

Speech by Kate Anthony

YWPA District and International Winner 2009

Good afternoon. My name is Kate Anthony, I'm 17 and a graduate of the International School of Basel where I completed my IB exams this May. While at the ISB, I had the opportunity to attend two volunteer trips – the first a school trip to South Africa, where we worked in the townships and with local schools, and the second a self-funded service trip to Kenya, with an organization called Free the Children, helping to build a primary school. These two experiences opened my eyes to the shocking poverty that still exists in the 21st century, filled me with a passion for volunteering and developed my fierce belief that education is the best way, the only way to achieve sustainable development and lift millions of children and their communities out of poverty's vicious circle.

My interest in women's rights began, too, in Africa. There I found it was the women who were truly involved in the betterment of their community – it was women alongside whom I dug foundations in a Habitat for Humanity build outside Cape Town, women who carried the heavy buckets of water for mixing concrete, women who opened the doors of their house to AIDS affected orphans. I'm not saying that men didn't also do their part – I met many extraordinary male builders in Kenya. However, while for the most part the men were employed, the women gave up their free time to work with us. It was the women who, after the build, would go home and tend to their crops and animals, cook dinner, look after their children. To see the fervour, and the joy with which they worked was truly awe-inspiring. It was my memories of these women, which motivated me to apply for this award.

When I returned home, I was eager to continue my involvement with women's development and education initiatives. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that education and women's development were inexorably linked. It is my belief that improving women's access to education could help lift thousands of girls, and their children out of poverty. This is for three main reasons.

Firstly, the gap between education of girls and boys remains huge, especially in developing countries. Access to education is a universal human right, but girls' enrolment in school is far from universal. 100 million girls will drop out of primary school this year – to marry, to care for their families, to save money, to start work. It is small wonder that women remain behind in the workplace, in government, when, in many developing countries they are denied the opportunity of education – the strongest base for development. Please don't misunderstand me – I don't mean to pursue women's education to the detriment of that of men. I only mean to address persisting gender inequalities. I believe in equality for all, and consequently, it seems only just, that women, as half the world population, comprise half the world's school population.

Secondly, education can help to address deeply rooted inequalities within communities. In Kenya, I spoke with girls who, at age 12 would previously have been

married, about their plans to attend high school and university. Education gives women more choice and more opportunity – to attend school now and marry later, to become teachers, lawyers, to start their own businesses. In Kenya I also spoke with a member of the Kipsigi community, who revealed that greater access to education had led to re-evaluation of his tribe's policies on female genital mutilation, a practice that can harm women irreparably. It was inspiring to watch how this lessening of gender disparity through education was creating a new generation of empowered, self-confident women, with the ability to make their own choices.

Thirdly, education can vastly increase the living standards and health of women, and, by default, entire communities. Educated women have fewer children, are half as likely to contract AIDS and are more assertive in their choice of husband. Education about hygiene and disease prevention can stop the spread of many diseases such as Cholera, Tuberculosis and Malaria, saving the lives of many women, men and children. Integrating family planning into education can give women greater control over their future, and consequently their living standards.

But education of women accomplishes more, far more than this. Education of women in many countries yields far higher returns than education of men – according to World Bank, if female farmers in Kenya had the same education as male farmers, crop yields could rise by 22%. Women are far more likely to use gains in education and income for the betterment of their community. For example, in Kenya, a woman called Beatrice began an organization, comprised of the mothers of her community, where, each month, every woman would place a small sum of money into a pot. They would then use this money to buy one woman from the group something that they needed – a toilet or a new roof. One woman, one household at a time, this community lifted its living standards. Kofi Annan once called it “the single highest returning social investment in the world today”. It has become clear that women's education cannot be ignored. It emancipates and empowers women, and leads to greater opportunities for all.

I have seen the impact education can have. I have met girls who have told me of their dreams to become teachers, lawyers; I have seen women who have used knowledge gained in school to defy convention and raise their own living standards. I have met Kenyan mothers who were so convinced of the power of education that they dug, by hand, a path from the main road, to their community, kilometres away so that Free the Children could build a school there. I have seen that road. And that, above all, has convinced me that education is the path to development.

It is for this reason that I am using all the prize money gained from the ZONTA YWPA to fund the building of another Free the Children school in Kenya. I am honoured and extremely grateful to accept this award. Thank you so much.