







## more than a meal

Jenny and Eileen were both teaching at a primary school when they met, in their twenties – and they've been best friends since!

The pair took up wedding photography on weekends and trekked the globe as travel buddies. Now retired, they're helping to feed 200 children at Esilalei (pronounced eh-sil-a-lay), a Maasai village school in the arid Rift Valley of Tanzania, Africa.

After stepping off the plane in Arusha, a bustling city in Tanzania, Jenny Willis and Eileen Short experienced sensory overload!

**The sights, sounds and smells were vastly different from Australian suburban life.**

The Maasai people (the largest group inhabiting parts of Kenya and northern Tanzania) were out herding skinny goats and cattle along the dirt road. Women were selling charred corn cobs and motorbikes flew past them, carrying up to four people, a few dozen buckets or an entire piece of furniture.

Jenny and Eileen had taken several trips to Africa, but this time they were catching up with someone special – another Aussie, Donna Duggan, founder and director of 'Maasai Wanderings', a safari company founded in 2003 for tourists and students alike.

Over the years, Donna and her Tanzanian husband Nas recognised the Maasai community were given little opportunity for education. The Maasai people speak Ma, while the official language of Tanzania is Swahili. To bridge this language barrier and give the Maasai kids a real shot at an education, Donna set to work establishing four nursery schools teaching Swahili. "Education is a key factor in escaping poverty and giving back to their community," Eileen says. "These people live traditionally, the way they have for centuries and we don't want to change that. But they need to have some form of education for future opportunities."

Seeing Donna's humanitarian work, Jenny and Eileen were inspired to support the nursery school in Esilalei by raising money in Australia, then flying back to Arusha to help Donna with her projects.

"Out of the four schools, Esilalei was the most in need," says Jenny. "We questioned, 'What's the most important thing kids need?' Well, you can't learn anything if you're hungry, so what if we could feed every student?" The friends launched the project, 'Mealtime for Maasai Students'. "There are about 200 kids in Esilalei. To feed one kid porridge for a year costs around \$50. So we knew we had to raise \$10,000. We thought, 'Oh gosh, this is too big for us! How are we going to do this?'" says Eileen.

Two weeks after launching their fundraiser Donna's husband tragically died in a plane accident. Jenny remembers how Donna was devastated, but determined to keep her and Nas' dream alive. "A lot of people





*gave in grief and in memory of Nas. The fundraiser just grew and grew,” Jenny says.*

When Jenny and Eileen landed in Africa three months later, they had raised \$18,000, paying for two years’ worth of food for the children.

Their first order of business – set up a steady supply of porridge and bananas. *“The kids knew the Swahili word for banana (ndizi), but they’d never seen one!”* says Eileen. *“Kids were trying to open them up by squeezing them. One kid was sucking on the yellow skin! We had to show them how to peel a banana! Once they got into it, they just gobbled it up. A lot of the adults had a banana too. The main Maasai diet is cow’s blood, milk and goat’s meat, so bananas were a sweet, unexpected treat.”*

Now every Thursday, a boy comes into the village on a motorbike carrying 200 bananas. *“Between the 3,000 people that live in the district of Esilalei, there are only 4 motorbikes. If the Maasai people are wanting to go out of town, they have to hitch a ride from the main road or walk the 30 kilometres,”* says Jenny.

The pair also introduced a gas cooker because the village cook would make the porridge over an open fire, stinging her eyes. *“The kids brought in a stick every day in order to sustain the fire. But the sticks were getting smaller and more scarce. We felt this needed to change and wanted to be environmentally responsible... so we bought two gas cylinders they could refill and use in rotation,”* says Jenny.

The elders of the village were blown away, says Eileen. *“You’re giving this to us?”* they asked. *We replied, ‘No, it’s 200 people back in Australia giving this to you!’”*

The duo were also able to supply four water tanks to collect clean water, plant shrubs to add vegetation to the land, send the two village lay teachers to a workshop where they could learn the fundamentals of teaching, and provide hippo rollers to the women to improve the carriage of water. *“They roll along the ground like a wheelbarrow, so the women and children don’t have to carry buckets of water on their heads. Health experts have said if you put 20 litres of water on your head every day, by the time you’re 18, you’re*

*likely to have damaged your spinal cord. These kids start at six or seven,”* says Eileen.

*“When it rains in Esilalei, the water takes out bridges. Then the land is coarse and dry. But the Maasai people don’t want to move. They have a real connection to the land. Their ancestors lived there. Even if they move away for education, most go back to the villages,”* says Jenny.

During their six-week stint in Tanzania, Jenny and Eileen visited Esilalei three times. *“It’s a two-hour trip each way and we would only go for the day. We were offered a bomar to sleep in – a mud hut made out of cow dung and straw, but we politely declined,”* says Eileen.

*“We highly recommend doing this kind of gig. Instead of just looking at everything from a distance, immerse yourself. It changes your life. You can’t come away and not think of others. My mind’s always ticking, ‘Could this be given to a kid?’”*

*“We’re just part of a stream of love that’s going through this community. We’re not there to change the world, we’re there to help make their lives a little easier.”*