

Webelle Kweeja
Thank You for Coming

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17 October 2008

Study Abroad: Uganda

Summer 2008

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At five o'clock in the morning, over an hour before the sun rose to shed light on the rural village of Kyarusoji, a rooster would call outside my small bedroom window. I would shift around on my foam mattress to find a position that drowned out the noise in order to have a few more moments of sleep. Eventually, it was time to crawl from beneath my mosquito net and wiggle my red dirt-stained toes on the cool concrete floor of my room. I would throw on a modest, knee-length skirt that was appropriate for women of the culture and, with no mirror available for self-approval, I would set off for a day of prayer, work, and play. It was the beginning of another day in Uganda and I wanted to be ready.

Life in a new culture will always present challenges of some kind, I believe. As can be imagined, my experience in Africa was no exception. However, from each struggle, I walked away with a broader understanding of life in this world and my place in it. The challenges I faced during the ten weeks I spent in Uganda helped develop within me a deep love of the country and culture and a desire to share all that I learned.

Uganda taught me to find beauty in simplicity. When I close my eyes and picture Kyarusoji, the rural village in western Uganda that I called home this past summer, I imagine the feeling of my feet finding proper footing on the deep-red dirt roads that I spent hours walking down each day. These paths dug their way through thick luscious grasses that stood taller than me and curved over hills leading to neighboring villages.

The warm air was peaceful. Only the sound of nature could be heard. The soft breeze blew through the trees as monkeys jumped from branch to branch above my head. Often times, there was no noise at all, just silence. Many afternoons, I would pause in the

middle of the road as the sun beat down on my face, take a cleansing breath of the unpolluted air, and look around at the beauty of the scene in which God had placed me. Life was simple and, in the moments that I spent walking down these Ugandan roads, it seemed perfect.

However, life was not perfect. On the contrary, it is extremely difficult for the people of Uganda. Continuing on my daily walk down the dirt roads, it was evident that the families I passed dealt with overwhelming struggles in their lives. I still dream of these people I passed during my summer as I walked from village to village. I can easily picture the details of their faces and their actions.

Since vehicles were not found in the area, people traveled miles by foot down these bumpy roads, as I did too during my time there. The women could be found walking barefoot in their long tattered skirts. They layered themselves in brightly colored fabrics, which secured their babies onto their backs with a knot. They balanced woven baskets on their heads and juggled water containers in their hands.

Men pushed old skinny bikes that were piled high with heavy bundles of matooke, a plantain that is a staple in Uganda's diet. We would greet each other in Rutooro, their native Bantu tribal language, as we passed. I always felt ashamed as I witnessed the labor of their everyday lifestyle. Tasks that consumed their day and energy could have been completed quickly and easily on the other side of the world.

Children ran barefoot and dirty along side of me. Their white smiles stretched wide across their black faces as they giggled at the luck of their encounter with me. Some little ones were brave. They would practice the few English words they knew, which consisted of about three small phrases. A few worked up the courage to reach out their

little fingers and rub my arm to test if my white skin felt the same as theirs. Many kept a safe distance from me and simply stared in awe at the color of my skin and the texture of my blonde hair.

The children could always bring a smile to my face with their joy and laughter. However, they could also draw a tear from my eye as I often studied their faces and questioned what life had in store for them. Unfortunately, I knew the answer to these thoughts. That was difficult to handle.

Witnessing these daily struggles the Ugandans face each day took its toll on me. I spent many days wondering about my purpose in life and the reason God had placed me in this rural African village. I was overwhelmed at the sight of such poverty and hardships. Many days, I felt nothing but a sense of complete helplessness. There were so many problems unfolding around me each day and yet, I did not know what to do about any of them.

I compared the lives of Ugandans with the lives of those back home in the United States, with my own life, and it made me sick. I could picture the images of home, the sounds that surrounded my neighborhood. I knew that paved roads and stop lights existed in front of the new shopping mall and that people were driving to dinner at a nice restaurant. However, I often did not believe it. I had a difficult time accepting that life was so different. The unfairness disturbed me and was unsettling for a long time.

My thoughts and emotions were strapped to a roller coaster ride during my summer in Uganda. Since my return home, I have had the opportunity to reflect upon the experience more deeply. It is obvious that the study abroad changed me. I have come away with a new understanding of the vastness of this earth and my place in it. This

world is huge. I think about the small village of Kyarusenzi and its tangled web of problems that I still cannot even begin to solve. Then, I realize that there are many poverty-stricken villages like it throughout the world that suffer from similar struggles. In addition, there are too many people on this earth that are in desperate need of assistance as they attempt to keep afloat in the cycle of poverty.

I realized that this world has a great deal to offer. There is so much to learn and so much to do. This realization was overwhelming and made me feel insignificant for some time. It seemed easy to give up. Learn nothing. Do nothing. I knew that there was no way for me, as a single individual, to solve the vast number of problems in this world. Where would I even begin?

One afternoon, I expressed this feeling to a friend who told me that I can only do so much. Again, I reflected on this statement in light of my experience in Uganda. Quickly, it became clear to me that I could not give up. I still struggle at times with the thought, but then remind myself that I am only one person. I can only learn and do so much; that is all God asks of me. I will continue to try to do my part and trust that others will do theirs. These small steps today may help gain ground for a better world tomorrow. That is my hope.

Obusinge. Peace.