

Dear St Al Sponsors,

I want to share with you my experience visiting St Al's this past June/July. I continue to be grateful for having taken this pilgrimage to learn about the metamorphosis of an idea to support vulnerable youth.

The visual contrast is overwhelming. Students who came to school fifteen years ago took classes in a building with a dirt floor and tin roof. Rooms were partitioned to accommodate the different grades. The noise of the community was ever present. It was a difficult environment in which to learn. BUT, it was an opportunity to move forward for youth who never imagined that they would be able to attend secondary school.

Today, students attending the new school built in 2010 have access to science labs, a broad curriculum, meeting spaces, quiet study, physical education, after school programs and more. The experienced, trained teachers and staff promote, provide and support active learning. These students now have a greater possibility to achieve acceptance for university and higher learning.

However, that is not the whole story. We, too, are part of that winning team that gives these ambitious and eager youth the ability to move beyond their difficult circumstances. Our financial support gives the children their place in an environment that is not only academically strong but also is loving and nurturing; a safe space that provides the students with a holistic framework and structure for daily living.

I learned from speaking with the students at St Al's that equally important as our sponsor dollars are our conversations. Every letter that we write to our students cements a connection of caring and vision. To know that someone whom they haven't even met cares about their future and shares praise and gratitude for their hard work makes them feel special. Our stories about our families, our work, our children and grandchildren, our struggles and our joys build a relationship that helps to motivate our student to greater things. They receive a small peek into a broader world that spreads beyond the limits of their own sphere.

From my own experience, I also selfishly would voice that I have gained so much from the back-and-forth letters between myself and my sponsored students. Each one has shared with me their hopes and dreams and their difficulties. They have opened my privileged eyes to the difficult choices that these young people make every day. They have humbled me with their thanks for my letters and my support and reordered my priorities. They have found a place in my heart that continues to grow with each letter we write to each other.

I hope and pray that you, too, have had as meaningful a relationship with your student. They are the future. We can play an important role in helping to mold that future through our words as well as our dollars.

Gratefully,

*Terri Mierswa*

