

PROVOKING HOPE

[Community-Based Theatre for AIDS Education in Urban and Rural Kenya]

Joshua Williams '07

I'm sure that many students in the past, as they sat down to write about their summer experiences as recipients of funding from the Class of '95 Summer Service Fund, felt compelled to describe their projects as "life-changing." I'm afraid that a younger me might have scoffed at such an idea – I would have thought, if I had read their accounts, that they were being cute, that they had opted for a pat turn of phrase without regard to its true meaning. It surely takes more than a summer worth of living, I would have thought, for a life to be changed. I take a certain pride, however, in admitting that that younger, more cynical, me was absolutely wrong. One's life can certainly be changed over the course of a summer, providing one opens oneself to change. This summer – I can say it without pretense or equivocation – I had a life-changing experience.

The generous support of '95, in conjunction with that of several other organizations, allowed me to fulfill my life-long aspiration to visit Africa this summer. For two months, I lived and worked in Kenya – speaking virtually nothing but Swahili and spending virtually all my time with Kenyan friends and colleagues. It was, in the truest sense of the word, an immersion experience. Every day, I would meet up with the theatre group with which I was working at the time (I worked with many over the course of my trip), and we would head out into the slum area that we had decided on for that day to do our work. That work consisted of the facilitation and performance of a short play in Swahili or the slang dialect Sheng about health and behavioral issues to do with AIDS. We performed everywhere – on street-corners, in fields, at fair-grounds – and our plays tackled everything from AIDS-phobia in churches to "sugar-daddies" and "–mommies" to rape. It was hot, dusty, difficult work – but, without question, the most rewarding work I have ever done. People were sincerely interested in what we were doing. They asked us questions, and sometimes even intervened in the action

of the play itself. Right before our eyes, out in the open – and this in a country in which talk about sex is still largely taboo – people were discussing their behaviors and how they related to known risk factors for contracting HIV/AIDS, a disease that is devastating their society. It was incredible.

Over the course of my time in country, I developed a tremendous respect for – as well as, in many cases, deep friendships with – the people I worked with in the various theatre groups. They were mostly my age, mostly poor, often under-educated, and yet they were doing so much to inform and transform their world. With very little monetary and material support, they were doing tremendous, courageous work that even professional theatre artists here in the States would be hard-pressed to duplicate. We hear so much bad news out of Africa here at home – it was profoundly moving to see good things of this sort happening, especially since these were Africans working in some cases with little or no support from the outside world to effect significant, structural change in Africa. They were truly an inspiration.

It seems paradoxical that often one has to travel halfway around the world to come to understand oneself. Before I went to Kenya, I often spoke of global poverty, and of the international AIDS crisis, and of Africa's problems and potential. But distance and ignorance distort – I didn't understand any of these things, not really, until I saw them first-hand. Of course, this is not to say that I now have universally applicable insight into poverty, AIDS, and Africa's potential for development. In fact, in some ways, I am now more acutely aware of my ignorance in some areas than I was before I left. But now there are faces in my memory that correspond to, and inform, my academic understanding of poverty and AIDS. Now I know first-hand the struggles and triumphs of development NGOs in Africa. And now, perhaps most importantly, I understand more concretely my civic obligations as an artist and as a citizen of a developed country. The film that I am now putting together about my project and the tremendous work that is being done with AIDS theatre in Kenya – as well as the papers that I hope to write on the topic as part of my independent work here at Princeton – marks only the beginning of what I hope will be a lifetime of using my voice, privileged as it is, to educate and advocate for social justice.

I hope that this report, albeit brief, illuminates something of the tremendous impact my summer project has had on my sense of myself and my world. It really and truly was a life-changing experience, as I'm sure the projects of other award recipients were for them, as well. I am exceedingly grateful to the members of the Class of '95 for seeing fit to allow me to pursue this dream of mine. Without them it almost certainly would not have been possible. I am in their debt.

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