

**Ike Garson with  
his favourite  
artwork, Roy  
Lichtenstein's  
The Kiss**

**Photograph:  
David Fleming**





**I**ke Garson spent 39 years teaching and working in Oxfordshire state schools, so you would think that in retirement he would opt for a restful life. But instead he has taken on a huge responsibility by starting up a charity.

In the last 12 years of his career, as international education officer, he set up Oxfordshire's International Education Bureau, which sought to internationalise our schools through the curriculum, seeking best practice and making educational links across the world including 66 school partnerships in Uganda.

His impressions of that East African country, both positive and negative, are vividly etched on his mind.

Ike saw for himself children walking five miles to school, having eaten no breakfast – and nothing to eat or drink when they got there.

One girl asked him, 'Why should I go to school when it is worse than prison? At least in prison you are given food and water'

Inspired to make a difference, Ike founded the charity Lunch4Learning in 2008. Because of his energy, organising skills and contacts

## Sylvia Vetta meets Ike Garson, founder of Oxfordshire's International Education Bureau

within Uganda, his charity is already reaching more than 50,000 children.

Last year Kennington Overseas Aid chose his charity as its project to support for 2012 and raised £29,000, enough to assist 24,000 children. In fact, Lunch4Learning proved one of the most popular charities in KOA's 45-year history.

Ike was born in June 1948 on the densely-populated peninsula of Gibraltar which measures a mere 2.6 square miles. The majority of its 29,752 inhabitants are Catholic, but Ike was part of the long-established minority Jewish Orthodox community.

He explained: "I believe the Garson family roots were in Manchester.

"My great-great grandfather imported linen and silk from the Eastern Mediterranean and Egypt and used to stop off in Gibraltar, and then found it a convenient base for his business.

"As I was growing up, my father, David, ran two businesses there. He was the agent for the Commercial Union Insurance Company (now part of Aviva) and he also imported fruit and vegetables to supply the local population.

"My mother, Bathsheba, was born in Cascais in Portugal. When her mother died in childbirth, the three daughters were split up. My mother was sent to Gibraltar while my grandfather was running a business in Tangiers."

David's father hit hard times and so he had to support his parents as well as Ike and his four siblings.

"I passed my 11-plus and was sent to the only grammar school in Gibraltar. It was Roman Catholic and run by the Christian

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**Ike with pupils at  
Nakanyonyi School,  
Uganda**

# Teaching across continents



**Ike with some tribal art he has collected on his travels**

**Photograph: David Fleming**



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Brothers who, in those days, went in for a lot of corporal punishment.

Ike said: "I remember being caned even in the sixth form because I had left school a few minutes early, although my classes had finished for the day. That experience left me determined to become a teacher and find a better way."

Given his orthodox Jewish background, I wondered how his parents felt about the Catholic education he was receiving.

"In Gibraltar, the orthodox Jewish community was fairly relaxed and tolerant, and I used to play with and visit the homes of my Catholic and Hindu friends quite frequently. That could be entertaining because of the things I was not allowed to eat," Ike said.

"As in many strict Muslim communities in Britain today, I was expected to spend hours after school learning the Jewish scriptures and prayers.

"After my Barmitsvah at 13, I underwent a quiet rebellion. But my Jewishness is so deeply rooted. I am still a practising – but relaxed – Jew and am heavily involved with the Oxford synagogue."

Freedom from that pressure came in January, 1967 when Ike was conscripted into the Gibraltar regiment.

Ike said "I loved my time in the army and on leaving I was given a generous grant to train as a teacher at Avery Hill College, London. The grant came with one condition. I must return to Gibraltar to teach for three years.

"I specialised in French but spent a lot of time involved in drama. In fact, I was offered a scholarship at the Rose Bruford College of theatre and performance. The scholarship covered 75 per cent of total costs but my father was not prepared to pay the remaining 25 per cent. I have often wondered how different my life would have been if I had been able to take up that offer."

Ike said he reads voraciously and showed me a book he first read at that time. It was his copy of *Catch 22* by Joseph Heller.

"It has to be a possibility for the island. It is one of the classics of the 20th century and is one of the few books that I can read over and over again," he said.

In 1968, Ike met Didi, who later became his wife. Didi was also training to be a teacher, but she is not Jewish.

When in 1971, Ike had to return to Gibraltar to fulfil the conditions of his grant Didi went, too.

While a Catholic education had not been a problem for his orthodox family, the idea of marrying out of his faith was a huge problem. Despite opposition they married in 1976.

Their daughter Sarah was born in 1980 and Daniel in 1986. Sarah is an author and illustrator of children's books and helps out at The Story Museum in Oxford.

Daniel did a degree in aeronautical engineering in Manchester and is now working in Cambridge.

It was thanks to Didi's father that the couple

started work in Oxfordshire.

Ike said: "Didi's father was taken ill and she wanted to be close to him.

"My career prospects in the Catholic-dominated education system on Gibraltar were not favourable, so I returned to England as soon as possible.

"Didi's father lived in Leamington Spa and I took a job teaching languages at Banbury School which, in 1974, with 2,700 pupils, was the largest school in the country," Ike said.

In 1977, Ike became head of year at Drayton School. Rapid promotion followed to head of upper school and then deputy head.

In January, 1989, Ike was appointed deputy head at Matthew Arnold School in Oxford. In recent years Didi has taught at Dunmore Primary School in Abingdon.

"In 1997, the headship of Drayton School became vacant, but I decided not to apply for it but opted instead for a six-month secondment to internationalise the work of Oxfordshire schools. Six months became 12 years directing the Oxfordshire International Education Bureau (OIEB). I loved the work and I maintain it was the best job in the county," Ike said.

"We regularly took teams of teachers around the world looking at best practice across the curriculum. It was an exciting time. We sent out on average 250 teachers on study visits abroad every year.

"The response from the schools was so positive that Graham Badman, then chief education officer for Oxfordshire, asked me to

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stay on. We used that experience to develop and enrich the curriculum and motivate staff and pupils.

“We had partnerships across the globe including the EU, Russia, Japan, Korea, Australia, the USA, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa. It was through that work that we created 66 school partnerships in Uganda.”

Sadly, two years after Ike retired, the county council chose to close the OIEB as part of a more general reorganisation.

Ike said: “The programme inspired teachers and broadened their experience. For example, thirty teachers often went to Uganda and 30 Ugandan teachers came here. Suddenly faced with teaching in a poor country with no equipment, our teachers had to be creative and adaptable.

“Like Africans, they became much more environmentally aware and learned quickly how to reuse and recycle materials. They always found it humbling to see how their African colleagues coped with the demands of teaching large classes.”

What about the Ugandan teachers' experience of the UK?

“For them, it was a cultural challenge. I will never forget their first impressions. On the journey home via the M25, one of my visitors asked ‘Where are the people?’ In Uganda there are always people walking by the side of the road. Another often asked question was ‘Where are the old cars?’ Africans find ways to keep their old vehicles working, however battered,” Ike said.

“For the Ugandan teachers, staying in our homes was an even bigger culture shock. Having full cupboards and eating different foods each day was new to them. The idea of three meals-a-day was luxury.”

From 1997 to 2008, Ike visited schools all over the world. He obviously loved his job so why retire early?

“I felt I could make a difference in Uganda. I had an idea which I thought could transform pupils' lives and enhance their education. These children needed to eat at midday instead of leaving school driven away by hunger to find something to eat outside, usually sugar cane.

“If I had deferred my retirement I did not think I would ever be able to set up Lunch4Learning. So, for my 60th birthday, I asked friends to help me set up the charity.

“Our original approach was probably quite naïve – taking things for granted can be temptingly easy. In the first year we gave start-up money to some schools in Jinja District. They did not waste the money but they used it to buy food for the children and did not invest for the future. So once the money was spent the children could not be fed.

“We realised that forward planning was not in the cultural make-up. So we thought about how to tackle the problem and encourage them to think ahead and produce food in a sustainable manner,” Ike explained.

“Most Ugandan teachers have a strong faith. So I sometimes use the Bible – both Old and New Testament – to underline what is required to make our programme a success. The story of Joseph in Egypt, storing the grain ready for the famine years, gave headteachers a better understanding of the importance of planning ahead.

“We reviewed what we were doing and have ended up with a much-improved model which,



**Ike and his wife Didi in the garden of his home**

I think, is translatable to other parts of Africa. But Uganda has a wonderful advantage – it has two harvests and, apart from cassava, everything grows twice a year. It is incredibly fertile and should be the new breadbasket of Africa,” Ike said.

Lunch4Learning has enabled a large number of children to be fed some or most of the time. Ike says some schools have been more successful than others, some having started their journey towards sustainability much later than others.

Just as in the UK, the drive of the headteacher makes a huge difference. So how has he achieved it without spending a lot of money?

Ike explained: “Firstly, in many cases schools, needed start-up funding to hire land. If they had sufficient land, then the money was used for ploughing and to buy seed. For example, one school might start with one acre while another started with four acres. Then a school with access to 30 acres to grow crops could only afford to plant two acres.

“Secondly, we have designed an income-generating project model so that, as well as feeding the children from the crops that they grow, schools can also develop micro-businesses.

“Some of these enterprises range from pig or poultry rearing to brick-making and growing bananas. Once that income source is secure the school will be on its way to self-sufficiency. The process can take anything up to five years. But we are still on hand to give help and advice where needed.

“Thirdly, help has been given in building or repairing water harvesting facilities to provide water for drinking, hand-washing and cooking.

This can be expensive but our plan is to increase the meagre water supply to every school.”

“Our work can spread only if we can raise money here. We had hoped to get support from Comic Relief but unfortunately, to date, we have not fit the criteria for funding.

“It was wonderful having the support of Kennington Overseas Aid in 2012. It meant we could expand to 32 other schools, but that was a one-off. Suggestions for sustainable sources of income are always gratefully received,” Ike said.

“We are working on obtaining support within Uganda too. We try to get the whole community involved – the churches, the mosques, local politicians and parents – to make their schools places where the children can feel safe, eat, drink and learn happily.

“So far the only area where we have not succeeded well enough is with the parents. We are now going to produce our leaflets in local languages and our team in Jinja will be talking to parents and building on the community's support,” he added.

“The average child's diet is not good, so we would like to explore ways of improving the nutritional value of what Ugandan children eat. But progress on all fronts depends on increasing our fundraising.”

I asked Ike if he had any free time?

He smiled: “I had a list of 12 things I wanted to do when I retired and I have been able to do some of them. One of them was to learn Italian and another was to take up glass fusion.

“Last year, I spent a month in Italy learning Italian and while I was there spent time on Murano, Venice, watching them make glass pieces and learning how they did it.”

Ike showed me some treasured pieces of glass from Murano but he felt they were rather fragile to take to our desert island.

Also during this time he and Didi have been pursuing their joint passion for art. I wondered if a painting would be Ike's castaway choice?

“On my travels I have seen some wonderful art and paintings and it is hard to choose from them,” Ike said. “Spanish art such as Picasso and Miró is important to me. But if I can only take one picture, it would have to be a Roy Lichtenstein. I have always loved the simplicity and yet complex nature of his work.

“I think the one I would love to be able to take is *Hey You!* As a castaway, the pointing finger will always remind me that we are never alone.”

Didi and Ike have built a workshop in their garden in Wootton. Here Didi will make her mosaics while Ike will make his glass fusion pieces. The arrival of a kiln is imminent.

“I am a keen DIY'er so perhaps I could take my tools to the island. I am quite practical and could make both useful and inspirational things with them?” he said.

So are his tools his final choice?

“That would work if I could have Roy Lichtenstein's *The Kiss!* imprinted on the toolbox.”

■ [www.lunch4learning.org](http://www.lunch4learning.org)