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COLUMBIA — Two days before her 14-hour flight, tears streamed down Nicole Henry’s face as she realized she would board a plane with nine people she never met before, to Nairobi, Kenya.

After that night, Henry, a 27-year-old kindergarten teacher at the Horace W. Porter School in Columbia, remembered going home and crying, asking herself if she was really going to go to Africa.

But of course she would go. Going to Africa has been something she has wanted to do ever since she could remember, and her friends, family, co-workers and roller derby teammates all pitched in to pay for the $3,000 trip to teach at the Anjali Primary School and update the students’ sponsorship for two weeks.

After the previous school year ended in June, Henry embarked on a two-week adventure to Africa from June 17 until July 3.

The Anjali Primary School educates the poorest children in the 3-mile long Kibera slum of Kenya. Wellingtone Nabwoba founded the school for not only his three sons, but also for three children he took in.

One of his students is finishing his schooling and will be the first Anjali student to go on to receive a master’s degree.

According to Henry, out of 130 schools, Anjali ranked first in academic testing.

“I’ve always wanted to work with the kids there. I’ve been volunteering with kids forever, I’ve always liked working with kids and, for whatever reason, I’ve always wanted to work with those specific kids,” Henry said at a blue horseshoe-shaped table in the middle of her classroom, decorated with bright colors and student projects.

When Henry boarded the plane for Anjali, she was full of apprehension and nerves, but as soon as she boarded, those feelings went away as her dream of going to Africa came to actuality.

“We were at Boston at Logan (International Airport) and I was just like, ‘Oh my god,’ but once I got on the plane I calmed down,” said Henry.

The plane landed at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in Nairobi after sunset and the group was taken to Nabwoba’s home, located in a gated community where no one is allowed outside from 11 at night to 5 in the morning because the area is so violent.

The trip was almost canceled because of a recent shooting.

Upon arrival at Nabwoba’s home, where he lives with his wife, Leonida, two house girls, five children and two students from Anjali, the group said a prayer and was served dinner.

“They eat dinner at 8 o’clock at night, so when we got there we were expected to eat and when they put food in front of you, you eat it because it’s considered rude not to eat it,” said Henry.

After dinner, Henry helped one of the house girls, Flora, wash dishes and joined the rest of the group for nightly devotional, akin to a nightly prayer in U.S. culture where a Bible passage is read and discussed and each person talks about their blessings for the day.

The next day, the group of nine trekked through rain and mud that stuck to their shoes to get to Anjali.

The dumps in the area are at capacity, so people throw trash in the streets, and some people urinate in the streets, said Henry.

“There were people everywhere because it’s a market area, and they’re looking at us. It was really overwhelming to walk into. They make you be really careful, keep your stuff on you. You don’t want anyone taking anything from you,” said Henry.

Upon arrival at the school, a morning assembly welcomed the group with the news and pledge to the Kenyan flag.

“That was really, really amazing to watch,” said Henry.

After the assembly, the group conducted vision and hearing screenings on the children. Henry was in charge of vision screenings, so she “was the crazy lady with a giant spoon coming at them,” she said.

“People just so happy because they know that that’s how they’re getting themselves to a better life. If they don’t work hard, then they don’t get out of the slum. They’re just some of the greatest kids I’ve ever met,” said Henry. “They know that family and love and friendship are what matters. They know if they have that, they have everything they need … it’s not the material things.”

ABOVE: Nicole Henry, a kindergarten teacher at Horace W. Porter School in Columbia, recently spent two weeks in Kenya teaching at the Anjali Primary School. Here, she poses with one of the students after making windsocks. RIGHT: Students participate in an assembly at the school.