

# a walk for africa

By Michael L. Kern III with Kirk Noonan  
Photography by Michael Goodling and Jeff Nene



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As our team journeyed through Kenya's Mathare Valley — one of the world's poorest communities — I saw, heard, smelled, felt and experienced things that destroyed the barriers separating my isolated world from the impoverished one I was walking through.

It's one thing to hear about hungry children; it's another to look them in the eyes. It's one thing to see a desperate mother on television begging on behalf of her children; it's quite another to shake her hand. It's one thing to imagine how the poorest of the poor live; it's entirely different to walk in their footsteps.

But that's exactly what happened during the HopeWalk that Convoy of Hope offers. I was forced out of my comfort zone and brought face to face with poverty,

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hunger and despair. Though I knew beforehand that I would encounter all these things, I never expected my life, goals, ambitions, dreams and heart to be so utterly transformed by what I experienced.

I **saw** toddlers with runny noses standing at the entrances of flimsy shacks their families called home. Only a few feet away, raw sewage flowed in open gutters; gutters that children were unable to avoid stepping in as they played in their bare feet.

As we walked, I saw mothers with babies straddling their hips. The women peered at me. Their eyes conveyed a hopelessness I had never seen or known.

I **heard** many stories. Their stories. The kind of stories I wished I would have heard 10 years earlier. If I had, perhaps I would have done something sooner to help.

In the distance, I heard the yelling of angry men illegally brewing a beer-like drink, a drink whose primary ingredient was the stream in which the sewage flowed. They,

no doubt, would sell their swill to customers wanting to blunt the misery of this life.

I heard the creaks of our bus as it bumped along the dirt road on our way out of Mathare Valley, creaks that interrupted the deafening silence of our group as we contemplated the despair we had just witnessed.

But nothing I heard was louder than my spirit telling me I must engage in the efforts to help these precious people.

I **smelled** the pungent odor that accompanies such places — the sourness of decay, sickness, trash and excrement. It hung in the air and stuck in my sinuses.

They say smells can evoke good and bad memories that we either forget or suppress. I don't want to forget what I've experienced. I've promised myself not to forget. If I did, my journey to Mathare Valley would be for nothing.

I **felt** deep compassion for the people I met and saw. My time with them made me realize more fully just how unworthy I am

of the multitude of God's blessings on my life. It also produced within me a sense of urgency to do whatever I can to help.

Tears came easily that day. And not just that day, but for many days after. Tears that were shed in prayer for God's mercy to be extended, for God's soldiers (us) to be sent, and for God's kingdom to come quickly.

I **realized** how good I have it in the United States. The cost of admission for such knowledge was seeing how badly others have it. I am certain our Heavenly Father weeps as He sees the abject poverty of His creation and the selfishness of those who can make a difference but choose to remain unengaged.

I realized I want my children to grow up with a servant's heart. I want them to feed and clothe the poor and care for the widows and the orphans. I want them to exercise compassion at every opportunity. I want them to give of themselves — outrageously. I realized for that to happen I need

to intentionally guide them toward those things by the example of my own actions.

I **prayed** that God would use me, enable me and propel me past my personal feelings of inadequacy so that I can fulfill His design for my life.

I prayed that God would use me to inspire others to "go for it" and not wait until tomorrow to make the difference that is needed today. We must dare to go to where people are hurting, hungry, thirsty and hopeless. We must go now!

I **vowed** to never forget the things I saw, heard, smelled, felt, realized and prayed. I vowed to never allow myself to become desensitized to the needs of others. I vowed to never become complacent in my service to the King.

So should you. **tpe**

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