

FOCUS: The African Connection

The Bat Mitzvah Project That Could

When the women started spinning the wool themselves, they had big smiles on their faces. They imagined earning enough money to buy food for their families.

BY LILLY GLAIRON

Becoming a bat mitzvah meant I was going to become an adult in my community. Like everyone else, I would practice my Hebrew prayers, prepare a *d'var torah*, and do a *mitzvah* project. At first I thought I'd collect canned food for a homeless shelter or do volunteer work—something simple. But when my mom told me about a small group of women in Kenya who wanted to learn how to spin wool and weave cloth to support their families, I decided that a project in Africa was as good as any.

In my mind I said, "Whatever." I didn't have clue about what I was getting myself into.

It all started with a conversation my mother had with Dr. Karambu Ringera, a Kenyan woman who sat next to her on the airplane when my mom went to Kenya in 2005. Dr. Ringera had founded International Peace Initiatives, a nonprofit organization that helps Kenyan people become self-sufficient.

At that time this didn't mean much to me. All I was thinking was, "I wish I could go to Kenya." And, three years later, I only wanted to raise enough money to buy and send a spinning wheel and loom to Kenya. No more.

My mom helped me send out emails to friends and family. Donations came in

Lilly Glairon became a bat mitzvah on February 23, 2008 at Congregation Har HaShem in Boulder, Colorado. To learn more about Lilly's continuing wool project visit <http://woolproject.byethost33.com/>.

slowly, mostly \$18 per family. More money was needed, so I spoke about my project at local Kiwanis and Rotary



What would I learn here in Kenya? What kind of person would I be when I returned?

clubs. It was very nerve-racking to talk in front of a lot of staring faces. I could feel my face flush, heat rising to my cheeks. I tried to look past people to the back of the room. With each presentation, though, it was easier to talk in front of groups of people I didn't know. It gave me confidence I didn't think I had.

Eventually I raised about \$2,500, enough to purchase the spinning wheel and loom and pay for weaving training sessions in Kenya.

It was my mom who brought up the idea of our family going to Kenya so I could oversee my project. I was thrilled!

Before going, I took a few short spinning and weaving lessons in Boulder and we all read a few books on the craft. It was really fun. I hoped the women in Kenya would find it fun too.

On the day of our trip I took one last look at my house and sighed. What kind

of person would I be when I returned? What would I learn? Who would I meet? I was very excited to be going, but scared too.



Arriving at the Nairobi airport I was feeling a little shy. What would the women be like? Would they like me?

We traveled by van to the village of Meru, about four hours from Kenya's capital, Nairobi. In the women's eyes I saw a glint of hopefulness. Beneath the hopefulness, though, I could see they had a hard life, not knowing when they woke up each morning if they were going to eat that day.

In Boulder, Colorado you don't see eyes like that.



We stayed at Karambu's house. Later my dad helped me assemble the loom and the spinning wheel. One of our first students was Carol, 19, who lived in the shack behind Karambu's home; she had escaped with her mother and brothers when violence broke out earlier that year in the Rift Valley. When we took the loom out of the box, I rolled the bubble wrap on the floor and started dancing on it, popping the bubbles. I heard laughing behind me. It was Carol. She had never seen bubble wrap. I told her to try it. At first she stepped on the edge. When she heard a pop, she giggled. After we walked on it a few times, she got down on her knees and said, "Lilly, let's do two" and started popping two