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The Grace of Good Work Jeff Coffey's Fair Flies

Henry Hughes

Success, a Green Butt Skunk in Kenya. Funny that there are no skunks or summer steelhead in Kenya but we sure can tie the flies there.

Four years ago, Jeff Coffey's wife, Lori, was critically ill with a flare-up of Crohn's disease that required a major operation. "The doctors didn't think she would make it," Jeff explains. To Jeff and Lori's surprise, post-surgery tests also revealed that she was pregnant. "Now two lives were in serious danger," Jeff shakes his head. The Coffey family, including two daughters, 11 and 13,

were living in Bend, Oregon, where Jeff loved to fly fish and guide, and where he was managing his fourth start-up software company. "But it all came down to this," he says. Lori amazed doctors with a full recovery, giving birth in December 2012 to a healthy daughter, Gracie. "Mother and child are doing great," Jeff smiles. "It was a miracle, and I knew it would change my life."

Jeff quit his job in Bend and moved his family west of the Cascades to help manage and guide white water raft trips for a youth program. "My values changed. I wanted to do work that directly benefitted people," he says. He also wanted to start a business related to fly fishing. "I always thought fly fishermen were very conscientious, but I was shocked by some of their business practices." Outsourcing fly fishing gear to factories in developing nations has been practiced for decades, and the manufacture of flies—an \$82 million a year business according to the American Fly-Fishing Trade Association—is no exception. There are many stifling fly factories in Asia, South America and Africa that pay tiers unlivable wages.

I visit Jeff in his unassuming suburban home outside Portland, Oregon, and hand him a smartly





Hope in the country. Fair Flies is working to help the tiers relocate back to their home communities in northern Kenya and out of the slums where life is difficult.

packaged Dryfly Selection that I picked up at a department store down the road. It contains six flies for the bargain price of \$4.79. He holds the package and tilts his head. “Sweatshop flies,” he says. “When a fly costs less than a dollar, you can bet the tier is getting a penny or less for each fly. You can’t live on that.” From my other pocket, I pull out a box of Jeff Coffey’s own Fair Flies, and the story is very different.

Jeff followed the ground breaking models of fair trade coffee distributors and fly trade entrepreneurs such as Dennis Black, who in 1972 founded Umpqua Feather Merchants and its factories in India, Sri Lanka and Thailand. Black insisted his tiers receive a decent wage and health care. Jeff launched the corporation Fair Flies to go one step farther: “To pay a good salary and help the tying groups establish their own business. People work with us, not for us.”

Operating for just over a year, Fair Flies’ profits have been modest—about \$7,000 for 2015—but the impact on his tiers in the East African nation of Kenya has been profound. Fair Flies pays tiers ten cents per fly, and contributes another twenty cents per fly to the local tying collective, which can be used for healthcare, annuities, and building a business. And though Jeff strongly believes in “trade over aid,” he has also set up the non-profit, Flies of Hope, which has begun addressing community needs such as clean water and orphanages, as well as fighting the horrors of human trafficking.

Jeff assembled the workers through an “honest and enterprising” middle-aged Kenyan man, Gamaliel Omolo Wetoyi, a former tier with

Traffic on a Saturday morning in Dagoretti Center. The power lines seen here supply power less than 50% of the time.



Jeff Coffey, Founder of Fair Flies, teaches a new pattern to tiers in training.

Being there early means you can have a seat in front of the window so there is light.





Jeff ties with the group to help in any challenges or to just add to the daily output of flies.

Even the dogs are looking for breakfast in Kibera.



Britain's Unwin & Sons. Not one to manage from afar, however, Jeff spent 15 days in the Kenyan town of Butere near the dangerous northwest border with Uganda and where waves of clan rivalries have made life difficult in a post-colonial country already rife with corruption, crime and a struggling agriculturally based economy.

"The people were wonderful," Jeff says. "The conditions not so much." He describes slums with bleak concrete buildings, rusting corrugated roofs, little or no plumbing, and a small grocer where unpasteurized milk arrives in a repurposed fuel jerry unloaded off a bicycle. The one water tower for the neighborhood collapsed while he was there, nearly killing a child.

Jeff helped re-erect the water tower using English (Kenya's second official language as a former British colony) and a few learned words of Swahili. He also got to work with Gamaliel and the group of tiers, showing them new techniques, introducing better tools and materials, and problem solving poor working conditions. Cheap hooks were replaced with high quality Japan-made Daiichis, though he had to ask tiers not to jam them into the wooden table when the pattern was complete. The floor was swept and mopped to control mites and other potential pests, and the light bulb dangling from the ceiling had to be replaced frequently, their filaments fried from surges and brownouts. Working over improvised homemade vices, the tiers were "eager



Wa-Suki working on Gracie's Hope for our latest run of flies.



and curious,” Jeff reports. “Skill levels varied, but the rate of learning was phenomenal.”

Although tying flies for British markets is a generations-old practice for some Kenyans, there is no native tradition of angling. “We use nets to catch fish,” explains Gamaliel. High-end guide services such as Iolaus do offer safaris where visiting anglers may cast to brown trout as zebras and elephants graze the stargrass, but those recreations are a far cry from the hardscrabble life of the Kenyan working class.

Many of these Butere tiers have seen hard times. Jeff points to a photo of a young girl who was prostitute at age twelve, beaten terribly by one of her johns. Now she smiles, holding a bright streamer in her delicate hand. Next to her sits a heavy-set woman, WaSuki, who took Jeff under her wing and cooked dinners of boiled vegetables and a sour-tasting beef. Although pleased with the “pleasant and steady” work, WaSuki confided her sadness, “Mother hope has left Kenya.” No small operation can change the world, or even this town in East Africa, but it can start to make a difference.

A skilled tier can wrap eight-dozen flies in a normal 8-hour workday. Working six days a week with holidays, a Fair Flies tier in Kenya could earn \$7,000 a year, five times the nation’s average annual salary of \$1,400, according to a World Bank source.

It used to be that most American flies were tied locally, either by artisan

anglers themselves or by all sorts of folks—guides, teenagers, housewives, and retirees earning a little extra cash. “Tying your own flies is the best way around the ethical issue,” advises Willard Greenwood, a professor at Hiram College who teaches a course in the culture fly fishing. “I’m strongly in favor of ethically sourced flies. But an angler, especially a novice, who catches a fish on a fly he or she has tied gets a feeling of accomplishment that cannot be purchased via Africa.” For whatever reasons, however, the culture has changed and fewer American anglers tie their own flies and fewer of these homemade bugs are available in local shops. With product demands being met by overseas tiers, why would companies challenge market and production forces and create anything but the cheapest fly? The first concern is quality. I tie on the small Adams from the less-than-a-dollar fly package and make twenty casts into my local stream. The dubbing unravels. A spontaneous disrobing occurs with two others from the discount set, even before I raise a fish. The quality of the Kenyan-tied Fair Flies I tested was far superior. But in a capitalist world, price matters. There are good quality flies tied in sweat shops. Will anglers pay from \$2.50 to \$4.00 for a Fair Fly? Fly fishing guide and author, John Larison, believes “that despite differences in politics and income, most of the fly fishermen I’ve known would pay more for the promise that the fly they bought was tied by a

person fairly compensated.” Larison adds another dimension to the choice: “Most fly anglers share a belief in bad luck—personally, I would never risk my juju by fishing a fly that had been tied by disgruntled hands.”

Perhaps, as Professor Greenwood suggests, the best practice would be to tie our own flies, or create a demand for locally tied flies. The *buy local* movement, which has grown in the United States, undoubtedly has its virtues. But these seemingly progressive attitudes should not exclude opportunities to help people struggling around the world. I like the idea that the Fair Fly I cast has been fashioned from Japanese hooks, American hackle, Canadian fur, Italian thread, Chinese flash—tied by a reasonably-paid Kenyan and distributed by a nearby Oregonian working out of his living room. That’s a fly with some positive global juju.

Jeff Coffey leans over his vice and wraps a little gray guinea on a richly layered, downy pink steelhead fly. “It’s pink on pink on pink, with a little natural,” he laughs. “I designed it with my daughter, Gracie, on my lap.” Jeff recalls again the life changing event of his wife’s recovery and the healthy birth of their child. “Gracie’s Hope, we call it.” I ask Jeff how he feels about people 9,000 miles away in Africa tying a fly with such personal significance. “It’s an honor,” he says. “Those people welcomed me into their homes and heard our story as well. We are all in this crazy thing together.”