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Maasai culture showcase has Saturday debut

■ Program aims to connect cultural dots between U.S., Africa and help Africans

By Robert Jordan
STAFF WRITER

LIVERMORE — Erna Grasz has two advanced engineering degrees and knows that parallel lines never intersect. For most of her life, the Livermore resident never questioned that mathematical principal, but that changed after a two-week trip to Africa.

During that 2005 excursion, Grasz and her husband, Mark Newton, crossed paths with two women trying to improve the quality of life and education for children in East Africa.

The encounters moved Grasz so much that she decided she had to help and started Asante Africa, a non-profit aimed at providing children in East Africa with a quality education. Asante is Swahili for "mutual thanks."

"Our worlds were running on different planes," said Grasz about the meeting. "And because of two weeks, our worlds intersected and created a new future, for both ours and theirs."

On Saturday, Asante Africa will host an opportunity for the public to meet and experience the Maasai culture at two interactive shows held at the Masonic Center in Pleasanton.

The shows begin at 10 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. Hellen Nkuraiya, one of the women Grasz met on the trip, and Sabore Ole Oiyee, a Maasai tribal leader, will demonstrate everything from warrior training for boys, that includes spear throwing, to the making of tools, jewelry and clothes for girls.

Oiyee and Nkuraiya, of Ke-

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— Sabore Ole Oiyee, tribal elder

nya, have been in the Bay Area since September. They have been sharing the Maasai culture at various schools, libraries and event centers throughout the area. The events have all been in an effort to raise funds for Asante Africa.

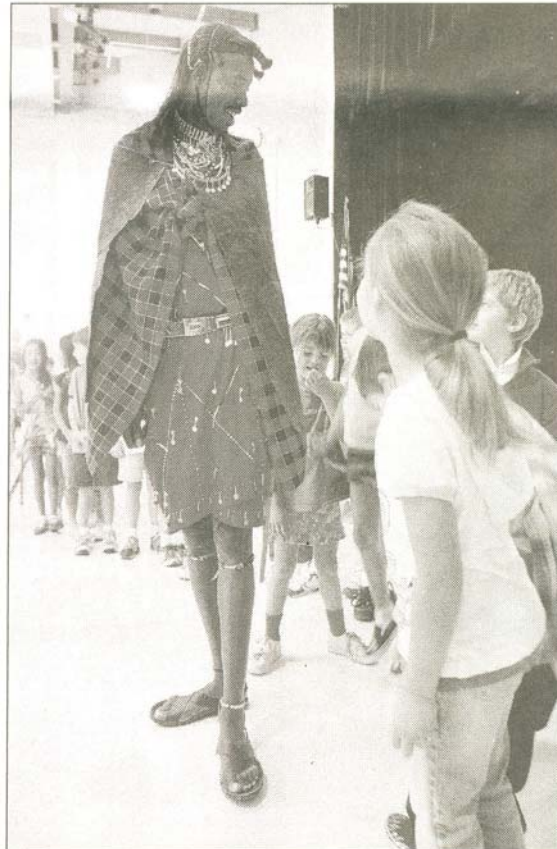
So far, Grasz and Asante Africa have raised money to build 12 new classrooms, 38 toilets, a nursery, a water project and a top floor to a school. They have also purchased more than 5,000 textbooks and sponsored 54 children to attend school in East Africa. Asante Africa raised \$130,000 in 2007.

By early 2009, a \$50,000 school compound, complete with classrooms, a dormitory and housing for teachers is expected to be completed in East Africa.

"There are dots (in life), and they get connected sometimes," said Grasz, the vice president of Phillips Health Care. "We are in charge of the dots, and sometimes we are not. I'm not a believer in fate, but I am becoming more aware of things happening."

The first dot that Grasz, 45, connected with was Emmy Moshi, a Tanzanian woman, trying to build schools in impoverished villages.

That encounter led to Nkuraiya, a former school principal, trying to help end gender discrimination against young girls and stop them from having their education halted at



JIM STEVENS/STAFF

MAASAI TRIBAL WARRIOR ELDER Sabore Ole Oiyee, at 6-foot-7-inches, towers over the students at Sunset Elementary School in Livermore, where warriors presented a program about the culture of the Maasai on Wednesday. The Asante Africa Foundation, which promotes education in Kenya, is visiting schools in the area.

age 10 to be married off.

In turn, Nkuraiya introduced Grasz to Oiyee, the first in his village of Maji Moto to attend high school.

Grasz, a child of a single-working mother, was the first in her family to go to college and understood the barriers Nkuraiya, Oiyee and Moshi faced in trying to provide an education for children in Africa.

"There is no difference between children here (in the US) and children in Africa," Oiyee said after a presentation on Maasai culture to students at Rancho Las Positas Elementary in Livermore. "They all have the same heart."

Through Asante Africa, Nkuraiya and Oiyee gave elementary school students at Ran-

cho Las Positas and Sunset in Livermore a small show-and-tell presentation on Tuesday and Wednesday.

The students heard how the Maasai boys go through seven to eight years of warrior training that includes how to survive in the bush and protect the herds from lions and other predators. The students also had a chance to experience Maasai songs, dances and attire.

"Africa touched my heart," said Grasz, who has traveled the world. "... You can do so much with so little money, and we have trusted people there and that has never happened in other countries."

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