



Emmanuel (with brush) and his friends build a rocket from trash.

Laughing, Singing, Crafting dreams

Many children in Kenya's Kibera slum don't have rooms of their own, some don't even own a single toy. In art classes, they learn to believe in a happy future. BY BEATRIX SCHNIPPENKOETTER

"Look, a rocket! I'll fly all the way up to the moon", Emmanuel shouts, applying paint to an empty spray can he found in the street. Everything that he and his friends are gluing together and painting here, they found in the alleys outside their houses. These children live in Kibera, the largest poor neighborhood in Nairobi, capital of Kenya in East Africa.

Almost a million people live in Kibera, about as many as in Cologne. A poor neighborhood like this is also called a slum. They exist all over the world; often they are located in the vicinity of large cities. The Kibera slum is itself like a big city, except that it doesn't provide many of the conveniences we associate with our cities. People don't live in houses but are crowded together in small huts made of mud or corrugated iron. They have no running water, no toilet, often not even a kitchen. They cook on little tea stoves on the floor and wash their clothes outside in plastic buckets. When it rains - and it rains a lot - everything gets muddy. Rats scurry, and the water that runs in streams through the slum is gray and polluted. Anyone who drinks this sludge gets sick.

The only thing you can almost always get in Kibera is electricity. When you walk between the huts, you see TVs flicker, hear radios blare and cell phones ring. And you see lots of garbage. It lies around just about anywhere because there is no trash collection. Emmanuel and the other children assemble toys out of the things people throw away.

They don't do this by themselves - once a week special teachers come to their school: they are artists who

make arts and crafts, dance and sing with the kids. For Emmanuel and his friends, this is an extraordinary experience. At his school there is no art or music class to speak of, let alone something as unusual as acrobatics or storytelling.

A normal school day for the kids is long and hard: classes begin at seven in the morning and last until three or five in the afternoon. Almost fifty students are sitting crowded together on wooden benches. Still, Jeff says that school is his favorite place because he can read here. He has no books at home. He lives in a single room with his family of seven. Just like all the other children, he tries to do well in school because he knows: only if he gets an education he will be able to find work later, make money, and leave Kibera. In the stifling air, the children repeat every word the teacher says in unison.



The children in dance class (above) and out in the Kibera slum (below)



Classes with the artists are very different. Vivian and Malika have ballet class once a week. They even have costumes and put on shows every now and then. Lydia, who lives in a small mud hut with her parents and three siblings, says: "When I'm dancing here, it clears my head." - "I want to be a singer," says Mary. She wants to study guitar and piano. She can only make music during art class; her family cannot afford a musical instrument.

Many of the children in Kibera have lost their parents; they are growing up with their neighbors, their grandparents or aunts and uncles. Many people in the slums have no work. They try to earn a little money anyway, for instance some of them sell vegetables or sandals at small stands. The lucky ones find work outside of the slum. Only those who make money can pay the fee for their children's school,

which is about ten euros as month. For many families, that is too much: approximately one out of two children in Kibera doesn't go to school.

The art classes are free; any child can come for music lessons, painting with watercolors or learn how to dance. The aid organization One Fine Day organizes the classes and collects donations from people in order to help the children in Kibera. Vivian and Malika are hoping to leave the slums one day. They dream of a proper apartment with windows and a bathroom. Jeff wants to be a pilot. "It's a well-paying job, and then I get to see the whole world," he states. Joshua wants to be a singer. He writes his own lyrics, has taken music classes for years and sings in a choir. He says he would like to take more music lessons, not just once a week. And he dreams of owning his own guitar someday.

The artists who dance, paint and sing with the children hope that the classes can help Jeff, Vivian, Malika and her friends to discover where their own special talents lie. Twice a year, they work with almost 700 children to put on a big performance. Then the girls and boys get to stand on a stage together and the audience applauds after the show. It makes the children proud, but there is more at stake. "When we are creative, we get to know ourselves, and that is something that gives us strength," says Vivian. There have been art classes in the slum for close to seven years now. Many former students are now teachers' assistants. And who knows, maybe today's students, Jeff, Vivian and Malika, will even become art teachers themselves. Perhaps then they would only come to Kibera as visitors.

