

FOR THE GOOD OF GIRLS

Improving female lives in rural Kenya. One pad at a time. BY KATE LAPIDES

IT'S A SNOWY EVENING in March in Breckenridge. Sixty-plus people are ensconced in the warm glow of Breckenridge Christian Ministries (BCM), and the mood is festive. Locals are connecting at yet another fundraiser in this philanthropic town, sharing beer and pizza. Breck's homegrown band, the Pine Beatles, fills the room with bluegrass. Sitting behind them, at tables spread throughout the room, 20 people are measuring and cutting fabric, sewing, of all things, sanitary pads.

Ask the proverbial man on the street what the primary barriers are to girls' education in the developing world, and you're likely to hear answers ranging from poverty to child labor. Fewer people know that millions of girls in the developing

world also drop out of school once they reach adolescence due to lack of access to a sanitary pad.

Coloradan Kayce Anderson first learned this sobering fact in 2014. At the time, she was working as an ecologist, happily researching the life cycles of aquatic bugs in Ecuador's High Andes. Then she became mother to a beautiful daughter named Blu. Her new status forced contemplation of a career change. While she was exploring her options, a friend happened to ask if she'd volunteer to sew pads for girls in Kenya. That's when Anderson first heard the data on the high drop-out rate. The disparity in opportunity it represented struck her so profoundly, she chose to forego her ecological career and dedicate her life to reducing this barrier to girls' education. With

the help of a fellow research scientist and an entrepreneur, she fine tuned a design for a reusable sanitary pad that could last for three years. Then she launched her nonprofit, For the Good, and made plans to travel to Kenya.

To date, For the Good has provided pads and reproductive health education to over 3,000 girls from more than 30 village schools. Initially, the organization focused nearly exclusively on the tangible and immediate barrier of pads. Partnering with schools in rural Kenya, they provided them with free pads and human rights-based reproductive health education. The health education was, and remains, as critical as the pads: Girls in the region are highly vulnerable to pressures for coercive and transactional sex, which



Classroom, Kajiampau Primary School, Kenya, 2015.
A young girl works on her lesson at Kajiampau Primary School

KATE LAPIDES

increases their exposure to HIV and other health risks. When they stop going to school, their vulnerability to these pressures increases, with the correlative likelihood that they will marry young, endure high-risk pregnancies, and be coerced into the practice of FGC (female genital cutting), still highly practiced in the region despite the fact that it was outlawed in 2011.

Early on, it became clear that pads were only one of the many extensive barriers that impede girls' educations in rural Kenya. Accordingly, For the Good re-engineered its approach. Kenyan staff now engage with rural communities to address more systemic barriers, facilitating seminars on human rights, gender roles, water and sanitation, HIV, substance abuse and saving. The seminars are taught in the schools to both girls and boys, and also facilitated in the larger community, extending For the Good's education to thousands more boys, mothers, fathers, teachers and community leaders. The approach, Anderson believes, is critical to creating real and lasting change. "To be true to our mission of supporting girls' education, we needed to expand who we were talking with and what we were talking about," she says.

"You can feel yourself get pressed into the like you would in a race car that all of a sudden tromps on the gas."

Breckenridge residents (including this writer) have supported For the Good in myriad ways from the start, including traveling to Kenya to see the work firsthand. Early on, locals Doc PJ, Vivian Gordon and others anted up with significant fiscal support. The Summit Rotary awarded the organization a grant that helped it reach new villages and several hundred additional girls. Local Nikki LaRochelle organized a Breckenridge version of Pints and Pads, For the Good's longtime signature fundraising event, at BCM. The idea? Friends and family come together to sew pads for the organization while the age-appropriate quaff back beers. Which brings us full circle to that snowy March evening in Breckenridge.

Bumping along Kenya's rough red dirt roads en route to a school, barefoot children in ragged



Kaare, Kenya, 2016. Mothers of girls at Kaare Primary School listen intently to a community discussion in 2016.



Vivian, Kajiampau Primary School, 2016. One teacher was in charge of three different classrooms at Kajiampau. At nine-years old, Vivian, a class prefect, helped manage the classroom when the teacher was occupied in the other classrooms. In 2016, For the Good visited with girls at Kajiampau to assess how pads they received the previous year were working for them.



Magutuni, Kenya, 2015. Girls wait in line to receive pads near the District Office of Magutuni. Due to a teacher's strike in Kenya, For the Good was unable to visit with small groups of girls in their classrooms in 2015. Hundreds of girls from several different schools came to a large field in the village of Magutuni to receive pads and reproductive health education.

clothes running jubilantly alongside the car, it's easy to grasp how a little support from the mountains can stretch a long long way in rural Kenya. The price of five door tickets to that March fundraiser enabled a Kenyan elder to gently guide his community through an FTG visioning session, a vision that might translate to a brighter future for their girls. Dollars given for an auction paid for the delivery of potentially life-saving health information shared with an entire village.

And the magic such support can work revealed itself in the shy smiles of the girls when they are first introduced to visitors; equally so when they clasp each other and erupt into embarrassed laughter when the pads come out. Each of these moments has happened countless times in the villages where For the Good works. And they happen because, thousands of miles away, locals in a little mountain town linked their arms together to do something for the good.