

From Kenya to Katonah

Exchange students spend day at middle, high schools



PHOTO: BRIAN MARSCHHAUSER

Mary laughs when describing her large family with 17 siblings.

'No matter where you are in the world, kids do have dreams.'

—Dr. Kakenya Ntaiya
Kakenya Center for Excellence

BY BRIAN MARSCHHAUSER
EDITOR

The Katonah Education Exchange Program started seven years ago with the goal of keeping girls in school and keeping their dreams alive. For the past four years, KEEP has raised more than \$50,000 to fully fund the tuition for an entire class of 37 Kenyan girls in Maasai, helping them to avoid societal influences that would result in early marriage and female genital mutilation.

Four eighth-grade Kenyan girls came to the Katonah Village Library on Monday, March 19, and were warmly received by a standing-room-only crowd.

“The two ‘Es’ in KEEP stand for education exchange,” said Cynthia Braun, a founding member of the organization. “Now this exchange is really happening and I have goosebumps.”

Prior to the library event, the girls spent four days in New York City attending the Montessori Model United Nations conference, where they learned about cultures, governments and peoples of nations around the world. They attended the conference with Andy Greene, a Katonah resident and teacher at the Whitney School in Greenwich, Conn. Braun said it was the first year that students from an African nation attended the conference.

At the library, the girls were welcomed by the Notables, an a cappella singing group at John Jay High School, which performed “Put Your Records On” by Corinne Bailey Rae.

Bedford Town Supervisor Chris Burdick then presented the girls with a proclamation granting them honorary citizenship.

“Now, I should mention, this doesn’t mean citizenship in the sense of being able to vote,” Burdick said. “But it does mean that you always will be a member of the Katonah family and always welcome in the town of Bedford. So, we have you in our hearts.”

The girls—Rahab, Elizabeth, Mary and Felisters—are students at the Kakenya Center for Excellence, a primary boarding school for girls in the Maasai village of Enoosaen founded by Dr. Kakenya Ntaiya. The girls spent the night with two Katonah families before spending Tuesday, March 20, at the middle school and high school.

“I’m just overcome with emotions and love and I’m out of words,” Ntaiya said. “I just want to say thank you so much for such a warm welcome.”

Ntaiya said she began working with KEEP four years ago.

“They reached out and said they want to support us and they want to work with us. You never know what comes out of it,” she said. “We never thought that these girls would be here.”

Ntaiya said she was engaged at 5 years old and was supposed to be married at 12. Though she avoided marriage, she underwent female genital mutilation.

“I was fortunate,” she said. “I did get a scholarship from a real kind person who introduced me to a school in the U.S. and I came here, I went to college, and that’s really where my whole world kind of opened up.”

When she returned to Kenya, she knew she had to give back.

“I saw my cousins, I saw kids in my neighborhood getting mar-

ried at the age of 12, age of 13, and their dreams were ending,” Ntaiya said. “No matter where you are in the world, kids do have dreams.”

At the event, the girls introduced themselves to attendees, sharing their stories and dreams. Next, a question-and-answer session was facilitated by two groups: Students for KEEP, a club at John Jay High School, and Students Supporting KEEP, a club at John Jay Middle School. An ice cream sundae social capped the evening.



The Notables welcome the girls with a song.



Dr. Kakenya Ntaiya receives a proclamation from Bedford Supervisor Chris Burdick.



Felisters is excited to spend time in New York.

PHOTOS: BRIAN MARSCHHAUSER