

Maasai
Girls
Education
Fund

April 2003

Dear Friends,

In two years, the Maasai Girls Education Fund has come a long way toward meeting its goals to increase literacy among Maasai women in Kenya and to provide opportunities for their economic independence. Along the way, we are also building community support for educating girls and developing a model community-based initiative that can be replicated beyond the Kajiado District where we began.

January was an exciting month for the Maasai Girls Education Fund. Twenty new students throughout the Kajiado District in Kenya received education grants, bringing the total number of Maasai girls whose education is sponsored by the Fund to 36. Four of the 20 are the first girls in their families ever to attend school. The remaining 16, who are from 7 to 16 years old, would not have been able to continue their education otherwise. The selection process was the culmination of a two-year community-wide effort by the 42 volunteers who serve on our board and Division Committees.

Our success extends far beyond the enrollment numbers, however. It is visible in the changes taking place at a deeper level within the Maasai communities. One example involved an 11-year-old student. The girl was under the guardianship of an uncle because her mother had died when she was a baby and her elderly and poor father had been unable to take care of her. This past January, the uncle refused to allow the girl to continue her education, even though her father approved and the Fund was assuming financial responsibility. Her uncle was planning to marry her off for a dowry. The Fund's committee representative in the girl's area attempted to change her uncle's mind, but he angrily dismissed her. Our representative persisted, however, and along with the girl's father, convinced the local chief to intervene on behalf of the girl. Within three days, guardianship was given to the committee representative, and the girl was enrolled in school. Without the Maasai Girls Education Fund, this would not have been possible. There would have been no advocate; there would have been no alternative.

Throughout the Kajiado District, more girls are resisting efforts to end their education early, more women are openly assisting them, and more community members are offering shelter to girls who have run away from home to avoid unwanted marriages. The Maasai Girls Education Fund has been a catalyst for the extended community to assist these girls. These positive changes reflect the depth and breadth of community involvement in the Fund, whose volunteers are active in every area of the Kajiado District and at all levels of the organization.

This community network is one of the Fund's key assets. The Maasai Girls Education Fund has created a replicable model for a successful community-based initiative. It succeeds, we believe, because it is a partnership that includes stakeholders, business professionals, and educators, but most of all because it is governed and managed by the Maasai who live in the Kajiado District. The partnership now includes the government of Kenya, beginning with the election of President Mwai Kibaki in December and a new era in the country's history. President Kibaki immediately instituted a new policy to provide free primary school education to all Kenyans, giving great credibility to his promise to build a better future for Kenya. The task is

enormous and will take time to implement. Schools must be built, teachers trained, and supplies procured for the many thousands of students awaiting enrollment.

In time, as the new government in Kenya begins to fulfill its promise of free primary school education for all, more Maasai children, including girls, will enroll in school. Cultural biases will persist, however, and many education expenses will not be paid by the government, including books and uniforms. As in the past, many girls still will not be enrolled in school and many will continue to be married against their wishes when they reach puberty. For those who do enroll, and graduate from primary school, another hurdle remains. Secondary school is not free, and a primary school education does not adequately prepare students for employment. As more Maasai girls complete primary school education, the need for the Maasai Girls Education Fund to build the bridge to economic independence will be more important than ever.

With the new Kenyan government's emphasis on education and the Fund's model community network in place, the potential impact of our work is greater than ever. Our ability to reach this potential is limited only by our ability to manage growth, and that is our number one priority. With this in mind, the Fund received its first foundation grant in December 2002 from the Bauman Foundation in Washington, DC. This grant will help strengthen the Fund's infrastructure so that we can effectively manage an increasing number of students. It will also allow us to develop a plan to expand our reach beyond the Kajiado District to include all of Kenya's Maasai.

To further help our effort, the Fund has developed a Web site, which we invite you to visit at www.MaasaiGirlsEducation.org. The site will help educate the world about the plight of Maasai women and the work of the Maasai Girls Education Fund. The site includes discussion of the barriers to education, strategies for achieving our goals, information about some of our students including photographs, information about our endowment fund, and organizational information.

Our work in Kenya these past two years has made a positive difference in many lives. Thirty-six Maasai girls are now realizing their dream to have an education. Many more now have hope that they too will have this opportunity. Equally important, 42 Maasai women and men throughout the Kajiado District are volunteering their time to make that happen.

Sincerely,
Barbara Lee Shaw
Executive Director
Maasai Girls Education Fund