

Larry, Eileen and daughter Sara – between them, they have more than 7 decades of experience in education and training – their placements were in a rural community school in South Africa.



Larry: My commitment to education, reading and writing, diverse elementary students, and innovations in education has been a life-long endeavor. Since my 'retirement', I've continued my involvement in education in one way or another – training and learning at the same time! I get great satisfaction from my participation and also took part (with Eileen too) in a couple of multicultural teachers exchanges in China and South Africa.

Eileen: My varied background includes working as a journalist, information director for a federal agency, manager of several non-profits, public relations and marketing consultant, and national speaker and trainer. It was through volunteer work, though, that I found my true passion - working collaboratively with the educators in my kids' very diverse school. I travel extensively in the US to work with educational leaders in building strong multicultural schools.



Following the teachers' exchanges, we decided to return to South Africa to support the work of teachers. We found *people and places* in a web search, and knew we'd found an organization of integrity that is committed to sustainability. We were thrilled when Sara said she wanted to come with us.

Sara: I began my teaching career working with at-risk students in a school in which 75% of the children lived below the poverty line. I continued my work with literacy and focus much of my classroom work around helping students acknowledge and deconstruct prejudices about issues of race, class, gender, physical ability, religion. This work has always been important to me, believing we need to address these issues in the classroom. When my parents suggested volunteering in South Africa, I knew I wanted to join them.

So, to cut a long story short, we worked with *people and places* making plans for our placements in the rural community of Nomathamsanqa, in A.V. Bukani School – we were confident that our few weeks living and working together would contribute to the school and community ... but we could not be sure that our input would bring long-lasting results, for us and the community ... until we went back this year!

... and it feels like we never left! After a weekend in Port Elizabeth, meeting up with Paul, Nelson and the Calabash team, we headed out to A.V. Bukani, arriving just in time to hear the students singing some of our favorite songs. The teachers gave us warm hugs, but beyond the deep friendships formed last year, we wondered what lasting impact our visit had. How would the second visit be different? Would there be a motivation for future visits? We soon saw the school had made progress beyond our expectations.

The very first day in class, Larry was thrilled to see and hear students talking about the books -- amazing.

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Last year it was all “chalk and talk” by the teachers, but Larry and Sara showed the teachers some techniques for engaging the students and there it was, “think-pair-share” in every class. Progress continued as other teachers, even those who don’t teach in English, came to observe Larry’s teaching strategies. As Larry planned with the teachers for some co-teaching with them, they took it very seriously and asked great questions. Larry continued to observe and provide feedback. We hope to give them enough demonstration, information, and confidence to continue after we leave, but based on our experience of this amazing school community so far, the prognosis is good. The teachers all missed Sara who could not return because of work commitments, and they sent Sara a note saying how her presence was felt even this year. We’re all hoping she can return next year.

So – that’s ongoing progress in the classrooms – what about the computer lab?

Words cannot describe what it felt like to see the students completely comfortable with the keyboard and mouse after only three months! We thought this day would not come for a few more years, but through the amazing principal, Mr. Thambo, the school had a donation of new computers and every class gets to work in the lab. The teachers are starting to realize they must improve their own skills because very soon the students will surpass them, so they’re really getting involved.

And what was Eileen going to concentrate on this time?

Parent engagement – a critical piece that so many schools around the world find challenging. In Eileen’s work with schools, she has seen parents and teachers form powerful partnerships when families feel they have a place in the school. With the support of the wonderful principal and parent leaders, Eileen worked with families to create a school quilt. While they sewed, the families learned how to support their children’s learning. And the teachers learned how valuable family insights and experiences can be.

Plans had been made for this long before we arrived – Paul and Mr Thambo had been liaising with Pindewe, a parent leader and amazing woman who is committed to serving her community. Our first meeting was set for 5:30 on Tuesday – the school expected about 20 parents, and assuming they would be late, the note home said the meeting started at 4:30. At 4:45 there were 50 mothers and grandmothers in the room! Eileen explained how each family would create a quilt square describing their hopes and dreams for their child. Family members talked about their dreams of their child becoming a doctor, social worker, bank manager, etc. One of the mothers noted that it is not enough to have your own dreams, they must also be the dreams of the child, leading to a great discussion on talking with their children. At following meetings, the parents heard about adult education classes, the library, and how to encourage their child at home.

The family members were very engaged with the discussion. One grandmother gave a speech in Xhosa: ‘On behalf of all the mothers and grandmothers here, I want to tell you how much we appreciate being here. We do have hopes and dreams for our children, but no one has ever asked us, and we do not know how to help them. You are telling us how we can help our children. Thank you.’ It was quite a moment for us, but also for the educators who gained new respect for the parents. At the final meeting, Principal Thambo held a lively dialogue with the parents about continuing their engagement in the future. The municipal librarian is already talking about regular family story hour at the school in Xhosa and in English. The quilt, hanging in the entrance, is the pride and joy of the families, the students, and the faculty.

What a moment that was! And we know there will be more – and that we’ll be back.

To read the Kuglers’ full blog <http://www.kuglersinsouthafrica.blogspot.com/>