lack of water, extremely poor roads do not prevent the Kenyan people from being happy and friendly. It is said in Kenya, "The spirit of the land hasn't been broken". We must ensure that the spirit of our land, and that of the Aboriginal people in Australia, isn't broken either.
