

Sowing The Seeds of Education in the Desert



Looking back at my time in the desert, it all seems like a haze. It was not long ago, but it was a very intense, rigorous, and at times, disorienting trip. I landed in South Africa, taught some middle school kids, and, before I knew it, was flying back to Germany. I wish I could have spent more time with the kind and stoic kids I taught.

With these experiences in mind, I interviewed Pete Sinclair, Assistant Principal of the Upper School, on the

Kalahari Education Experience Project (KEEP) he coordinates.

When and how did KEEP start?

“The best part about the Kalahari is that it’s a student-led project, even though it’s highly teacher-directed. It grew out of the students’ ideas. In 1991, there was a teacher Ambrose Kelly who started at the school. He had been living in the Kalahari for some time in the late 80s, and worked with young people down

there in developing schools. So one summer his former students wanted to go down there for their senior trip. In 1991, he got a group together of teachers, parents, and students. In 1992, they went down for the first time. It really started in 1991, but the first presence down there for FIS was in 1992.”

What, to you, is KEEP about?

“It’s hard to pin down. I’ve been involved with it now for nine years.



When I first went down, it was just going to be a service project. I went to see what it was all about. The singing, the people, the place is very infectious. The change that happens in the young people of the international schools that are involved and the schools down in the desert is remarkable. It really helps a person define what's important in their life. It's not an easy project to manage or be part of because of the high level of maturity and commitment that are needed. If I

really had to put it down to one thing, it's children helping children. I think that works both ways, kids from the desert helping kids from the international environment and vice-versa."

How has it developed over the years?

"It started with the building and renovation of facilities, and in 2005 and 2006 it moved to teaching. Now it has moved to teaching and some building. We just finished building a weekly boarding house for orphans that live too far away from the village to be able to come to school. Now they can stay in the boarding house right next to the primary school, and then go home and be with their families on the weekends. So it is things like that that have changed. The next phase of the project is looking at teen mothers and how to provide on-going education and skills for them so that they can raise their babies while still getting an education."

Do you have any upcoming events or plans concerning KEEP?

"It's really interesting how things have developed. We have a young woman, Georgia Germein, who is now a singer/songwriter. She went to the Kalahari about six years ago, and has been down three times. She has performed one concert here and in October is doing another concert for us. The difference with this concert is that we've aligned with the Ustinov foundation. The Ustinov foundation has sponsored kids from other parts of the world, and they are all coming here to the Oberurseler Stadthalle in October to put on an international concert that will raise awareness for our joint projects. We've also started to align with another group called *PfefferminzGreen*, which is a foundation in Bad Homburg. Furthermore, we are looking at promoting the Tswana children's choirs from the local school where young people will be performing traditional songs that have been taught to them by the local children from the desert communities."

How do other schools become involved in the project?

"Ambrose Kelly, one of the founders, is an Australian. Some of his Australian friends are also involved with the Kalahari Project. The key school in Australia is Concordia College, and the teacher that introduced it to Concordia College was a counselor at FIS about ten years ago. She got them interested. They lead four other Australian schools. About 40 schools come each Australian winter. The Institut Le Rosey, a school in Switzerland, became involved because of work that I had done with them in leadership and other service projects. They are now doing their third trip. Mark Ulfers (previous Head of School at FIS) has continued his work in the project area by introducing the American School of Paris, and he has done three trips with them. We expand through contact like that."

Do you have an interesting KEEP-related anecdote?

"There are people you meet in your life, where stuff just happens to them. Ambrose Kelly is one such person. He seems to always be in the right place at the right time. He has done emergency dashes to hospitals, all sorts of things. He has delivered babies on the side of the road, one of which is named after him. Once, Ambrose drove to the project area with the Bishop sitting in the back of the buggy. He forgot that the Bishop was sitting there, took a corner too fast, and the Bishop tumbled out of the back of the buggy. The Bishop then dusted himself off, climbed back into the buggy, and off they went. So that's how the road was named Bishop's Corner. It's a funny sort of place. When a person like Ambrose has been involved with a project for nearly 30 years, there are a lot of stories hidden there somewhere."

*Thomas Shipley,
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