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# Climb the Hill

By Eloise Hockett and John Muhanji

**C**limb the hill. Chelebei Secondary School rests on top of one of the ridges of Mt. Elgon in the northern region of Kenya's Western Province and is a part of Chwele Yearly Meeting. The yearly meeting is in the valley below, nowhere close to the school. One day in March 2011 our adventure was found in the trek of getting from the valley to Chelebei Secondary School high above. The journey to the school taking 45 minutes entailed driving up a dry river bed complete with rocks and boulders. The scenery on the way up revealed terraced farms with deep, fertile soil. Although this region is rich in agriculture, it lacks many other things, including peaceful coexistence with surrounding communities and economic stability. As we climbed the hill, little did we know what we would experience this day.

*Climb the hill.* One of the girls from a secondary school in the valley knew the way to our location and rode along to ensure we did not take any wrong turns. Unfortunately, this young lady only knew the footpaths to the top. This meant we had to keep looking for an actual road so we could proceed with safety in the vehicle. Close to the top of the ridge we took a turn and discovered we were not on a road but a wider foot path. At a nearby farm we inquired how to proceed from there. The family told us we could pass on the edge of their freshly ploughed field. Driving along the border between the hedge and the field created our own unplanned shortcut to the school climbing the hill.

*Climb the hill.* The view from the top was a peaceful scene. However, we were reminded this peaceful spot was the epicentre of violence in 2004-07, where many people were maimed, killed and displaced. The school closed briefly in 2007 and was heavily vandalized during this time. When the current principal, Moses Kamoet, arrived in 2008, the school re-opened with 31 students, two teachers, and virtually no supplies. In the beginning Moses had to borrow books for teachers to use in order to prepare lessons.

This area has the reputation of being very oppressive to young women. There is a high early pregnancy rate and many of these girls do not even complete their high school education. Yet, at the time of our visit, the school had a few teen mothers who nursed their babies in the morning, then came to school for their studies.

*Climb the hill.* Moses challenged us with the words, *climb the hill*, as we sat in his school office and heard the story of this school. The words struck deep as he shared how many resources were provided to the schools in the valley below, but due to the inability to reach the top of the hill, resources became scarce.

Moses, a product of the community, is highly invested in helping to make change. In three short years the school has acquired:

- A working science lab
- A lunch program for students
- An 1:1 student to textbook
- An increase to 191 students, and 10 teachers
- Four adequate working classrooms and a kitchen.

Yet, there are still many challenges which include:

- Having a stable water supply. Currently two donkeys haul the water up to the school from a spot below.
- The need to complete the girls' dormitory. It is the plan is to have the senior girls board so they can be basically monitored and protected, keeping them safe as they finish school.
- The need for staff housing. Some of the teachers live in the village below traveling on motor bike about 45 minutes each way. The trip is nearly impossible to make when it begins to rain. Had it rained the day we visited, we never would have made it up the hill and would have slid back down on the slippery soil.
- The need for electricity from the valley below.

*Climb the hill.* Since there were also church leaders present during our visit that day, John Muhanji, African Ministries Director of FUM, encouraged these leaders to rise to the challenge and assist the way forward to build peace and reconciliation in this community. Many of these students in this region had lost family members and all desperately need healing from their trauma.

Our visit included spending an hour with the senior students. Each person in our group passionately encouraged the



students to be individuals of substance and to avoid the issues plaguing young people in this region. We exhorted them to be the ones to bring about needed changes and to make a difference in their community.

*Climb the hill.* God planted a seed within us that day. We knew we needed to somehow reach out to this community and assist with their educational needs. As Moses had shared his needs with us, John and I realized there was something we could do immediately. Utilizing some grant funds designated for such purposes, we were able to bless Moses and his school by paying the remaining balances needed for the national exams at the end of the year. Moses was overwhelmed and grateful by this surprise gift.

*One year later . . .*

*Climb the hill.* God continued to use the three words of Moses Kamoet to lead us to focus our education enrichment efforts with the Quaker secondary schools in the Mt. Elgon region. As we sat in a visioning meeting with the principals from these schools, Moses shared the impact of the gift received last year. Two of the top students last year were female. One of them is already enrolled in the university. Other students have been inspired by their success and are working harder. Peace clubs have now been formed at the school encouraging students to find non-violent ways of handling their differences both at school and in the community. In addition, Moses has found a way to have a dormitory for the “Form 4” girls, so they can concentrate on their studies in their final year.

*Climb the hill.* When Moses challenged us with those words, *climb the hill*, he used them as a metaphor for getting out of our normalcy and to go beyond our comfort level. He wanted us to truly see what needs and possibilities were within the region beyond the valley. We need others to come along side of us, to climb the hill with us and envision the possibilities of assisting the Quaker schools in this Mt. Elgon area as well as in other areas in Kenya. The needs at this school and community are vast and overwhelming. We know that with our God, all things are possible.

Will you *climb the hill* with us?

Eloise Hockett is an Associate Professor of Education, Director of the Master’s Education Program at George Fox University. She has been instrumental in the creation of the Kenyan peace curriculum and has trained teachers in Kenya to implement the program.

