



COMMUNITY COORDINATOR IN KENYA by Gillian Cohen

In the summer of 1983, after four years in Seattle, Washington, my husband, myself, and our two children were posted to Nairobi, Kenya. The delight I felt at the prospect of a return to the continent, if not the country, of my birth was soured upon arrival by the incredible security precautions with which we had to live. At first glance our S.Q. looked forbidding with its two front doors with five locks on each plus a "rape gate" between the living and bedroom areas. Well-intentioned people, in an effort to caution us or to impress us with their survival, regaled us with dire tales of gang thefts, road blocks, muggings and death on the highways. It all sharply contrasted to the open, relaxed atmosphere of the suburbs of Seattle. In my vulnerable eighth month pregnant condition, I was on the verge of catching the next flight home.

While my husband quickly settled into his new job and surroundings it took me considerably longer to adjust. However, I quickly developed different driving habits and learned to deal with the frustrations of food shortages, power failure, shopping under and behind, as well as in front of the counter, and the stench of garbage rotting in the heat. Throughout most of our first year in Nairobi we had no garbage collection. We quickly became skilled in recycling, lobbying and, as a last resort, bribery.

In April, 1985, Jeanette Bartlett and I were hired as the first Community Liaison Coordinators in Nairobi. There was much information to be collected and prepared for distribution to new arrivals. How to purchase a vehicle for use in Kenya, educational information, items to bring to Kenya, management of domestic staff, travel, special interest courses, volunteer organizations and cultural events were all important issues. New employees were sent a personal letter which included information relevant to his/her particular family situation and interests. A couple who had hesitated to accept the post told us later how delighted they were to receive our letter - it made them decide to come!

The community activities we organized included a children's Christmas party, pool parties, expeditions to craft markets and African self-help social programs, suggestions and maps for day trips and the annual Thanksgiving dinner/dance for over 300 people. We also published a monthly newsletter and set up a lending library in our office. A map of a walking tour of downtown Nairobi was a great success and even ended up in the hands of visiting businessmen.

Administration was very supportive of our program and we had a good relationship. We felt we were of considerable assistance to newcomers during the settling-in process. However, once established, they used our services less than we had anticipated. There were a lot of CIDA cooperants and other Canadians in Nairobi who knew of, and wished to be included in, our program. We were frustrated that our mandate did not include them. However, we felt that we partially resolved that dilemma by forming a Canadian Women's Club.

It was a difficult experience for us all when we left Kenya in 1987. We left behind dear friends and beautiful places but took with us memories of many wonderful times - of camping amongst the hippos and elephants, spending Christmas in the bush with lions and a cobra who came just a little too close, snorkeling over coral reefs, reaching the top of Mt. Kilimanjaro despite a blizzard, listening to the groaning of camels being loaded at daybreak, seeing the sapphire blue of Lake Lurkana after days of driving in the desert and the brilliant night sky visible away from the campfire. Kenya is not simply a memory for us. It has become part of the common blood that binds our family.

Gillian Cohen

