

[Performs *Amazing Grace* and reads the lyrics to the audience]

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

T'was Grace that taught my heart to fear.
And Grace, my fears relieved.
How precious did that Grace appear
The hour I first believed.

Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come;
'Tis Grace that brought me safe thus far
and Grace will lead me home.

The Lord has promised good to me.
His word my hope secures.
He will my shield and portion be,
As long as life endures.

Yea, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
And mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess within the veil,
A life of joy and peace.

When we've been here ten thousand years
Bright shining as the sun.
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we've first begun.

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

Thank you for having me here to share the floor with the Teachers for East Africa Alumni Conference panelist and share with you my experiences in Meru, Kenya. A big thank you to Ron and Keith Schuchard for their invitation and Brooks Goodard who is presiding over the conference.

My name is Stanford Thompson and I am from Decatur, Georgia. I grew up in a large family with seven siblings and parents who are both music educators in the Atlanta Public School system. My early musical experiences and training made me competitive to enter one of the world's renown music conservatories, The Curtis Institute of Music, where I earned my Bachelor of Music last spring. I've performed in Europe, Asia and the

Americas with the world's best conductors and in the world's most beautiful concert halls. Of all of my musical experiences, nothing compares to the transformation I went through in my nine weeks in Kenya.

Two years ago, local Meru Bishop Lawi Imathiu had the vision to bring music to his community. After founding the Kenya Methodist University, two local primary schools, a secondary school and the community center, he is always looking to do more. While the First United Methodist Church of Ann Arbor was on a mission trip to Meru, Bishop Imathiu asked retired Ann Arbor music educator Larry Dittmar to help establish a music program for the community of Meru. Larry collected over one hundred recorders and came back the next year to get the music program started. While the kids learned recorder, Larry collected over ninety woodwind, brass and percussion instruments and delivered them in February 2009.

Larry convinced me to come to Meru and spend over two months working with the kids, making assessments about the program, training two Kenyan self-taught musicians to carry on the work when I left. The first week I spent with every community leader, school principals and teacher figuring out what the kids need and how music could help them achieve those goals. My team immediately began working with about 250 students through a recorder class at the Bishop Imathiu Integrated Board School, Kithoka Primary School and the instrumental music program at the Bishop Imathiu Secondary School. The students received around one to three hours of instruction each day during the month of July and more time in August when the students were on holiday.

This program went beyond teaching notes and western instruments. About three weeks into the program, I arrived at the secondary school early and sat on the ground outside of the old science lab where we had music classes. My students came out of the main building carrying their chairs and I waved them down to come sit around me. I planned to not teach that day because I was tired and told them they could ask me anything about America or my personal life and I would answer it... as long as I didn't have to teach. One kid quickly said that the music classes were the best part of his day and that he was looking forward to playing and another kid replied that it helped him with his stress. It took less than a minute for the kids to unanimously agree about those two ideas. I figured I would need to teach...

After the class, one of the girls came to me to thank me for teaching and shared with me what the music class gave her. She is currently sixteen and two years ago her mother died and the following week her father raped her. He then killed himself in front of her eyes and she moved in to live with her aunt. Despite her frequent pains from the ordeal and the doctor's recommendation to go through an extremely risky surgery, her aunt refuses to believe that she did not kill the father and the fact that she was raped. This young woman deals with a great deal of stress and as she explained this story, my heart jumped out to her with a tear rolling down my face. As she continued to explain, she said that being involved in the music program was the only comfort she has felt in years and was grateful to have music as that conduit.

As I tried to write a speech for this event, I felt that my final journal entry could sum up my experiences the best:

Monday September 31, 2009:

This music program is more than an artistic structure: they are examples and schools of social life. To play together means to intimately coexist toward perfection and excellence following a strict discipline of organization and coordination in order to seek the harmonic interdependence of choices and instruments. That's how they build a spirit of solidarity and fraternity among them, develop their self-esteem and foster the ethical and aesthetic values related to the music in all its sense. This is why this music program is immensely important in the awakening of sensibility, in the forging of values.

The Meru Instrumental Music Project is felt in three fundamental circles: in the personal/social circle, in the family circle and in the community.

In the **personal/social circle**, the children in the program develop their intellectual and emotional side. The music becomes a source for developing the dimensions of the human being, thus elevating the spirit and leading man to a full development of his personality. So, the emotional and intellectual profits are huge: the acquisition of leadership, teaching and training principles; the sense of commitment, responsibility, generosity and dedication to others; and the individual contribution to achieve great collective goals. All this leads to the development of self-esteem and confidence. I learned that the worse thing about poverty is not the lack of bread or roof, but the feeling of being nobody. That's why the child's development in this music program provides him with a noble identity and makes him a role model for his family and community. It makes him a better student at school because it inspires him a sense of responsibility, perseverance and punctuality that will greatly help him at school.

Within the **family circle**, the parents' support is unconditional. As the kids continue to apply themselves in this program, the child becomes a role model for the family, and this is really important for these kids. Once the child discovers he is important for his family, he begins to seek new ways to improve his life and hopes better for himself and his community. Also hopes social and economic improvements for his own family. All this makes up a constructive and ascending social dynamic. Most of these kids belong to the most vulnerable strata of the Kenyan population. Out of all children in Kenya, 85% attend primary school, 24% attend secondary school and 2% move onto the college level. The Bishop Secondary School is transforming the community. It's the cheapest high school in Meru and one of the cheapest in the country, all students graduated in it's first graduating class in 2007, it was awarded the #1 day school in the district for 08-09 by the Kenyan Ministry of Education and before BLISS, fewer than 20 students attended secondary school, now the school has 257 students. There are three types of secondary schools: private schools, government-aided schools (National Schools) and harambee schools (district schools). Only one out of four students go to National schools, the rest to district schools. Acceptance is based on a child's score on the KCPE. The kids know they are at the bottom of the totem pole. The teachers know they are at the bottom of the totem pole and the materials and facilities they have to be

inspired by are way below standards. All a child has to do is rise above those challenges, score well on the national exams and they will find a full-ride to the university. I have seen this program encourage these kids to embrace new dreams, new goals, and progress in the various opportunities the music has to offer.

Finally, in the **circle of the community**, this program proved to be creative spaces of culture and sources of exchange of new meanings. The spontaneity music has excludes it as a luxury item and makes it a patrimony of society. Families join with pride and joy in the activities their children belong to. The huge spiritual world that music produces in itself, which also lies within itself ends up overcoming material poverty. From the moment a child is taught how to play an instrument, he is no longer poor or uneducated. He becomes a child in progress heading for a new life, who'll later become a full citizen. Needless to say that music is the number one prevention against violence, bad habits, and everything degrading of the life of a child. As I know it, only arts and religion can give proper answers to humanity, to mankind's deepest aspirations, and to the historic demands of our times. With education as the synthesis of wisdom and knowledge, it's the means to strive for a more perfect, more aware, more nobel and more just Kenya.

I can't put my feelings into words of what I received from this program, but you all have spent time in Africa and worked with the kids, you know. The best way to share those feelings with someone else is to bring them to Kenya, see what's going on and dive in with your hands and hearts to help. Thank you again for allowing me this space to share the Meru Instrumental Music Project with you.

