



Gloria Simoneaux with children in Nairobi's Kibera slum

# Africa *Is My* Heart

Alum and Fulbright Scholar Gloria Simoneaux (ICP, '98) on introducing expressive arts therapies to traumatized children in Africa

By Valerie Chow Bush

**a**bout ten years ago, Gloria Simoneaux, an Integral Counseling Psychology alum, received a letter from a man who was working with orphans in Ghana and desperately needed her help. She didn't think twice about going. "I don't hesitate, I just jump through," says Simoneaux, a veteran expressive arts therapist. After three weeks in East Ghana she asked the man, "Why did you pick me?" to which he replied, "I wrote a hundred letters, but you were the only one who answered."

This serendipitous visit would result in several more trips to sub-Saharan Africa over the ensuing years. In Eritrea, Simoneaux set up an arts program for children affected by HIV/AIDS. In Tanzania, she trained HIV-positive community health workers; and in Zimbabwe and Ethiopia she offered art therapy to sexually abused orphans.

Simoneaux moved to Nairobi in fall 2008, thanks to a Fulbright Scholar grant. Affiliated with the Kenya Association of Professional Counseling in Nairobi, she is currently teaching expressive arts and play therapies to counseling students enrolled in diploma and degree programs. She is also designing a 150-hour certificate program for therapists, who will then be able to train others, and helping to organize Kenya's first association of expressive arts and play therapists.

Leaving the Bay Area last year wasn't easy, but it proved to be essential for her own well-being. After 19 years as the founder and executive director of DrawBridge, a Marin-based organization that brings art therapy to homeless children in 30 sites in seven Bay Area counties, Simoneaux was burnt out on fundraising and running the day-to-day operations of a large nonprofit. "I never took a break," she says.

In Africa, she can focus on doing what she loves the most: art therapies with at-risk children. "Africa

is so far away that no one can bother me," Simoneaux says with a chuckle. "In Nairobi, I have no voicemail. I take my time and I'm very present with the children. That's very satisfying."

Simoneaux has adapted her groundbreaking work with homeless children in California shelters to the needs of African communities. She has founded a new nonprofit called Harambee Arts: Let's Pull Together, which partners with grassroots organizations to train local health providers and educators to provide arts programs for children.

A visit to the Harambee Arts Web site and blog ([www.harambeearts.org](http://www.harambeearts.org)) reveals her many, and varied, projects: from painting murals, salsa dancing, or meditating with children in Nairobi's Kibera slum to running an art support group for HIV-positive women in Langata Prison. She also introduced painting to children with autism. Some of their extraordinary work is now on display at the RaMoMa Museum of Modern Art in Nairobi.

Simoneaux believes that expressive arts and play therapies can help heal children traumatized by AIDS, war, dislocation, and famine by giving them a nonthreatening means to express often inexpressible grief, loss, and anger. "Most traumatized children, both in the United States and Africa, don't have a childhood," Simoneaux says. "So I give them time to play, to escape their difficulties." Like the homeless children in California, Africa's most vulnerable children "paint their stories. Their art is an expression of what they're going through and what they've experienced," she says.

In March, Simoneaux, who received the Jefferson Award for Public Service two years ago, was selected to be a 2009 Marin Women's Hall of Fame honoree. In the Bay Area for the week to receive the award and see family, Simoneaux was already anxious to go back. "Africa is my soul, my heart," she says. "I'm just so comfortable there and can't wait to return." ●

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Gloria Simoneaux