Barlow Alumni Travel Grant:

Thanks to the generosity of the Barlow Alumni Teacher Grant, I traveled to Tanzania for three weeks this summer to serve as a teacher at the Peace House School, a school for children orphaned by the AIDS pandemic. The experience at the Peace House School was a life-altering experience, both personally and professionally.

The Peace House School:

The Peace House School in Arusha, Tanzania was started by the Peace House Foundation (now called Peace House Africa), a non-profit organization established to help children orphaned by HIV-AIDS. The school opened in the summer of 2007 with a class of 100 seventh graders. The summer of 2008 marked the second year of the program. The seventh graders, now eighth graders, returned along with a new incoming class of a hundred seventh graders. I arrived at the Peace House School with six other American teachers a few days before the students returned. We met with the teachers at the Peace House School and immediately began to help them prepare for the students’ arrival.

The school is located in a spectacular setting within sight of Mt Kilimanjaro. The classrooms are large with lots of light and the dormitories are homey. The school has solar panels and wind turbines- I was very impressed by their great use of natural energy! The Peace House School grows almost all of the school's food- beans, rice, vegetables, and fruit. In addition, each dormitory has its own plot of land and the students are responsible for planting flowers and caring for their gardens. This activity provides the students with a real sense of ownership! The land is beautiful and the children are proud of their school grounds and the fact that they can see Mt. Kilimanjaro from their bedrooms!

Each American teacher was paired with one of the Peace House School teachers. My co-teacher was Nicholaus Mushi who teaches geography and biology. By sharing our ideas and planning lessons together, we experienced an extraordinary opportunity to collaborate and learn from each other. It was a remarkable experience.

Three days after I arrived, I went into the town of Arusha to greet the new students. Each student brought a small bag (containing a change of clothes) and a bucket (for washing clothes). For most of them, these items were their only worldly possessions. It took my breath away to realize that these children only possessed the barest necessities in life. This was a very moving moment for me and my eyes welled up with tears. It was difficult not to cry.

The children were emotional too. They had come from long distances and they didn’t know one another, their teachers, or even the school. They were obviously nervous. But there was also an underlying excitement as the students got in buses for the ride to their new home, the Peace House School. When they arrived, they met their teachers and staff who had organized a welcoming ceremony and everyone sang songs and danced.

Each child was given a homemade quilt, made by quilters in Minnesota, and then we took them to their dorm-rooms. Each dorm-room had four bunk-beds. For most of them, this was the first time the students had ever had their own bed! We helped them settle into the dorm rooms and gave out their uniforms.

Over the next few days, we led the students in interactive, community building activities. Each of us was responsible for one of these activities and we rotated groups of fifteen students between us. Working in small groups really gave us the chance to get to know these students. We were able to share stories, learn some Swahili from them, and eat our meals and play games together.
A week after we arrived, the new students had settled in and the returning students had arrived back on campus. Classes started. We became a part of the everyday routine—teaching classes with our co-teachers, having lunch with the students, joining them in after-school sports, attending Devotions (their religious hour), and helping them in study hall. We even helped run a soccer clinic with coaches who had come from Colorado. The children loved this!

My Impressions

I was deeply moved by the students at the Peace House School. These young people maintained a positive attitude about life despite having dealt with enormous sadness in their lives, including the loss of their parents to the HIV-AIDS pandemic. Many of the students arrived with scars from being beaten. Two of the girls who were accepted to the Peace House School had to leave a week after arriving because their health exam showed that they were pregnant (most likely from rape). When the children told us stories about their lives before coming to Peace House, I found myself incredulous. Children can be resilient and in this case, these students kept expressing over and over again, how fortunate they were to be able to come to the safe haven of Peace House where they were fed and clothed and given the opportunity to study and advance. They were bright and observant and curious about the world around them. Every one of them was eager to learn. A quote that hung up in the teacher lounge and several of the classrooms resonated with me “The greatest enemy of great is good or good enough.” The students loved sharing ideas/discussing things with each other and worked quietly and intently. Not only were they respectful and affectionate toward each other, but they gave their teachers respect and their full attention. It was obvious that the students and teachers at Peace House were now their family to substitute for the family they had lost. They expressed such gratitude for everything—the meals they were able to eat, the school supplies they received, the uniforms, etc., During the first week of school, every child got a pencil, eraser, and four notebooks (one for each subject); they took care of these school supplies like they were the most treasured possessions.

My contribution prior to going to Tanzania

One of the criteria for participating in the Peace House Foundation’s Teacher Trip was that each teacher raise a minimum of $2,500 for the students at the Peace House School. I was drawn to this aspect of the Teacher Trip: a method of ‘giving back’ before even reaching Africa. The fact that the funds went directly to the students rather than to the school’s overhead or towards my personal travel appealed to me. It also made me more comfortable asking for donations from my friends and colleagues. With the help of my friends, family, and my students, I was able to raise over $5,000.

The most important contribution was from my students. I had talked to my Kindergarten class about my trip and the students that I would be teaching in Tanzania. I explained that these students at the Peace House School were orphans and that they owned very little but that they were very excited to go to school. We had learned a lot about Africa in our Africa Study. The children immediately wanted to do something to help. We decided to have a bake-sale and crafts-sale. We cooked and made African crafts (necklaces, Kente cloth bookmarks, stationary with African symbols). We then sold these baked goods and crafts and were able to raise $100. The children were so proud of this! I took photographs of the children making these crafts and then selling them. I enlarged these pictures and brought them to the Peace House School to show the students there. They were very touched! The Kindergarteners also made a Swahili counting book for the Peace House students. They were proud of the Swahili that they had
learned and I thought it would be great for them to share their knowledge by making a book and giving it as a gift.

My current activities pertaining to the Peace House experience

I have assembled a slideshow for the students I had in my class last year and for my colleagues in order to share my experience with them and to show my former students where the money they raised had been sent. I also created a website: http://mariasafricatrip08.shutterfly.com/ and organized 'photo books' to share my story through visual images with others who might be interested in learning about or volunteering with the Peace House School. I also worked with a friend from National Geographic to put together boxes of videos and maps to send to the Peace House School. When I was at Peace House School, I was astounded to discover that most of the students had never seen an atlas or a world map before. I decided that this was something they could use and my co-teacher, Nicholaus Mushi, agreed. The boxes arrived at the Peace House School in mid-December. Later this year, I plan to talk to the high school students at the school where I teach, and their families, about the volunteer opportunities that are available with Peace House Africa.

In my Kindergarten class we study Africa as part of our social studies curriculum. This year, we are focusing primarily on the country of Tanzania. It will be nice for the students to have a real connection to students in Tanzania through my personal experience— my pictures, stories—as well as from having a pen-pal exchange with the students at the Peace House School. I have made some ‘photo books’ out of my pictures- that tell the story of the students at Peace House School. I am hopeful that establishing this real-life connection will create a bond between our two schools and an opportunity for the students to share ideas with each other.

I have been asked to return to the Peace House School this summer to lead the Teacher Trip. They also would like me to run a workshop for thirty to forty teachers in Arusha, Tanzania on the Responsive Classroom and Open Circle approaches/teaching practices. I am really excited about this opportunity.

A Transformational Experience:

Working with the students at Peace House School was a transformational experience. The students possessed a great inner strength. Despite extraordinary hardships and challenges, they persevered. Each was attentive and wanted to take full advantage of the opportunity to learn. With an excellent work ethic, they focused on the task at hand, whether it was planting the school's garden or conquering multiplication tables. The competition which I see so often between my American students wasn't apparent with the Peace House students. Instead, they seemed to possess a spirit of collaboration—the happiness or success of one student is celebrated because they all share in that person's ability to be happy or successful. One prime example of this attitude was illustrated on the first day of school. Each student was presented with a hand-crafted quilt to help keep them warm at night. They were grateful to have their very own personal quilt, a gift just for them made by someone in a far off place. There weren't any comments about how one quilt was prettier than another nor were there attempts to entice someone to swap a quilt.

The students at the Peace House School accepted what they were given and used that as the base to go forward in life. I thought a lot about this quality then, and I think about it often in my classroom now. It seemed to me that it shouldn't have to take great deprivation to possess an attitude of humility and gratitude. There must be a way for my American students to learn these qualities, too. When I returned, I continued to contemplate what the Peace House students had taught me and kept asking myself questions such as "How do you teach a child who
has EVERYTHING to be appreciative and grateful for life’s small and big gifts?” These thoughts and questions encouraged me to sign up for trainings and workshops that focused on children’s social and emotional learning. Since my return from Tanzania, I have taken three teacher workshops—Open Circle, Responsive Classroom, and the Project Zero Workshop at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education. I learned how, as a teacher, I can help build students' social skills—skills like communication, cooperation, respect, gratitude, self-management, and problem solving. These skills will help my students foster healthier relationships and become more engaged, thoughtful citizens.

I recognize that I have become a better teacher now because of the students at the Peace House School. They taught me the lessons of being grateful, respectful, thoughtful, and humble. I have been inspired to use the lessons I learned from the Peace House students to teach these same skills to my students. I have seen first-hand how material advantage can create children who are isolated in a world where they believe their possessions and lifestyle are the only criteria for being “the best.” It is my goal as a teacher at a school with a ‘privileged’ student body to help my students discover that no one person or avenue in life is necessarily better than another. I hope to connect my students to new experiences and people and teach them how positive it feels to give back and to share with others.

In thinking about my professional growth, I wrote the following quote from Three Cups of Tea in my journal a month ago. In Three Cups of Tea, Greg Mortenson, a man who built more than fifty schools in Afghanistan and Pakistan, writes the following about his friend, Haji Ali, the Korphe Village Chief:

“Haji Ali taught me the most important lesson I’ve ever learned in my life... he taught me to share three cups of tea, to slow down, and make building relationships as important as building projects. He taught me that I had more to learn from the people I work with than I could ever hope to teach them.” (Mortenson, 150).

What I learned from the students at Peace House School is more than I can ever hope to give back to them. And yet, I am already indirectly giving back. Every year, I will be teaching my students skills that the Peace House students taught me. And I will be telling them about the incredible story of these students and their impact on my life, as I prepare them for their own discoveries and experiences.