

Fresh Start in Africa

A Special Boarding School in Kenya Gives Troubled Boys Another Chance

By Andrew Goldstein

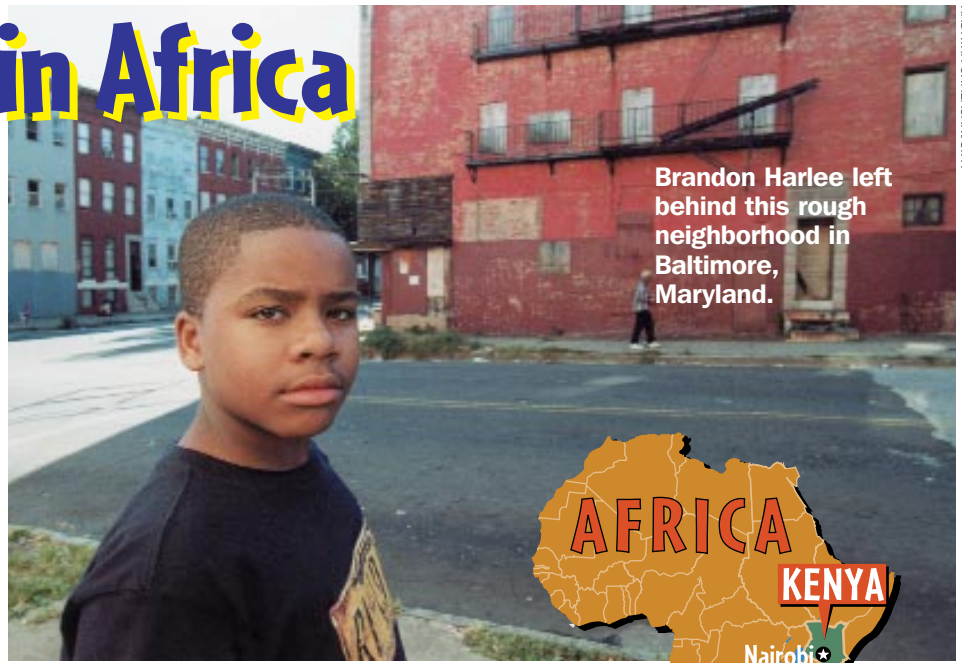
Brandon Harlee grew up in a tough neighborhood in Baltimore, Maryland. It was filled with drugs and gangs. Even little kids learned to act tough there. By sixth grade, Brandon had become too much for his mom and his school to handle. He earned bad grades and was always fighting.

Then Brandon got an amazing chance to change his life. Thanks to an unusual program, he was sent to a school in Africa. For Brandon, things didn't start well in Africa. But soon he began to climb trees, collect bugs, do homework, read—and learn.

A New Beginning

Robert Embry got the idea for the school in Africa. He works for a group that tries to help Baltimore schools. He asked school principals what they needed most. They said some students made it tough for the others to learn. The principals wanted to get help for those troublemakers.

So Embry's group set up a new school in the African nation of Kenya. The school



Brandon Harlee left behind this rough neighborhood in Baltimore, Maryland.

was named Baraka. This word means “blessing” in Swahili, an African language. Half of Baraka's teachers are Kenyan. The other half are American. The boys are chosen because they have problems in school but show some promise. Brandon had never brought a single book home from school. At Baraka, he had to take hard classes to catch up.

A Tough Start

Brandon started out talking back to his teachers. His punishment was having to live outside in a tent. Brandon soon learned that staying out of trouble would earn him neat stuff—safaris (trips to see animals in the wild), video nights, and visits to Kenya's capital, Nairobi.

When the boys return to the U.S., they are placed in a good public school or Embry's

group pays for a private school.

Brandon thinks what he learned at Baraka was important. “I learned not to be a ringleader or a crowd follower,” he says. He finished seventh and eighth grades in Kenya and was named Most Improved Student. Now Brandon is in high school in Baltimore. He got an A+ on his first Latin test!



Brandon and a Baraka classmate get a lesson from a member of a local tribe.

RADHIKA CHALASANSIPA

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Comprehension Connection



Before Reading

1. Read the article title and the sentence below it. What do you think the article will be about?
2. Do you know what a boarding school is? What do you think it is like at such a school?
3. What do you think the writer means by a “fresh start”? Why might troubled boys need a fresh start?

During Reading

1. How does the writer feel about this topic?
2. How did going to Baraka change Brandon Harlee?
3. What details are most interesting to you in this article? Why?

After Reading

1. What do you think about Brandon’s punishment at Baraka? Was it too hard? Why or why not?
2. How do you think being sent to Baraka helps boys?
3. What is the main idea of the article? How can you prove it?

Skill Focus

Connecting What You Read to Your Life

When you read something new, you should just think about the words in front of you. Right? Wrong! Thinking about your own experiences helps you understand new things you read.

In fact, this is one way we learn. We come upon something new. We picture something similar that we already know and compare the old and the new. The brain then adds the new to the old. We learn.

For example, when you read about Brandon, you probably thought about kids you know who have problems in school. Maybe they aren’t as troubled as Brandon, but they can make life hard for everyone in class. This background helps you understand why it was helpful to take Brandon out of public school.

You may not know about boarding schools, but you may have spent some time at camp, away from home. This experience helps you understand what it was like for Brandon to be far from home. Everyone has talked back one time or another and been punished for it. This experience also helps you understand Brandon’s experience. You compare his punishment to yours in your mind. You see how strict Baraka is.

Writer’s World

1. Pretend you are an American student at Baraka. Write in your journal about what you do in school. Tell if and how you think it is helping you.
2. What animals might Brandon see on a safari in Kenya? Research the wildlife of this country. Write a booklet for a safari company. Describe the sights and sounds visitors will enjoy.
3. How should kids be punished for fighting in school? For talking back to teachers? State your opinion in writing. Then write the reasons you think as you do.

