

Opening New Doors

Caren McNelly McCormack promotes education in Kenyan villages

By BJ Marshall (BSJ94, IMC96)

During her time in Medill's IMC program, Caren McNelly McCormack (IMC96) never learned how to manage an overseas staff or host a successful fundraiser. But as the president and cofounder of The Kilgoris Project, a nonprofit that builds and runs schools in remote Kenyan villages, McCormack uses these on-the-job lessons along with her IMC skills.

After graduating from Medill's IMC program, she headed back to a familiar role as a Silicon Valley public relations manager. That job wasn't a good fit, so McCormack left the company to start her own business writing and publishing memoirs for families.

Then a vacation in 1999 changed the course of her career — and her life. While on a safari in Kenya, McCormack and her husband, Jon, struck up a friendship with a waiter at the Maasai Mara National Reserve. The couple corresponded with him by mail after the trip and learned about a need for musical instruments at a church in the village. The McCormacks offered to help, and over time made a series of donations to fund the building of a church and school in Maasai.

In January 2004, Enkijabe Empiris School (which means Winds of Grace in the Maasai language) opened its doors with two teachers and 75 students. "Not many people here have gone to school and this is a great opportunity that we are doing to build on that," explains David Lemiso, the Maasai resident who runs The Kilgoris Project's day-to-day operations.

Over time, the McCormacks' involvement with the organization grew. "Education really has to be in such a holistic sense in the developing world," Caren McCormack explains. "A school alone or a building alone doesn't add up to educating children." That is why The Kilgoris Project focuses on clean water, food, scholarships and also does some medical work.

In addition to its five schools among the



Caren McNelly McCormack (IMC96) uses the skills that she acquired at Medill to build and run schools in Kenya. *Photography by Jon McCormack*

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Maasai in southwest Kenya, The Kilgoris Project operates a tea farm, a maize farm and a women's cooperative to provide financial support to the schools and their families. McCormack travels to Kenya twice a year to oversee new projects and meet with the Kenyan staff.

During a recent visit to a new construction site, McCormack says she was touched when she saw how many stones the villagers had gathered to help build the foundation for their community's new school. "What that represented was so much work and so much heart and so much desire of a community," she says. "It makes me want to work harder."

Whether the task is fundraising, generating awareness or engaging staff and community members, McCormack says she's always using the customer-centric focus she learned at Medill. "My IMC training is invaluable in what I do — everything from the nuts and bolts management side of things to all the PR and communications," McCormack says. "I don't know that there is any of it that I don't use."

— BJ Marshall lives in Lemont, Ill., where she writes about the environment, education and interesting people.