



Linda Ercole-Musso, who chairs the African Children's Haven board, holds up an Agbada, a traditional African robe, to Karmen Juanez at Ambassador Preparatory Academy in Galveston.

[Photo by Jennifer Reynolds - See More Photos](#)

## Pen pal letters link isle, African students

[By Ed Sulzberger](#)

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GALVESTON — Students at Galveston's Ambassador Preparatory Academy are learning about Africa in a program that will help them communicate with children at a small school in East Africa.

Since early September, fourth-graders at the 4-year-old charter school have been writing letters and preparing materials for the students at St. Philip's Primary School in Nairobi, Kenya.

The project, a joint program between the two schools, is coordinated by African Children's Haven, a Galveston nonprofit. The first group of letters will be hand carried to Kenya in November.

“The children at Ambassador want to know everything about Africa: what it feels, smells, sounds and looks like. Linda Ercole-Musso of African Childrens Haven’s said. “They especially want to know about the animals and what tastes like.”

Ercole-Musso, who chairs the African Childrens Haven board, is a teacher and artist with experience working with students both in the U.S. and overseas.

“The children are an inspiration,” she said. “They want to know about the world and they are willing to do the research to find out. What I teach them about Africa is just a fraction of what they’ve learned on their own.”

Ambassador’s administrator, Dr. Pat Williams, said: “The project, known as African Pen Pal, has motivated students not only to learn about Africa but to write about it. Knowing someone like Linda who’s lived and worked many years in Africa gives them a connection to the children at St. Philip’s and is a great motivator.”

Williams said the project provides real life experience about Africa that can’t be found in textbooks.

St. Philip’s Primary is a small school built and paid for by parents to provide their children with a place to learn to begin lifting themselves out of poverty.

“The school is very poor,” Ercole-Musso said. “It’s a collection of huts made of scrap lumber and sheet metal that provides an intensive curriculum that’s complemented by a corps of dedicated teachers.”

The St. Philip’s kids, she said, are interested in many of the same things as the kids at Ambassador. Although they live near a game reserve that’s home to tens of thousands of animals, most have never seen them.

That’s why African Childrens Haven is sponsoring a field trip in early October that will take more than 100 kids on a bus to the Nairobi game reserve to see giraffes, lions, cheetahs and gazelles.

“Our expectation is that they’ll tell the children at Ambassadors about their trip when they respond to their pen pal letters,” Ercole-Musso said.

Lowie Paz, the fourth-grade teacher at Ambassador who developed the idea for the project, says that African Childrens Haven connects two continents of the world through writing.

The objective is to help students enhance their reading and writing skills by using resources like African Childrens Haven that are available in Galveston.

“It makes reading and writing fun and gives it a purpose,” he said. “We anticipate that it will be equally valuable for the kids at St. Philip’s.”

Ed Sulzberger, a fundraising and public relations consultant, is volunteer director of African Childrens Haven.