

CENTERVILLE- WASHINGTON **Neighbors**

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MEET the
Cumming Family:
Resilient. Refined. Real.



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Africa is unrelentingly harsh. And breathtakingly beautiful. And devastating. And, above all, authentic.

When Centerville High School (CHS) alumna Heather Corinne Cumming joined the Peace Corps in 2004, she had no idea how the experience would change the trajectory of her life.

Heather had a typical Centerville childhood. She graduated from CHS in 1998, attended University of Cincinnati for a year and earned her bachelor of science degree from University of Colorado at Boulder (with a year of study in Norwich, England, thrown in for good measure).

Even as a child, however, she felt a pull to do something of value. “Even at age 6 or 7, I knew how much food we wasted,” Heather said. “When I was 8 years old, my grandparents went on safari in Kenya. My grandma sent me a postcard of two giraffes grazing, which I still have; and I knew I needed to be there.”

Her eventual introduction to the continent of Africa took place as a Peace Corps volunteer (2004-06) in Zambia, one of the world’s poorest countries. “The people here live in a state of chronic starvation and illness,” she said. “They have dealt with this for centuries. There are no government

resources set up for housing, education or food; so even when people eat, they get only enough to take the edge off.” Very few Americans can comprehend the overwhelming discrepancy between the resources of the West and other parts of the world. Even the highest paid African workers would be considered poor in the U.S.

After her Peace Corps service, Heather landed nearly 5,000 miles away, at a camp on the eastern Sierra Leone-Liberia border, where she worked with former child soldiers. Many were teens who had already lived through unimaginable atrocities, yet were determined to reclaim their lives.

While at the camp, Heather met a graphic designer-portrait painter. The two fell in love. Although their union eventually dissolved, one incredibly bright star resulted: Heather’s daughter, Radiance, now 12. She lives up to her name, both inside and out. The fiercely independent young woman is passionate about animals. Radiance has launched a program called “Radiant Street Beasts,” which funds feeding and veterinary care for stray animals (primarily cats) in Zambia.

Driven to make a difference, Heather established the Simwatachela Sustainable Agricultural and Arts Program (SSAAP) in 2009, for both Zambia and Sierra Leone.

The 501(c)(3) organization’s mission is “to alleviate starvation by securing a sustainable water source; to promote sustainable agriculture and nutrition; and to promote empowerment through income-generating activities.” Heather has lived in the community since SSAAP’s founding, adopting the local ways and learning to speak ci-Tonga, the language of Southern Province, Zambia.

Members of the community create and sell artwork to generate income. The organization empowers children and adults (especially women), through assistance with education. It provides microloans for small businesses, such as animal husbandry, agriculture and sewing. In addition, it offers education on the importance of basic sanitation and hygiene, as well as helping Ebola survivors rebuild their lives. Perhaps SSAAP’s greatest endeavor is bringing clean drinking water and irrigation systems to dry rural areas, to reduce chronic starvation.

Centerville residents Mike and Sue Fanelli learned of SSAAP through a presentation that Heather’s mother made at their church. They were inspired to make a donation. “Then on my mother’s 90th birthday, we sponsored a well to be dug for a village in her name,” said Mike. “The people in the



Heather displays SSAAP artwork. In the background are a photo of Radiance's cousins (grandchildren of a UN employee) and a 20-liter jerrican used to carry water from the village's central well.

village couldn't understand why someone in the USA, who doesn't even know them, would pay to have a new well dug so they could have clean, safe water. As a thank you, they built my mom a house in the village, so she would have a place to stay if she ever came to visit them!" The couple has since sponsored additional wells.

Over the past decade, Heather and Radiance have spent approximately 75% of their time in Africa. When they travel back to the U.S., Heather splits her time between her father's Centerville home and Colorado. Much of her time here is dedicated to fundraising, to continue making an impact on the lives of those she has grown to love. Their ways are now so deeply ingrained in her heart that returning to the States delivers a bit of a culture shock. "Americans are not very direct; for instance, they'll say things are okay when they're not," Heather stated. "No one in Africa does that. They are very direct and don't suffer frivolity. They don't bother with small talk and get straight to the point. At the same time, they're very warm and human—wired to nature, emotion and instinct."

The process of refining frees substances from impurities, often through the use of intense heat, pressure or other methods. Perhaps Heather's greatest realization is that the suffering so long endured by the people of Africa is exactly what enables them to drink in every moment that they're given.

"We take life so seriously here," she mused. "Through the lens of an African, it's just life. You learn to live in harmony with nature. You live or you die, and that's the end of it; there isn't any medical buffer in between. I feel safest in Africa. I wouldn't have spent the prime of my life there and raised my daughter there, if I did not.

"The American perspective on Africa is the Kenyan safari sunset with the acacia tree and silhouette of the giraffe in the backdrop," she went on. "Africa is this, but not limited to this. It is so many things. It is a whole world apart from our culture—a world that thinks of collective first, before the self; a world where people survive alongside and in harmony with nature; a world where people are phenomenally strong.

"We have to do justice to the African people: the calm, strong, sensual and wild, deep and natural, poetic and often misunderstood voice of an entire continent of people living off the land, building their homes from earth and cultivating the land to grow their food. Africans are a sect of humanity who don't care if they die, so long as they have lived; where life spans are short, but abundance in spirit is long. Africa isn't what we want it to be; it is what nature is."

To find out more about SSAAP and its efforts, go to www.ssaap.org or email ssaapafrika@gmail.com.



Home schooling travels with Radiance.



Radiance expresses her creative side, selling her jewelry through SSAAP to benefit the Radiant Street Beasts program.