

Tanzania
Class of 1995 Summer Service Fund Report

It is often said that in order to truly understand someone, you must walk a mile in his or her shoes. I have never heard an adage though, for understanding derived from walking on someone else's naked soles. In our present world, shoes do not usually mean nameless thin flip flops two sizes too small so that one's heel touches the ground, or bare feet so hardened they might as well pass for shoe soles. But this summer, it did. And for seven weeks, because of the Class of 1995's grant, I had the honor of working with children and meeting people who wore such shoes. I cannot thank you enough for that opportunity.

I worked at two different orphanages in Tanzania, both located in the bustling town of Moshi at the foot of Mount Kilimanjaro. From early morning up until noon—at which point the children took their daily nap—I helped at Upendo Orphanage. Upendo is an orphanage funded through the Catholic Church and private donations that cares for children up to age seven, at which point they are either sent to live at centers for street children, other orphanages, or with surviving relatives. It is run and maintained for the most part by Catholic nuns, although there is a number of university-age students studying childcare that work there as well. Many of the children at Upendo are either abandoned by their parents, orphaned, or have a single parent (usually the father) who is unable to take care of them.

At Upendo, my duties ranged from helping the orphanage with its more manual daily tasks to simply loafing around with the children. Usually, in the earlier part of the morning, I would help the sisters and student workers wash and hang laundry, prepare the children's meals, stitch and mend their clothing, and occasionally help in feeding the cows, washing bathroom floors, and assisting in the process of mixing human and cow waste to be used as fuel in the kitchen. During the later part of the morning up until noon, I would play with the children (most of whom ranged from 2-4 years of age), help the sisters with hygienic tasks such as washing the children's hands and taking them to the toilets, and feed them before putting them to sleep for their afternoon nap.



The playground at Upendo Orphanage

One of the striking aspects of Upendo Orphanage is the noticeable paradox upon which it operates. At first glance, Upendo appears to be relatively “well-off”—the orphanage actually has a playground for its children, a formidable herd of animals including chickens, pigs, goats, and dairy cows that provide fresh milk for the orphanage every morning, an impressive central building complete with a courtyard in which the children can play, and charming gardens and trees decorating the grounds. However, despite the lovely façade of the facility, it becomes apparent within a few days of experiencing the orphanage that it is still plagued with difficulties of a different sort. For one, a childhood tool that almost all of us take for granted is almost never used at Upendo: diapers. The shortage of diapers means that the children, most of whom are not toilet-trained or are still in the process of being toilet-trained, are constantly waddling around and playing in urine-soaked and feces-covered underwear and shorts/dresses. Instead of simply changing diapers, the sisters are repeatedly changing entire lower ensembles that inevitably quickly become dirtied; however, as inefficient and unsanitary as it may seem to us, it is the best they can do with their given resources.



(L) Children at Upendo getting in line for lunchtime.

(R) Helping the student workers with laundry

I left Upendo knowing that I at least helped a little in greasing the engine, helping with the daily tasks of the workers there, and bringing some joy to the hearts of the children whose squeals and laughter floated like clouds when I tickled them, spun them, and threw them in the air. For an age group whose primary concern lies simply in being held, it was moving to pick up a child and feel her head gently drop and rest contentedly on my shoulder, or to sit and immediately have four little bodies clamber and lie across my lap.

After walking back from Upendo, I would spend my afternoons at Msamaria Center for Street Children. Msamaria is home to about 40 kids ages 5-19 who are orphaned, have abusive parents, or come from homes unable to care for them. At Msamaria, my official assigned duties were to help the children with their homework, help to implement/organize games and activities, and play with the children. However, in Tanzania—quite possibly the friendliest place on Earth—it is easy to quickly forge new prospects and new projects.

For one, it is impossible to go from place to place without hearing the words “*karibu sana*”—you are most welcome. Consequently, it was not surprising that I soon became close friends with a collective of artists who worked not far from Msamaria. I admired their beautiful woodwork and brushstrokes, and came up with the idea to ask them if they would be willing to give free lessons to some of the kids. The artists were more than happy to do so, and so three times a week, I and some other volunteers would take a group of kids to their wooden shacks to learn under the tutelage of the artists.

“They are the future,” one of the carvers said one day, and I realized that what I had considered to be a favor from artist to child was really a symbiotic relationship—the child learns from the artist, but the artist simultaneously has someone to whom he can pass on his trade. The children learned quickly and became very adept with their tools after only a couple of lessons, much to the delight of their teachers. As they worked, I would sit on the wooden logs that doubled as benches, watching a group of kids bent over side by side with a skilled woodcarver, watching as a giraffe emerged from inside of a tree trunk with the thought that some day, one of these kids might continue on the tradition of the artists’ woodworking and painting, and might even be able to find a career in it.



A group of kids from Msamaria working with some artists to carve a giraffe sculpture



Kids from Msamaria with one of the artists

In continuing with this artistic vein, another volunteer and I even went into town with our country coordinator to buy supplies to start a mural project of our own. Once the supplies were there—paints, paintbrushes, and a big slab of wood to paint on—we let the children have free rein over how the mural would turn out. They drew in layers, penciling in outlines and drawings before painting over it with completely new figures and then painting over that again and again until the final result was a masterpiece of layers, the surface barely hinting at what lay beneath. It was modern to say the least, and absolutely spectacular.



Their masterpiece



The kids at work on the mural

I soon found myself being integrated into their lives not just as a volunteer, but also as an actual friend. In most cases of volunteer work, there is always that implied distance; however, I found that distance to be quickly dissolving. On Sundays, the kids would take me to church, and although not personally religious, there was still something fulfilling about sitting hand in hand with the group of them, listening to the rumbling Swahili service. We would have impromptu dance parties and I would wake up early in the morning to go and see their schools and follow them as they led me around town with the easiest confidence. But apart from that, I found myself becoming emotionally attached to the kids as well.

John Ken was one of the kids at Msamaria that I found myself becoming very close friends with. He was brilliant and had excellent command of the English language; he would often serve as the official translator for the volunteers whenever complex instructions for a game had to be laid out for the other children. I remember the day that I saw John sitting by himself on a table, writing something contemplatively in a notebook. Curious, I went up to him and sat beside him, asked him what he was working on. *A song* he told me, and then proceeded to sing it in Swahili. *Its lovely*, I said. *What is the song about?* He looked at me and simply said “sad things” before turning back down to his notebook, writing “Sad Story” in block letters and drawing a series of simple pictures underneath, each accompanied by a short caption on its lined pages. In whole, the captions said, “Boy is happy with family/ His parents die/ Boy and Brother bury parents/ Brother runs away/ Boy is alone/ He has to find his way.” I read these words, and watched as John’s hand slowly crept up the page, drew a thin black line through the words “Sad Story”, and wrote “My Life” in its place. I hugged him and we sat there, letting the weight of the moment and of his memories hang around us. I later found out that John’s finding his way meant a journey from his native Kenya to Tanzania; on foot, he found his way to Moshi.

One day, John and I were arguing over who was the better superhero: Batman or Superman. Now that I think about it, the real answer is probably neither. Batman and Superman are not real and what they did will never be real. But John Ken, and all the

other children at Msamaria and all that they have been through, have done, and will do—they are real. They are perhaps the greatest little superheroes I know.



John Ken polishing an elephant carving during a lesson from the artists

I am grateful that these children so graciously accepted me, seamlessly integrated me into their lives, and showed me their worlds. They have told me words strung in combinations to form stories I never thought I would hear firsthand and we have reveled in each other's company with a contentedness I hadn't found in a while. We must have been a funny sight: a group of children, all different ages, simultaneously leading and walking in step with a *mzungu*¹, hand in hand, joking and running after each other like the oldest of childhood friends. We would end every day with "*kesho*,"—tomorrow, as a reminder that even though today was coming to an end, there would still be tomorrow. Nowadays, there are many different definitions of a friend—business friends, work friends, best friends, distant friends—but we were friends in every sense of the word. Universal friends. I'm proud to have them, happy I met them.

For these children may not have worn the best of shoes, or any at all for that matter. But they taught me not only to appreciate what I have, but also to share it with others. I remember one Sunday morning when I woke up early to go to church with the children. They were getting up to have breakfast and had gathered in a line, waiting to be doled out their portion of food by one of the boys sitting in front of a big pot of rice and a bucket of sweet chai tea. As I waited to go, one of the boys, Baraka, came up to me carrying a plate piled ridiculously high with rice and a cup filled with the hot tea. *Your breakfast*, he said, *you eat*. I looked around me and saw the pot filled with rice, saw it going quickly, saw the long line of children still gathered for food, and the increasingly smaller portions being rationed out—I saw all this, yet they still had enough to give me breakfast as well. The tenderness of the moment hit me.

¹ *Mzungu* is the Swahili term for foreigner

They might not have shoes and they might be short on food, but they always had more than enough to share. Because in reality, they had so much more than most people: heart, generosity, and the deeply ingrained instinct to look out for one another.