

BACK TO AFRICA

by John B. Linsley '04



Alumni
of the Kenya
program return
to Africa to fulfill
dreams of altruistic
work that took shape
while they were
students there.



For nearly 40 years, St. Lawrence's Kenya Semester Program (KSP) has provided students with a challenging, hands-on introduction to Kenya and the African continent.

(For more on its beginnings, see On Campus). Long a sought-after experience for St. Lawrence and non-St. Lawrence students alike, it has been recognized by the Ford Foundation as one of the best undergraduate programs in Africa. Its alumni often describe the KSP as life-changing.

For some, what makes the experience transformative is the program's interdisciplinary approach and its emphasis on both classroom and field-based learning. For others, it's the experience of homestays, independent study and research, and learning from Kenyan faculty. Whatever the reason, the KSP is revered by many of its 1,800-plus alumni. Several maintain deep connections to Kenya and continue to make lasting contributions in communities across Africa through their careers and service.



One of them is **Kathleen Perkins Colson '79** (KSP spring '78). Colson is founder of the BOMA Project, a Vermont-based organization that supports poverty alleviation through an innovative micro-finance and business development program in northern Kenya. Accepting the University's 2010 Sol Feinstone Award for Humanitarian Service, Colson said "KSP-ers (are) having a tremendous impact on the continent – from law to technology to wildlife conservation to water projects and livestock and community development. Our influence and understanding of the continent, gleaned from a semester of immersion and challenge, is profound."

Colson has also created ways for other Laurentians to exercise their altruistic interests in Africa. BOMA Fellows contribute to her program, and one of them, **Sarah Ellis '04** (KSP fall '02), was recently hired as BOMA's director of new program development and evaluation in Kenya. And among BOMA interns in the U.S. have been **Lyndsay Bisaccio '09** (KSP Summerterm '08), **Haley Feickert '11** (KSP summer '09), **Carly Pearson '12** (KSP spring '11), **Steve Kiplagat '12**, **Stanzi McGlynn '10** (KSP spring '09) and **Bond Longley '12** (KSP fall '10).

Colson is emblematic of St. Lawrence KSP alumni whose continued involvement in Africa is contributing to positive change and improving understanding of the continent. Evident in their work are a spirit of cooperation and collaboration, and palpable enthusiasm for Africa.

EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The KSP introduces students to some of the most critical issues in African development and presents an opportunity to understand how these challenges are being addressed. Post-KSP, alumni have become involved with programs and projects connected to various causes, especially in educational development:

- **Chris Bunting '93** (KSP fall '91) and **Chachu Ganya '96**, a member of the Kenyan Parliament, co-founded the Northern Kenya Fund (NKF), which since its inception in 2004 has supported more than 400 high-achieving students in attending secondary school and college. Also involved with NKF is **Deb Kmon Davidson '94** (KSP spring '93), who sits on its board of directors.

"Our influence and understanding of the continent, gleaned from a semester of immersion and challenge, is profound."

*-Kathleen Perkins Colson '79,
The BOMA Project*

- **Class of 1998 alumni Joost de Laat** (KSP spring '97) and **Caroline Archambault** (KSP fall '96) founded Africa SOMA in 2005. The education-focused nonprofit grew out of the work the couple continued in Kenya following their KSP experiences.

- **Kelsey Redpath '11** (Kenya Summerterm '09) returned to Kenya last fall as an intern with Education for All Children (EFAC), working with EFAC scholars in the Rift Valley. Through EFAC, Kelsey's family sponsors a girl to attend secondary school, a connection that was the pathway for her return to Africa.

PUBLIC HEALTH

Public health is a hot development topic and a field that many St. Lawrence students and KSP alumni are keen on. KSP independent study placements in public health and other medically-g geared organizations are also popular. One who's been inspired in this field is St. Lawrence Trustee **Amanda Pearson '92** (KSP fall '90), who recently completed her master's degree in public health at George Washington University. Others have found direction from KSP Co-Director Wairimu Ndirangu's community-based summer course in Kenya, Healthcare Delivery in a Developing Country:

- As part of her recently completed graduate studies in public health, **Katrina Franz '06** (KSP spring '05) interned in Tanzania with Africa Bridge, a nonprofit that supports orphans and vulnerable children.
- **Kristen Cahill '96** (KSP fall '94) is the medical director of the faith-based humanitarian organization EQUIP Liberia. Prior to moving to Liberia in



Patrick McLaughlin '05 measures a new transect in preparation for conducting a primate survey among the calderas of Bioko Island, Equatorial Guinea.



In Usisya, Malawi, **Hope Thornton** poses with a colleague from her time as a food and nutrition security adviser with Temwa, a UK-based NGO.

“I’m convinced that at this critical moment in our planet’s history, transformative initiatives (like the KSP) may be instrumental in fostering in us and our global neighbors a sense that in our diversity we share much that is fundamental to us all. As we recognize this, we can together, in the words of former Tanzanian President Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, ‘develop the resources of this planet for all the people of this planet.’”

—Former KSP Director Paul Robinson, current director of the Human Needs and Global Resources Program, Wheaton College, Ill.

2010, Cahill was managing an HIV/AIDS program in the post-conflict region of northern Uganda.

- **Valerie Foster Githinji '98** (KSP spring '97) is writing her Ph.D. dissertation on gendered vulnerability to poverty, HIV/AIDS and food insecurity in northwestern Tanzania.
- **Justin Sullivan '07** (KSP spring '06) is based in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, with the organization Management and Development for Health.

ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE

Many KSP alumni have been involved with unique business and nonprofit startups in Africa. Their goal is to benefit Africans by opening avenues to economic independence and self-sufficiency:

- **Hope Thornton '01** (KSP fall '99) is co-founder and former executive director of Nature’s Gift Permaculture, which focuses on sustainable solutions for food and nutrition security in Malawi,

where she was also a food and nutrition security adviser with Temwa, a United Kingdom-based NGO.

- Matt Meyer (Brown University, KSP fall '92) co-founded Ecosandals, a sandal-making business based in the disadvantaged Nairobi neighborhood of Korogocho. Ecosandals, which makes sandals from scrap materials for sale around the world, grew out of Matt’s KSP independent study project. U.S. Senator Chris Coons (D-Del.), a KSP alumnus and chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on African Affairs, toured Ecosandals in May with then-U.S. Ambassador to Kenya Scott Gratton.
- In 2009, Sara Holby (Bowdoin College, KSP fall '06) and her mother, **Ann Funkhouser Holby '79** (KSP fall '78), founded Ajiri Tea, a producer of award-winning teas based in western Kenya. One hundred percent of Ajiri’s profits support the education of local orphans through the Ajiri Foundation.

The power of the KSP to cultivate long-term relationships between its participants and communities in Kenya, and indeed throughout Africa, is unequivocal. St. Lawrence’s steady support of the KSP has put Africa on the St. Lawrence map. Looking ahead, opportunities abound for future Laurentians interested in Africa to develop their own connections and exert their own impacts in a part of the world where the need is extreme.

John Linsley '04 (jlinsley@gmail.com) participated in the fall 2002 KSP. He has been hooked on East Africa ever since and credits the KSP for giving him the know-how to return to Africa for work, study and travel. Himself a leader of educational trips in Africa for young people, he writes the *Habari Gani* column in this magazine.



For more from our highlighted alumni on the impact of their Kenya experiences on their lives, and additional material on St. Lawrence’s Africa connections, go to www.stlawu.edu/magazine.



MICRO-FINANCE INNOVATOR

Kathleen Colson '79

(KSP spring '78)

Founder and CEO, The BOMA Project

"My experience with the KSP gave me personal insights into Africa and Kenya. The constant reports of war and tribalism and AIDS did not reflect the extraordinary spirit of the people and the young nation that I came to know. So I started raising money for organizations in Africa, began a safari company in 1986, and, after years of guilty pleasure surrounding the surreal experience of safari, decided to start my own development organization, the BOMA Project. We focus on poverty alleviation through a micro-finance program that builds self-confidence in people's ability to change the circumstances of their lives and communities. The program is totally led by local people."



WATER BEARER

Ned Breslin '88 (KSP fall '87)

CEO, Water For People (Africa and India)

"The KSP forced me out of my comfort zone. I was asked hard questions, and I was allowed to find my way. I was exposed to water issues, which have become my core focus, and so I was hooked."



HABITAT ADVOCATE

Kathleen Fitzgerald '92 (KSP spring '91)

Director of Land Conservation, African Wildlife Foundation

"After my KSP semester I wanted to return to be a part of Africa's dynamism, diversity and rapid change, but I also wanted to make a meaningful contribution. I have lived in Kenya since 2008 and travel throughout the continent for my work. Africa continues to hold enormous potential and I am grateful that the KSP program introduced me to it."



FOOD FACILITATOR

Christopher Burns '95 (KSP fall '93)

Economic Growth and Agricultural Development Adviser, USAID

"My entire KSP experience established my desire to work and live in Africa. Professors like Paul Robinson, David Lloyd and Celia Nyamweru provided the theoretical and practical knowledge that allowed me to pursue my career. My KSP mates made every day a unique experience. And my homestay families throughout Kenya showed me the power and scope of resilience and indigenous knowledge. I still visit my family in Nairobi.

"The KSP is a phenomenal opportunity and I am fortunate to have been able to participate in it. My career, to this day, benefits immeasurably from the experience."



HEALTH CARE INITIATOR

Sara Wilhelmsen '01 (KSP spring '00)

Senior Program Officer, Management Sciences for Health

"While living in Kenya and learning about life in a developing country, I found a passion that inspired me to pursue a career in international development. The experience created an excitement I hadn't felt in any other field of study. It led me to graduate school in public policy and international economic development, work with USAID in Washington, D.C., and now a career dedicated to improving health in Africa, to which I return often."



AIDS WARRIOR

Brendan Hayes '04 (KSP spring '03)

Banja La Mtsogolo (a Malawian reproductive healthcare non-government organization), Projects Director

"I finished the KSP having had a great first experience in Africa. This kept me interested and open-minded about returning.

"I also had my first encounter with the AIDS epidemic while on my KSP internship at a fishery in Kisumu. I was conducting community interviews for a paper I was writing about the Nile perch, and the beach chairman interrupted us at one point and said something like, 'This is important, but our biggest problem is AIDS.' He then reeled off the names of all the people from his village who had died from AIDS. When I had a chance to work on an HIV prevention project with the Peace Corps, that moment played a big role in my decision to accept it. I'm now in my sixth year working in public health in southern Africa."



STUDENT AND TEACHER IN ONE

Patrick McLaughlin '05 (KSP fall '04)

Ph.D. Candidate, Drexel University

"One thing I learned very quickly on the KSP is that there is so much good, meaningful work to be done in Africa, and that even a small effort can have dramatic positive effects. The KSP fundamentally changed the way I thought and helped me figure out what I wanted to do with my life. I was interested in ecology and conservation, and there are few places better to explore either topic than East Africa.

"Today I am pursuing a graduate degree in ecology. I spend six months every year in West Africa doing research and working with a conservation organization, and in the summer I lead high school student expeditions focused on wildlife and conservation. The KSP helped form the academic foundation and personal inspiration that have allowed me to pursue these opportunities."



THE EDUCATION CONNECTION

Leading educational programs in Africa has been popular among younger KSP alumni. The cultural savvy gained from the KSP experience translates into strong qualification for this type of work. Rewards include reconnecting with one's own experiences and the satisfaction of guiding a new generation of students in their own understanding of the continent.

• **Rebecca Brown '03** (KSP fall '01) has led student and teacher programs in Kenya for the World Leadership School.

• **Leah Knickerbocker '04** (KSP spring '03) is academic program director for The Traveling School, an education-abroad program for high school girls, which offers programs in South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Mozambique.

• **Hope Thornton '01** (KSP fall '99) and **Patrick McLaughlin '05** (KSP fall '04) have led programs in Africa for National Geographic Student Expeditions. More than 15 other KSP alumni have led high school service learning programs in Tanzania and elsewhere in Africa for Putney Student Travel.

Other KSP alumni have stayed connected to Africa through higher education:

• **Assistant Professor of History Matt Carotenuto**, who teaches courses in African history and coordinates the African Studies program at St. Lawrence, enrolled in the KSP as an undergraduate at SUNY Cortland. He has said, "To have a chance to be part of the KSP again is really amazing, because my experiences on the program were the spark that led me to a career in African history. St. Lawrence has one of the largest commitments to Kenya of any university in the U.S., which to an African historian like me is remarkable."

• **Katie Gauthier '04** (KSP fall '02) and **Sajana Blank '08** (KSP spring '06) have both worked at St. Lawrence with outgoing KSP students as assistant directors of off-campus programs at the Center for International and Intercultural Studies. **Drew Pynchon** (Dickinson College '10, KSP fall '08) currently holds the position.

• **John McPeak '88** (KSP fall '87) is associate professor and vice chair of public administration and international affairs at the Maxwell School of Syracuse University, where much of his research is focused on northern Kenya.



Josh McGrath

"My greatest hope is that one day (this film) becomes irrelevant."

—Ben Hull '14

TANKS FOR THE RAIN

Some Laurentians start doing altruistic work in Africa before they graduate. In summer 2011, Benjamin Hull '14, of nearby Madrid, N.Y., and a friend volunteered through the Ugandan Water Project (UWP) to make a documentary, "Uganda23" (named for its length in minutes), that they hope will spur financial support that will result in clean, disease-free water for thousands of families in that landlocked African nation. They released the film last Christmas. It can be seen at uganda23.com.

The film portrays children walking miles to obtain potable water – and polluted water that some people must share with livestock.

"It is so exciting to see 'Uganda23' being used so actively by the Ugandan Water Project," Hull said. "It is helping the UWP team tell their story in almost every touchpoint they have, and I couldn't be happier about that."

The UWP's goal is to place rainwater collection tanks in accessible places, and by last winter some 32,000 people were benefitting from them. In July, Hull learned that a tank had been installed in Kivulu, a Kampala slum where they had filmed (pictured). "How incredible is that?" he asked. "With \$3,500 (the cost of the tank) and the diligence of this organization, clean water is available in a place where it is needed desperately. I'm talking garbage-piled-in-the-street and sewage-contamination desperately. That is one of the reasons I was moved to make this film; the connection between water tanks and saving lives is unmistakably intimate.

"We created this film to be used for years to come, but my greatest hope is that one day it becomes irrelevant," Hull added. "I pray that someday we can watch 'Uganda23' and know that every person in Uganda has clean, accessible drinking water. But until that day we must keep telling the story." —NSB