

In February 2019 Pat gave the following talk to the Kingston Grandmother Connection:

Hello and thanks to Jeri for her introduction. I am an almost retired nurse. I graduated from KGH in 1971 and have worked in a wide variety of roles and locations. In preparing for this talk, I realized that what I love most about nursing is the opportunity to provide care and assistance but also, and maybe more importantly that it is the opportunity to stretch and challenge myself to make the most of my abilities. I love to teach and I love to learn and nursing is a wonderful way to do both.

In 2006, I travelled to Lesotho to teach some of the office employees at Help Lesotho about Excel spreadsheets and keyboarding. It was a life changing experience. I experienced a world completely different from my own and I felt useful and appreciated. I was hooked. In the next 8 years I would return to Africa 10 more times, to the countries of Zambia, Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda in addition to Lesotho. I fulfilled many roles as a nurse, teacher, pharmacist, task master and shoulder to cry on.

The trips would last between 3 and 7 weeks and I had to pay between \$3000 and \$5000 each time. There is no financial payment for the kind of work I was doing and although I was encouraged to fundraise, I am not very good at asking friends and family to support my interests. So in 2009, I decided to do some vacation relief contracts as a Homecare nurse in Nunavut, the newest territory in Canada. I could earn enough money in a 4-6 week period to pay for a trip to Africa. It was a completely different experience but I found that I loved doing it as well.

BUT WHY? Why would I live and work in -50 degree temps in a land where snow is on the ground from September until June or go to countries where the temp was +35 in the shade where there was little clean water for bathing.

It's because of the people I met and what they represent.

The people in Africa showed such courage in difficult situations. In spite of having little to eat and very basic health care, they were strong. They have an acceptance of life and death and circumstances that was truly amazing to see.

And both in Africa and in Nunavut I saw the joy that can carry one through life. Dancing and singing were on display everywhere. Everyone smiled and greeted one another whenever they met on the street or in an airport. Soccer was played and enjoyed everywhere in Africa whether the ball was a beautiful new one donated by the mzungus, that's white people in Swahili, or whether it was a ball made from plastic bags and strings. In Nunavut, they are Canadian, so they play hockey, of course. And they use what they have for sticks, goal posts and pucks.

In Africa, the people who came to our medical clinics would wait in line for hours and hours with no guarantee that they would be seen. They were often in open sun for most of this time. There was little water and no food unless they brought it with them. And they almost never complained. The people of Nunavut live in very crowded housing situations and have few opportunities for employment. They have endured being moved from their nomadic lifestyle to one outpost community or another since the 1950s when the government of Canada thought a human presence on the Arctic coast would be a deterrent during the Cold War. They have schools and health centres but they are poorly maintained and staffed. Yet, still they are patient—waiting for the day when they will receive the same privileges that we who live in the south take for granted.

But, in spite of the fact that most of the people I met had little education, their ability to problem solve and survive was amazing. In Africa, I saw plastic lawn chairs used as the seat for a wheelchair—and it worked really well. I saw a 2 litre pop bottle attached to a water hose to make a sprinkler. And, unfortunately, I saw malaria nets being used to cover crops to keep the birds and insects away. We think that they would have been better used on their beds to help prevent malaria perhaps, but they were doing what they felt was the most important thing for them. Malaria is treatable but it is also a killer in Africa where in some countries as many as 1 in 20 children die before the age of 5 from this disease. In Nunavut, they are equally creative.

There is only one or at most two stores in each community. These stores sell everything from food to clothing to boats and furs but everything is so expensive up there. And there are few if any repair shops so they use string and wire and anything else they can find to make the brakes on walkers work or connect a trailer to an ATV.

And all of these people have an ability to love that took my breath away. Their sense of family is very different from ours. Their family includes anyone who is even remotely related to them. And if you are considered family, they will support and look after you to the best of their ability. In Nunavut they often live with 3 generations in a house so that the elders can be cared for. When someone goes out hunting and brings back a caribou or a seal, they always share with all of their family and then if there is anything left over they find an elder who does not have a family that hunts to give the meat to. One of the most wonderful demonstrations of love that I witnessed up North had to do with a terminally ill patient. This man had decided that he wanted to die in his community so he left the hospital in Yellowknife where he had been alone except for one family member and returned to his home. His bed was moved to the livingroom so that it was easier for people to visit with him and also so he could remain a part of the family life. One Saturday evening, I went to visit him to be sure he was comfortable for the night. When I got there, the men in the family were sitting on the sofa watching the hockey game. The women of the family were gathered around the kitchen table playing radio bingo. And the grandchildren were all running around and playing. But whenever someone would pass by the bed of this man, they would stop and give him a kiss or just say I LOVE YOU GRANDPA. It was just a wonderful sight to see and brought tears to my eyes.

The love of family is seen everywhere in Africa as well.

That's why grandmothers look after such large numbers of orphans who we call grandchildren but many are not closely related at all. It is not out of a sense of duty but out of a sense of love. They know that the future lies with the children and they will sacrifice everything to provide food and education for these young people. And the young people know this and appreciate it. They don't ask for toys or the latest clothing. In fact, in Swahili there is no word for toy. And

they loved me for doing what I could. And they love the Kingston Grandmother Connection because we are helping them in their mission to improve the lives of their children and grandchildren.

But I don't want to leave you thinking that everything was always positive in my experiences. It definitely wasn't. I was often angry when men in Africa would push their way to the front of the line out of a sense of entitlement. And the level of dependence and entitlement that the Inuit demonstrate because we have taken away their independence and sense of self was very frustrating. And I will never understand the way that the Inuit encourage a young girl to get pregnant and then will 'adopt' her child to another member of the family. But there is one lesson that I have learned from my travels and work and that is that we are guests in the lives and homes of these people and we should be respectful of them and their ways.

I consider myself to be so fortunate to be able to have seen and experienced all this and so much more. And to feel that in some small way, I am making life a little bit better for these people. What better reason does one need?

Thanks

Pat Cauldwell