

Pen pal presents



Courtesy-Photo

Students in Africa are part of a pen pal exchange with Ambassadors Preparatory Academy fifth graders. The program is sponsored by African Children's Haven, a Galveston nonprofit that supports education, health and nutrition projects for African orphans and at-risk children.

By **ED SULZBERGER**
African Children's Haven

» GALVESTON

A pen pal project originally set up to improve writing skills and promote cultural exchanges between fifth graders in Kenya and Galveston has led to new friendships and a gift program for students and staff.

"We were thrilled and grateful to receive such beautiful handmade gifts from Kenya," the project's founder Linda Ercole-Musso. The pen pal project links students at Galveston's Ambassadors Preparatory Academy and St. Philips School Mathare in Nairobi, Kenya.

The first round of pen pal letters left Nairobi in May of 2011 and were answered the following October by students at Ambassadors. Since then two more rounds of letters have been exchanged. The most popular topics: sports, food, hobbies and African wildlife.

The U.S. kids are fascinated by Africa's big game animals, especially lions and elephants. "They are also interested in similarities and differences in the culture, language, music and school setting of their pen pals at St. Phillips," said Ambassadors' administrator, Pat Williams.

"An additional benefit is it encourages students to think about a range of topics by integrating information about things like geography, science and environment."

The initiative is sponsored by African Children's Haven, a Galveston nonprofit that supports education, health and nutrition projects for African orphans and at-risk children.

The Kenyan students sent the first set of gifts in August. All were produced as part of a project aimed at training Kenyan children to recycle ordinary objects into useful products, said Wilson Andeniyi. Included were stuffed animals, costume jewelry and

small toys. Andeniyi is the Director and Head Teacher of St. Philip's School Mathare.

The school, established by parents concerned about the education of their children, is in the second largest slum in East Africa. The teachers earn an average of \$50 month but, until recently, even that small amount was frequently beyond the reach of the school's finances. African Children's Haven now provides more than half of the school's teaching budget and invests in efforts to improve teachers' professional skills.

"The pen pal project has helped to boost student creativity and greatly improved writing skills," Andeniyi added. "It's simple, cheap and really popular with the children."

It's also popular with teachers. Both Williams and Andeniyi say the project has improved writing skills and contributed to the children's

“ Jambol! A Swahili word which means hello.”

“My pet is called cat.”

Pen pal quotes from Kenya

“ First of all, I just want to say that I loved your letter. When I heard you were going to the game park, I wanted to be you. I've heard many good things about you bro.”

“I am currently working on my dancing skills to become a famous dancer.”

“In closing, I love you, and one day I want to meet you.”

Pen pal quotes from Galveston

See pen pal | B3

EDUCATION



JENNIFER REYNOLDS/The Daily News

Linda Ercole-Musso, who chairs the African Children's Haven board, watches Ambassadors Preparatory Academy fifth graders decorate bracelets for their pen pals in Kenya. **Below left and middle**, fifth graders Aaliyah Jackson and Quinton Cooper show off jewelry from their Kenyan pen pals. **Below right**, fifth grader Marquez Holmes decorates a bracelet for his Kenyan pen pal.

PEN PAL

Continued from Page B1

understanding of other countries. "Drafting pen pal letters has stimulated an interest in writing and has promoted creative practices for teaching and learning," Williams said.

"The letters are really charming and really inspiring," Ercole-Musso

added. "The children basically own the project. The students take it upon themselves to learn about their pen pal partners and how they live."

For example, the children at Ambassadors were fascinated to find out that when it's winter in Galveston it's summer in Kenya. One student used the school's computer to translate her letter into Swahili,

a local language widely used in East Africa. St. Philips students are taught in both English and Swahili.

Andenyi believes that the project has also taught his students about life in the U.S. "Our children are really interested to learn more about America. The pen pal program makes that possible," he said.

The next set of pen pal



At a glance

Galveston-based African Children's Haven supports education, health and nutrition projects in Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania. For more information please visit www.africanchildrenshaven.org.



Online

» Learn more about St. Philips School Mathare and Ambassadors Preparatory at <http://vimeo.com/4559302>; <http://www.apagalv.org>.

» See a video about the pen pal program made by students at Ambassador's Preparatory Academy and their teacher Lowie Paz at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HaefzEt43f0&feature=fvsvr>

letters is scheduled to reach Kenya in December and arrive in time for the holidays along with gifts for the children at St. Philips.

