

# Making the Connection

**Susan Merrett**

**P**art of our school's motto is, "to reach out to others, to strive for understanding, and to share our talents." Last fall, our middle-school students were given an opportunity to put these words into practice. Through a connection with visiting artist Nip Rogers, students were introduced to Keela Dates.

Keela is the founder of Reason2Smile, a support organization for Jambo Jipya, a school in Kenya for orphaned and at-risk children. Since 2004, the school has expanded from one mud hut to eleven cement classrooms with 300 students, ages three to eighteen. Keela spends her time traveling back and forth between the United States and Kenya, raising money for the school.

Students listened to Keela's presentation and viewed pictures of the students her organization supports at Jambo Jipya. The presentation left our students inspired to reach out. They voiced a desire to design T-shirts for the Kenyan students that Keela could take with her on her next trip. They would send her back with forty individually designed shirts, forty blank shirts, and fabric markers so the Kenyan students could design their own shirts.

## **Bringing Designs to Life**

Students discussed images that would convey something about themselves and our American culture, trying to steer clear of commercial icons. On sketch paper, they developed several possibilities and picked one to enhance as their final image.



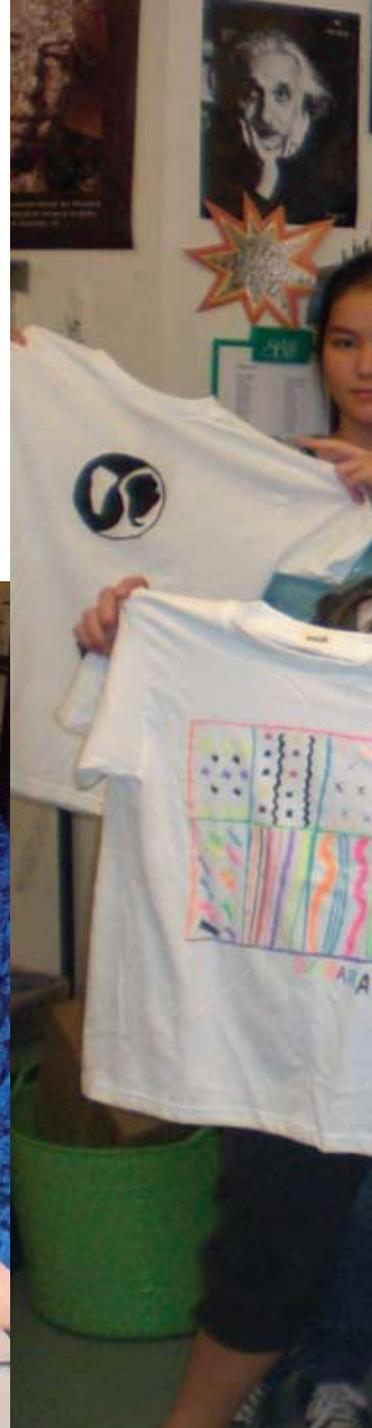
Once they were satisfied with their design, they taped their drawing to a piece of cardboard and placed it inside the shirt to prevent the marker or paint from bleeding through to the back of the shirt. With pencil, they traced the design onto the front of the shirt, taking care to ensure that the shirt didn't slide around. They went to work with fabric markers and fabric paints, and carefully brought the design to life adding color.

Students shared their work with each other as each shirt developed

into a unique work of art. When they were done, each student was photographed with his or her shirt, so that the Kenyan student receiving it would have a picture of the designer.

## **Delivering the Goods**

When Keela traveled back to Kenya in December, she packed the designed and blank T-shirts and markers. The Kenyan students were delighted to receive their art shirts. They wore them daily and soon began designing shirts for their American buddies.





They worked thoughtfully, reciprocating with images from their lives on the other side of the globe.

Upon Keela's return to the States in February, she revisited our school, bringing photos of the Kenyan students wearing the T-shirts they received, along with the shirts they designed for their fellow American students. Our middle schoolers were

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extremely excited and delighted by their gift of an authentic African artwork. Photos of their "buddies" were immediately tacked to their lockers and they asked if they continue this exchange next year.

Hopefully this was the beginning of a lasting cultural exchange between the students at Jambo Jipya and this inspired group of middle-school students in

upstate New York, who learned that through art you can communicate across language barriers, gain understanding, and form new relationships. 

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**WEB LINK**

[www.reason2smile.org/jambo-jipya-school](http://www.reason2smile.org/jambo-jipya-school)