

AFRICA HAND

Events once conspired to pry her out of a diplomatic posting there, but Janet Graham has found rewards in helping Africa strive toward its potential.

She's spent a quarter of a century witnessing and experiencing the trials and triumphs of Africa, but apparently nothing has beaten down Janet Graham's ardour for the continent—or for Canada's ongoing efforts there.

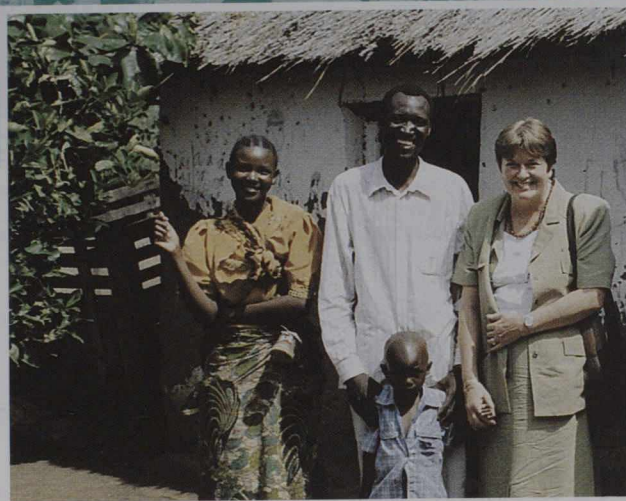
"One of the best jobs in the world is to be a Canadian diplomat in Africa," says Ms. Graham, 53, currently Canada's High Commissioner to Tanzania, "because we're very trusted and welcome and respected for our independent views, our constructive engagement in development and our fair approach."

Born in Bombay, the grandchild of United Church of Canada missionaries, Ms. Graham spent her childhood in India, Pakistan, Liberia and finally Canada, where she lived in Mississauga, Ontario. However, the Toronto suburb stood little chance for her permanent commitment and, after attaining a Bachelor's degree in Geography at McMaster University and doing graduate work at Carleton University, a first career as an urban planner there was short-lived. Instead, inspired by Pierre Trudeau's embrace of the developing world and "very different approach to Africa," she joined Canada's Foreign Service in 1977.

Desk work in Ottawa was followed by a posting as Third Secretary in Pretoria, South Africa, from 1978 to 1980, when the struggle against apartheid was reaching a fevered pitch. "It was the most incredible two years of my life," says Ms. Graham, who reported on the activities, campaigns and political trials of dissidents fighting apartheid and shared their passion and commitment. "It was very easy to get emotionally involved, which you don't usually do as a diplomat."

Her assignment in South Africa was followed by positions as First Secretary in Trinidad and Counsellor in Zimbabwe. Her first experience as Head of Mission was as Acting High Commissioner to Nigeria in 1996. However, Canadian diplomatic staff, including Ms. Graham, were forced to quit Lagos six months later, when General Sani Abacha's displeasure with Canadian criticism of his rule became pronounced and the Canadian presence unwelcome.

Characteristically, Ms. Graham and family pulled up stakes for all of a year's sojourn in Canada before she



photos: courtesy of World Vision

Passionate about the continent: Canadian High Commissioner Janet Graham visits aid projects in rural Tanzania.

returned, unruffled, for her next appointment as High Commissioner to Ghana and finally her current assignment in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

The challenges of Africa can seem insurmountable to those lacking passion about the continent. Ms. Graham anchors the Canadian presence in the third poorest country in the world, a nation almost entirely dependent on an agricultural sector subject to devastation by drought and flooding alike. Yet, noting the political stability and good macro-economic management lately achieved in Tanzania, she declares: "This is a country that deserves to succeed."

With a nascent civil society and commitment to tackle poverty, Tanzania's economy grew by more than six percent last year, "not good enough but certainly in the right direction," Ms. Graham remarks. The country is among Canada's six key African aid recipients, with Canadian aid efforts directed largely at primary education and support for key government reforms including the micro-finance sector. As Tanzania has worked diligently with the World Bank and opened its doors to foreign investment, major Canadian mining interests have extended operations there for gold.

Ms. Graham herself has uncovered rewards below the surface all over Africa, where she met her South African architect husband, John Shearman, and which has offered new horizons as a long-time home to their three children, now between the ages of 15 and 20.

Ms. Graham will soon move back to Ottawa to give her youngest child some Canadian exposure. But the diplomat who has found nothing to match the satisfaction of working with African societies striving toward their potential would like to return to Africa again.

"I'm quite optimistic about this place, which it was difficult to be 25 years ago," she says. "These countries have a long way to go, but they're heading in the right direction." ❁