

Money Absolutely Well Spent...

Tom's East African Diary 2009

First of all I would like to apologise to all my generous sponsors for taking such a long time to write this follow up letter to show you where your generous donations went, it has not been easy to sum up such an amazing journey in so few words. Going to East Africa was an absolutely incredible experience that I will remember for the rest of my life, as I am sure everyone else involved in the project also will. I hope that seeing these pictures showing what your donations actually helped to achieve will allow you to feel some of the joy that I felt when I first saw the Project Ape playground, and experienced the happiness that it brought to the community.



We arrived in Boma which is a small village close to Arusha in the heart of Tanzania after a long and dusty drive down from Nairobi the previous evening. I found Africa to be a truly awesome continent with some of the most breathtaking scenery I have ever seen. I was still taking it all in when we arrived at Tudor Village which is the orphanage where the playground was built, and it felt even more surreal when Susi and I were greeted by good friends that we hadn't seen for two months. The orphanage was set up by a lady called Mamma Lynn who one day got a calling and decided that she had to go out to Africa and make a difference to peoples lives, she has done an amazing job since then by creating somewhere very special that many children enjoy everyday.





We then found Ollie (top left) who is the one who made all this happen using his amazing limitless stores of energy and enthusiasm. To put everything into perspective over £12,000 was raised for Project Ape, and then a team of 9 students went over to Tanzania and spent 8 weeks living in very basic conditions and in that time they managed to build this entire playground from nothing. That is one heck of an achievement if you ask me, my respect goes out to all of them and I am disappointed that I could not be there to help them do it. One thing I was able to do when I arrived 2 months late was to design the three climbing routes (above right) in the Tanzanian national colours. Myself, Ollie and Susi's father Oliver all helped to drill the holes and attach the climbing grips onto the wall when we arrived. I know it wasn't much but those grips were bought with your donations and after carrying them from England all the way over to the playground myself it felt good to put them up on the climbing wall helping to complete the final part of the playground.





It turned out to be quite a challenge for me to actually photograph the playground, possibly as a result of karma for not properly helping to build the place it was only on my fifth attempt that I managed to get these photos! First of all my camera battery ran out on the way to the opening, I thought all was well and took lots of photos on my friends camera which were then accidentally deleted. It was not until two weeks later after experiencing some of the most hair raising journeys of my life including a bus ride down to Zanzibar with Scandanavia Express who seemed to trust God a little more than training their bus drivers for my liking did I finally get another chance to go back to the playground. It was at this point that illness struck the Davidson Estate bringing almost everyone down and further delaying the mission, and would you believe it two days later when everyone had recovered Susi's father Oliver's trusty old Land Rover refused to co-operate and left us all stranded. Luckily Susi's mother Rosemary saved the day and drove us all to the playground where I finally managed to get my photos. It may have taken five attempts but was definitely worth the effort, and taught me that nothing ever happens quickly or easily in Africa!

These photos were taken by my friend Phoebe Brown and actually are from the grand opening of the Project Ape Playground, above you can see the children arriving at the big event. The opening went very well, and it was then that I really got a feel for what this meant to the local community and especially the children, they absolutely loved the place. The photo below was taken just before the cutting of the ribbon, and the children then stormed the playground swarming over every obstacle in sight. I don't think I have ever experienced such complete appreciation, it was really quite emotional and made me extremely happy to be there.





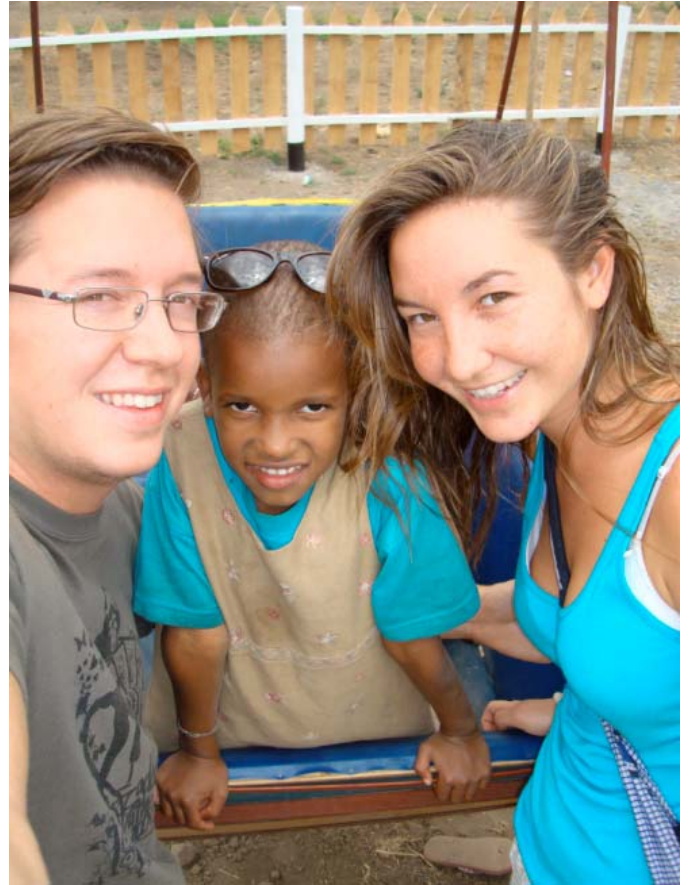
In the background you can see the buildings that have been constructed for the children by local people and volunteers using other funds raised by Mamma Lynn. They are built to a very high quality as Mamma Lynn wants the children to enjoy a similar standard of living to children in the western world. It was in one of these buildings that the Project Ape team lived for 8 weeks whilst constructing the playground. This is something I will fully admit I did not mind missing out on, the many stories include encounters with giant half spider half scorpion mutants and attacks from every type of harmful ant you could possibly imagine. Whilst staying in Arusha I experienced a 'siafu' or army ant attack, my finger got mauled pretty bad and I can tell you it was very painful and definitely not harmless as I had been led to believe! Below is the Project Ape team, from left: Unk, Kate, Sam, James, Helen, Liam, Phoebe, Ollie and Emily. They did a fine job, when they arrived there was nothing and over the weeks that followed with a lot of effort they gradually built the place up to become a high-grade Adventure Playground of Education, well done guys.





The main part of the playground constructed using funds raised by 'The Great EscAPE' was the basketball court that you can see above. It took the team many hours of chipping away at rock and earth in the baking sun to level this area out before it could be properly surfaced, and the local workers did a very good job of it. You rarely see completely flat level surfaces in Africa so to see such a well-laid basketball court was an amazing sight and as you can see the children loved it. Below is a fort that was built for the younger children I believe by Sam, the slide which you can just see off to the right was another contribution from 'The Great EscAPE', and was named 'Annndy's Slide of Peril' after my first sponsor Andy Beale of New Mexico, thanks buddy.





The disabled swings were another part of the younger children's playground which I believe were designed and made by Kate, 'Great EscAPE' funds also contributed towards these. Several of the children have disabilities and cannot walk so these swings were designed especially for them but are also enjoyed just as much by all the other children as well. One girl called Lucy actually pretty much refused to get out of her swing, and was even in there for the whole opening party, and still was not tired of them when we came back two weeks later! The other playground obstacle to receive support from 'The Great EscAPE' was the very impressive climbing wall (page 2 top right) built by Ollie and Emily, I think it was possibly the kids favourite part of the whole playground.





In total £1500 was raised by 'The Great EscAPE' and £1000 was spent directly on the playground obstacles mentioned above. The other £500 is sitting in the bank and will be used to purchase a flying fox (an aerial runway) which will be installed when Ollie returns to the playground towards the end of next year. I really hope to be over in Tanzania around that time and to be able to help Ollie with this part of the project. I wanted this write up to do what so many other charities out there don't do and show you exactly what your donations were used for. Of course it is very good to donate money to a worthy cause which all of these other charities are, but I think that being able to personally see what your money was used for and to be shown the happiness that it has helped to create within a community really makes a difference, and I hope it has.





I will end with a selection of various other great photos from the playground as I feel that they really do need to be included for your enjoyment. Top left - good times in the jungle, top middle - enjoying the swings, and top right - Liam catching up with old friends. Below left – Ollie and myself below the hand carved 'Adventure Playground of Education' sign, below middle – the monkey bars, and below right – the hand painted Project APE basketball backboard by Emily. I really hope that you have enjoyed reading this write up, and I again apologise for the delay in getting it to you! I will keep you updated on the next stage of the project as and when it happens which I hope won't be too far off in the future. Thank you again for your very generous donations, as promised they were used to help create something truly amazing which will be enjoyed by the local children for many years to come.

Finally, I would like to wish you all a Happy Christmas and a very Happy New Year.

Tom Murray Willis



Special Thanks:

Thank you again to all my sponsors for helping to make this happen:

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And of course a special thanks to my cycling buddies Adrian Walker and Callan Attwell, couldn't have done it without you guys, thank you.

Location:

The map below shows exactly where Arusha is actually located in Tanzania, the Project Ape playground was built at the Tudor Village orphanage which is just outside the city in a smaller town called Boma.





My Siafu Experience

Being a first time African tourist I was stupid enough to believe one of Susi's oldest friends Zac when he told me that this little siafu's bite was harmless. The ant did look very small and innocent when Zac was holding him so I ended up convinced that his bite would do no more than possibly scratch me. As you can probably tell I was taken by surprise when the little guy stuck his jaws straight into my finger and gradually started closing his bite with shocking strength. The pain was pretty intense and I had to pull him off but to my horror his body came away leaving his head still chewing away, I did eventually get him off a few painful seconds later! I then found out that these ants were used by African tribes to stitch up deep cuts, a string of heads would be left clamping the cut closed which is actually pretty clever. I also learnt that usually when siafu attack they wait until quite a few of them are on their victim and then suddenly one sends out a signal which makes them all start biting simultaneously, something that I hope never happens to me. As you can see below it was quite a traumatising experience, thank you for that Zac! I hope this gives a good example of how extreme African insects are and why living at Tudor Village for 8 weeks would have been quite a shock to the system! Lesson learnt – BEWARE OF SIAFU!

