

## —Arielle Sandor: Magnet Theater in Nakuru, Kenya— Class of 1995 Summer Service Fund Report Summer, 2011

This past summer I had the opportunity to travel to Nakuru, Kenya to learn about and engage in Magnet Theater outreaches with TEARS Group Kenya.

**What is Magnet Theater?** Magnet Theater (MT) is a vehicle for engaging high-risk communities in discussions about issues such as HIV/AIDS prevention and peaceful conflict resolution. A group of actors who have been trained in MT travel to the community, mobilize a crowd in a public arena, and perform a skit that mirrors problematic community behavior. The skit breaks off at a key dramatic moment whereby the community is asked to come up with a solution. For example, the skit will be about a woman forced into prostitution to feed her children. Her son gets sick and needs a 1,000 ksh operation. One of her clients tells her that he will give her 1,000 ksh if she doesn't use a condom and only 500 ksh if she does- What should she do? The question is posed: What if this were your daughter? In this way, the community is educated about STIs, condom usage, and can think creatively to solve problems they or a family member may face.



Through TEARS, I was trained along with several individuals from a local theater youth group. We learned about how to facilitate this skit, how to develop a storyline for the skit, and how to mobilize a crowd. As a result of the training, we conducted 5 outreaches throughout the city.

In our last outreach, we returned to a site we had visited before. A man approached me towards the end, extending his hand, and asking me: **“How are you sister?”** After my first moments of confusion, I realized he was a banana vendor in the market, named Peter, who had approached me after our previous outreach. We had done a skit about condom use and hosted several demonstration stations after the conclusion of the skit. The skit had also addressed the need to get tested for HIV/AIDS. Peter assumed I was a visiting doctor from a local clinic and extended his hand as if I should whip out a needle and test him on the spot. After explaining that I

was not a doctor, Peter and I began talking about why merchants in the market don't get tested. The major problem he said was because vendors don't want to lose money by leaving their stalls. We agreed that TEARS should coordinate a testing center to visit the market place. Peter remembered who I was and followed up with me during my second visit, telling me that all of his friends wanted to be tested and were just waiting for the clinic to come.

Peter's follow up made an impression on me. This interaction demonstrated the connection the community forms with our visiting group and with the message of the skit. It also drove another important aspect of MT close to home for me- the long-term relationship between community and group. MT is not a one-time program; behavior change cannot be achieved after one outreach. Skits are modified based on documented community feedback from previous outreaches and performed multiple times over several years. In that way, the community is directly responsible for shaping the course of the skit and making it the closest representation of the dilemmas they face. The theater group establishes a relationship with the community and engages in a sustained dialogue over many years.

After my stay in Nakuru, I traveled to Kuria with Professor Mwita and a group consisting of students and MT trainers from Nakuru. The goal was to train two local youth groups in MT and work with them to engage the rural community in outreaches. As a result, we successfully coordinated a condensed MT training and three outreaches. We saw growth and development in the skits the youth group created over the course of the week. This program also incorporated the local traditional dance rituals as a means of community mobilization. Large crowds approached our group, attracted by the sharp sounds of pebbles bouncing off of metal cans, and the rhythm produced by a traditional flute.



On Saturday at the market, we all began to dance, and finally, the youth group we had helped train put on their first outreach. The crowd voiced their opinions, shouted out their own solutions, and some even stepped into the actors shoes to direct the character by becoming the character. It was truly a sight to be seen.





MT is all about empowerment. It empowers the audience to take ownership for the skit resolution, empowers the youth to join a youth group and even learn MT, and lastly, empowers the entire community by filling in educational gaps surrounding public health, sanitation, and conflict resolution.



This experience was eye-opening for me, and made me feel like I contributed to something bigger than my summer project. MT is a movement that has been a large presence in Kenya for over a decade, and is continuing to grow at a fast pace. I was part of two projects that trained upwards of 20 youth to enable them to engage in MT outreaches. I was also part of a project that brought MT, a common phenomenon in many Kenyan cities, to a rural town. There, we instituted a facilitation rubric that will hopefully continue to be used in the future.

My time in Kenya and my involvement in Magnet Theater has inspired me to more seriously consider social development theater as a career path- be it in the capacity of writing plays about MT, or developing a new MT organization in Kenya. Thank you so much for giving me the opportunity to be involved in such an incredible project.

Sincerely,  
Arielle Sandor