

From the Colorado Foothills to Kenya with Love

An Interview with Carol Carper



We recently Zoomed to catch up with Carol Carper, formerly of Evergreen Rotary and neighbor of Conifer and now a resident of Sigomere, Kenya, an undeveloped subsistence agricultural community in Western rural Kenya. Carol's work is well known in our community and her many achievements include being one of the founders of the Mountain Resource Center, a Pottery artist, a kindergarten teacher at Bailey's Deer Creek Elementary, and directed the Early Childhood Director at Red Rocks Community College. She loves teaching to all ages and is a lifelong community organizer. Carol is a constant inspiration to Coloradans who are privileged to call her "friend". Her frequent newsletters offer

insights into the latest projects of the nonprofit, Sasa Harambee that she co-founded. She will be visiting Colorado in August for a couple of months.

We're eager to hear about news from Sigomere, but first, Carol, can you share a little with readers about how a woman from Colorado neighbor came to work in Kenya?

When I was 10 my mother gave me a book about Albert Schweitzer's work with lepers in South Africa and I declared "someday I want to visit there." After and in 1999, my daughter passed away in 1999, and I began searching for new meaning in life. And things came together: I visited Tanzania and returned certain that I wanted to help in Africa. I joined the Conifer Rotary Club, where I found like-minded people focused on "service above self." I also met a very special co-traveler in America, Dr. Meshach Onguti, a world-renowned maxillofacial surgeon who invited me to Kenya to help him in his work with children with cleft palate. While there I searched for places that needed water, a hallmark project of Rotary International. I also met Dr. George Oyeho, a Minneapolis Rotarian and he invited me to visit his hometown in Kenya. Through his eyes, I saw a place where I might and participate in long-term community projects. Thus, in 2008, I journeyed from the Foothills to Kenya and began my work in Sigomere.

Tell us about Sasa Harambee and how it operates.

Sasa Harambee is Swahili for "Let's pull together now!" In 2008, George and I founded this U.S.-based nonprofit to support our work in Kenya. We work with CBOs to identify needs, design community-based solutions, seek resources, and deliver them for programs. In recent years, we've launched several Kenyan Community Based Organizations (CBOs) to facilitate programs like SOAP (Soap Organic Agriculture Program) and Together We Succeed (serving People Living With Disabilities) and collaborate with the teen-centered Ugunja Development Initiative. The newest community group we've launched, Sasa Hapo, will serve a larger area with 1 million residents. All this work, including leadership development, is made possible by generous donors in the United States and other nations. And notably, 100% of Sasa Harambee donations still go directly to Kenya to benefit the people. We have no Harambee paid staff in America and our activities are carried out by volunteers or paid by contract with funds from other sources.

How has COVID-19 impacted Sigomere?

Overall, Sasa Harambee's service area has had very few cases of COVID-19. We have also experienced favorable climate conditions, which is great because farmers represent 99% of our program participants, including youth and persons living with disabilities.

What did emerge during the pandemic was a spike in teen pregnancy. So, Sasa Harambee partnered with a local youth group to start a new yearlong program in 22 public schools to establish health clubs. Over 900 teens of both sexes, ages 14 to 20 are meeting once a month to discuss topics including: sexual reproduction, menstrual hygiene, drugs, socially transmitted diseases including HIV, and gender-based violence. The focus is on making good decisions for oneself. Part of the program involves fun service activities. Students are gaining knowledge and are becoming health champions in their schools and communities. Participants get 2 pairs of new underwear and girls will additionally receive a month's supply of sanitary pads at each event.

I know you began your work in Kenya with an organic farming program. What is new there?

In 2009, a Rotary grant funded organic farming training for 50 farmers to plant hay. 16 farmer teachers emerged from the SOAP program and are now leading and guiding local farmers in organic farming practices. Women comprise 73% of SOAP's leadership team and 63% of farmer teachers. The organic farming method they teach, *Push/Pull*, has proven effective. 345 farmers are now

selling hay and generating income through the SOAP cooperative. Farmer teachers benefited tremendously from Buffalo Bikes (a bicycle designed for African terrain) and smartphones funded by supporters' Facebook fundraisers and grants.

Tell us about your other ongoing projects.

Our Water Project is still expanding. In 2015-2016, with funds from Evergreen Rotarians and Conifer Rotary Club, Interact teens at Fitzsimmons Middle School) and others, Sasa Harambee put in 13 springs protections (piping and filtration for natural springs). Eleven of these are still in operation and provide clean water to many families. Protections practically eliminated waterborne disease in a year. A new Rotary grant in 2021 will add 26 springs protections in new locations.

We also have a new art program for children. Obam (a community member) and I teach a weekly art class at a local primary school. The school has had no materials for art. A #2 pencil is all teachers and students have ever had to draw with. The kids routinely ask their teachers: "Is today art day?" They love it!

We continue our successful partnership with *Together We Succeed*, a local organization focused on improving the lives of Persons Living With Disabilities (PWDs). We've been training clinical and community health workers to identify different disabilities and our door to door census of persons with disabilities produced a database for health and policy planning.

In 2018, the Rotary Interact clubs of Fitzsimmons and Conifer High School made the dream of a playground at Small Home, a boarding place for children living with disabilities. a reality. It is another example of how Foothills families have improved lives in Sigomere.

And what's next for Sasa Harambee and Sigomere?

Though Dr. George Oyeho and I now live full time in Kenya, our vision is to establish and build a sustainable development model that will survive us and be replicated across other developing African communities. With the support and generosity of Americans and Coloradans, 345 Sigomere farmers are steadily growing their income and are proof that the Sasa Harambee development model works.

While our programs participants are no longer in immediate risk of hunger, we are focused on raising their income level and building leadership, management, and business skills. We are establishing aggregation centers in 10 areas for buyers to pick up their hay, working on boosting hay production, and buying land to install model hay plantations to increase dependability. Barns for storage are part of our dream. Adding other streams of income like milled products, milk, vegetables, juice, jellies, cheese is being analyzed, too. I want our supporters to know that I live in gratitude for the support of our Foothills communities and the love and kindness you constantly share with Sigomere. We are of one heart, though we are in different geographies. Email me at ccarper1337@gmail.com. I am hoping we can see each other in Colorado this summer.



Yes! I am looking forward to seeing you soon, Carol, and want to support the work of Sasa Harambee in Kenya. I am enclosing a donation of:

\$50 \$75 \$100 \$250 \$500 \$ _____

Name: _____

Address: _____

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Please make your check made payable to Sasa Harambee and mail to: **Sasa Harambee, 225 Union Blvd., Suite #150, Lakewood, CO 80228.**

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Now, Let Us All Pull Together!