None is Too Poor to Give

July 19, 2009 By Moreau Center

None is too poor to give! We have been humbled everyday by the generosity of spirit and love we have found in communities in East Africa. In Dandora we received gifts from the community, meals in the small Christian communities, in Kitete, Tanzania the welcome meal hosted by local community members was the largest celebration I’ve ever seen in a place one would never expect. The choir here wrote us a song and preformed it and many others to us, they dressed us up and gave us traditional congas to wear and keep as a reminder of the community. Everytime we are introduced to different people they show so much love. We have been blown away by all this and these are just a few. How can people who struggle to eat, cannot afford to educate their children and get proper medicanes still give so much?

I knew so little about the Holy Cross community in East Africa before I came but I have been so inspired by these people. I have witnessed the programs these individuals work with everyday, they really reach the ground level and work with the people to create better more just and loving societies. I hope all University of Portland students like myself have the opportunity to see the work of the Holy Cross in action, like I have. On top of the work they do to help communities grow and be healthy they also are the coolest, most fun people I have ever encountered. I hope to come back and work with the Holy Cross in East Africa as soon as possible. They bring life to people and it is so beautiful to witness on be a part of.

Sorry this blog has not been maintained as well as we desired, we got the real experience and rarely had internet and when we did it was quite limited. We are heading back to Kenya tommorow and then one day in Niarobi and then we are on a plane back home. Cannot wait to share more of our stories and experiences face to face when we get back home.

This trip has been the most educational part of my college career so far. Learning from the local people is so empowering, we hope through relationship we can give back some of the joy and knowledge they instilled in us. I love East Africa and the Holy Cross!

Filed Under: East Africa Internship

Live from Tanzania

July 16, 2009 By Moreau Center

We’re well past the halfway point of our journey and it seems as though the days are now flying by. Our dry spell of internet access has lifted, but we’ve entered a country that seems to be undergoing its own dry spell: Tanzania. All I can say is that Africa is a land of contrasts, and we’ve been fortunate enough to see many of them. The flat and dry moonscape-like plains in Tanzania were a 180 from the lush rolling hills in Wesley’s home town. The one catch is it’s hard to tell sometimes if these extremes are the natural way of things, or if a bit of human intervention was involved. One constant is the generous individuals we’ve met on our way.
We’ve seen and met more amazing people here than I can begin to describe. It will be interesting to see if the legendary hospitality of Kenyans can be matched in Tanzania.

Filed Under: East Africa Internship

**Jambo from Kakamega**

July 14, 2009 By Moreau Center

Hello friends! We apologize for not writing much. The internet has been down most places we could find access this week. Kathleen says she has an electromagnetic force that seems to cause such problems, so we made her wait in the car when we tried this time.

We have so much to share, but for now we are safe and happy and DEFINITELY well fed. Wesley’s family greeted us like long lost friends and we are honored wherever we go in ways that humble and delight. We’ll catch you up more soon, hopefully the internet connection will be restored when we return to Nairobi tomorrow evening. We’re off to Tanzania on Thursday!

*(Laura and the crew)*

Filed Under: East Africa Internship

**How Are You?**

July 8, 2009 By Moreau Center

Walk with us through Kibera…

The dirt is deep orange, almost red. It’s the kind of soil that sticks to your feet and when it rains, walking on it is like walking on a slip and slide. The road on the outskirts of Kibera gives us an introductory view. In a hilly, sloping area about the size of Central Park, over one million people have settled in tin, wood and mud shacks. It’s almost startling when we see green here in Nairobi. The overpopulation and lack of a supportive, sustainable infrastructure have lead to almost every last inch of this city to be settled on, built on, or used up. But along the road, there are a few crops haphazardly trying to grow up to be food.

I asked Lilian, our guide, why she came to Nairobi from the lush, open beauty of western Kenya. She said it was to look for work. Hers is a common story. Well-educated men and women come to Nairobi hoping that their hard work and success in school will mean something here in the big city so they can help their families improve their lot in life. What they find is fierce competition for even the most modest of jobs and an impressively expensive housing market. When your family has sacrificed so much for your school fees, for you to be the chosen one, and this is what you find in the promised land, how can you return home? You can’t. You don’t.
As we approach St. Monica’s Early Childhood Development Center and the Women’s Self-Help Group, about a dozen children greet us in song. I do not feel worthy of the honor I am so often shown in this country. We spend some time in the three room shack that serves as the school and the women’s meeting/business space. In conversation, I discover that we are the first visitors from the West to come to them since the post-election violence in January 2008. They depend on visitors to buy their crafts, but they understand the fear. Lilian tells me that in those weeks, even if people had food, they couldn’t eat it. They were afraid of their own neighbors in that embarrassing and deeply disappointing time.

Lilian and Pauline, an elderly mama, lead us through Kibera in search of the Hot Sun Foundation. We are hiking those hills on that red dirt. As I stumble over sewage streams and rocky, uneven hills, I just keep thinking how grateful I am that it is not raining. Then I am sad, because there is often water shortages in Kibera and the rain helps.

Everywhere we walk, there is a chorus of children calling out “How are you? How are you?” It is the most basic of English phrases. Every “Muzungu” presents an exciting opportunity to use it. I am fine, Children of Kibera, how are you?

Filed Under: East Africa Internship

Recent Conversation

July 8, 2009 By Moreau Center

How cool is it that across the world, you can have an instant conversation? Well tonight, while being inspired by the faces, stories and experiences in the Kibera slum today, I decided to shall we say... share why I think this is important work. We are here trying to establish relationships with local organizations so students from our University will be able to come here and study, explore and learn in the future. So many people lack the opportunity to see the world and I truly believe that if more people had the opportunity to see the faces of poverty and hear their stories face to face, we would live in a much different world. I really hope our exploratory work here helps get more students to see this part of the world and connect with it because they faces are unforgettable.

We are here as ambassadors for many people and groups. We are so fortunate to be here and learn from Kibera and Dandora communities and I can say I have learned more in the last 3 days then I could ever in a classroom.

This experience empowers people, it changes people and it builds relationship which one cannot turn their back against. We hope this experience can we shared with our school, friends and family to also empower them, to expose them to what we experienced, to make our world smaller and to foster a wider worldview for everyone.

This is an example of the kind of teaching that can happen, even over the internet. I am so proud of this person for wanting to learn more and opening himself up to ask questions and be curious
about why I am feeling inspired and amazing despite being immersed in a society of poverty, hunger and illness.

8:47Anonymous
more importantly however, is how is Africa?

8:48pmElle
Incredible, indescribable really. I can’t wait till I can upload photos. We are staying 5ft from the largest slum in Africa
With over 1.3 people living in it

8:49pmAnonymous
Question: why is that amazing
I feel like that would be sad, or infuriating or something else u know

8:50pmElle
Because it is real life, it’s not some huge roman cathedral it’s people and connecting with ppl and talking with ppl and building relationship

8:50pmAnonymous
ahh, when u put it that way

8:50pmElle
i spent today playing with 50+ kids in a school in the Kibera slums
they are happier, sweeter and more beautiful than anyone ive ever met, really. the joy they gave me made me want to cry. and in the conditions they live in, its inspiring
I’ve always wanted to work with the poor and now i am more than that though I’m getting to build relationship with those in extreme poverty and i think they are the best teachers

8:52pmAnonymous
how so

8:52pmElle
how so to which part lol

8:53pmAnonymous
how do you learn so much from those in poverty

8:54pmElle
really? where do i begin
life isn’t about wealth or class
it’s about experience
there’s nothing like hearing other people’s stories
8:55pmAnonymous
but whose to say that those in poverty have the best experiences?

8:56pmElle
best?
they have way more experiences than we do
that’s for sure

8:57pmAnonymous
they certainly have different experiences

8:58pmAnonymous
i think its weird the way you relish their experiences, when they may or may not though

8:58pmElle
may or may not what?

8:59pmAnonymous
so, you say they have more experiences
good and bad

8:59pmElle
no you’re missing the whole point
my point is that they are teachers
the things they face we could never imagine
they have joy despite not owning one thing
not having access to a toilet

9:00pmAnonymous
how does that teach u

9:00pmElle
u couldn’t learn from that?
we have so much, the disparity of wealth in the world is disgusting

9:01pmAnonymous
this is true

9:01pmElle
the stories they tell are real, these are real people
our brothers and sisters
they don’t ask for handouts
they all work
they are joyful
they appreciate life in a way we know nothing about
Walking in Kibera

July 8, 2009 By Moreau Center

Today wasn’t so much physically exhausting for us as it was mentally. It included the much-anticipated first-walk through Kibera, the largest slum in sub-Saharan Africa. Beforehand, we visited St. Monica’s school for children, which sits perched a stone’s throw above the slum. As our walk to the school took us above Kibera, we had a chance to get a closer glimpse of what we had seen from afar all these days. To note, Kibera is BIG with every emphasis of the word. Rusted corrugated steel roofs stretched out of view in both directions.

When we came within view of the school, we were serenaded by about a dozen school children, who sang a charming song calling for world peace (don’t worry, we have the whole song on video!). It turned out though that these kids were just the tip of the iceberg. The school contained probably over 50 students in the space of about a walk-in closet! How they managed to all fit in their classroom is beyond me. We spoke with the handful of women who ran and maintained the school. How they manage is a testament to their will and dedication. I am sure each of them are a real light in this dark place. The children stole the show, though. I shook more small hands and did more five-fives than I can count.
One UP dorm actually raised funds for this school two years ago, all without ever getting a
glimpse of where their money was going. It’ll be rewarding to put a face to the charity.

Our next stop was the Hot Sun Films Foundation, but in order to get there we had to pass straight
through a portion of Kibera. Lining the uneven pathways, sewage and trash was mixed into a
macabre stream of liquid that pigs still feasted from and the smell was one that I don’t even want
to begin to describe. Describing the inconveniences, inefficiencies, and injustices in Kibera seem
beyond words.

After taking in this one sliver of Kibera, it makes Danora feel homey. Where Dandora at least
had roads and permanent housing, Kibera lacks both. Imagine the depths of poverty, and then go
one degree further. But really when it comes to levels of poverty, how far is the bottom? I am
grateful and humble by my chance to walk in here, but I wish I could swap myself with you;
because after seeing Kibera, things will never quite be the same again. The saying is true, “Even
those who have nothing still have something to give.”

After some short wandering, we arrived at Hot Sun Films, which is a film production company
run entirely out of Kibera that trains local youths to make act, write and produce their own films.
Building off of their past film, Kibera Kid, some of the staff (predominantly Kenyans) showed
us a sneak peek of their next big-ticket film, “Togetherness Supreme. I won’t spoil the movie for
you, but trust me when I say it’s already top-notch! We met one of the main actors, a shy, young
little boy probably no older than six. His acting was so real and energetic that it was spooky. It
was inspiring to hear about how a number of actors in these films have boosted their lot in life.

As we talked with the group, one of their assistants snapped photographs of us and our
conversation. Apparently ‘we’ were the big event. It seemed funny to be on the other side of the
camera for a change.

I personally idolize Hot Films for so completely and fully negating the sigma of people in
developing nations as hopeless and talentless. In fact, all the organizations we have seen so far
show that such a view — whether guided by hatred or misplaced compassion — is dead wrong.

We finished our day with a visit to Catholic Relief Services (CRS), where we talked about
seemingly everything from their work in HIV, tribal reconciliation, to current politics. CRS is
one of the largest humanitarian agencies in the world, and it shows. Some of felt like they were
the teachers and we were the students. I’m not complaining; there’s still a lot to learn here. I only
hope that we can bring other UP students here, and turn these photos of smiling children into real
faces.

Filed Under: East Africa Internship
A Day in Dandora

July 8, 2009 By Moreau Center

What a LONG day it turned out to be. Our drive to Dandora took us through new parts of Nairobi. The city is full of stark contrasts: sprawling growth and stagnant poverty; paved streets and roads so rough and torn that they strain the definition of “road.” It reminded me of the saying, “God gives, but He does not share;” that’s up to mankind. Nairobi is certainly developing left and right, but what direction it’ll go and who it will leave behind makes me concerned.

We knew we had entered Dandora when the cement buildings gave way to tin huts and the streets bloated with trash and scavenging pigs. I had seen this level of poverty in Kampala, but not to this degree or size. Fr. Frank — reminiscing of past travels down these very streets — pointed at an unassuming building-high pile of trash, saying in bewilderment, “there used to be a road there!” In one respect, time had clearly not been kind to Dandora.

Dandora is divided into five ‘phases,” and speaking in broad strokes here, Dandora was envisioned as a low-income housing area of Nairobi meant to raise the standard of living for Kenyans. But from the areas we saw, corruption and mismanagement had turned a significant chunk of it into more-or-less a slum.

We arrived at the Dandora parish, and after a quick glimpse of the church, we were shuffled smack-dab into a meeting with over a dozen of the roughly seventy parish social workers. I’ve never met a saint, but the social workers we met sure seemed to embody them. In their own words, they “help those those who cannot help themselves:” the weak, the old, the orphaned, and the sick — all for no apparent reward. This one location was one of some 12 stations in Dandora. The challenges for them are many, not the least of which is being isolated from some friends for working with HIV+ individuals (people who are themselves shunned). As one worker put it, “This work is a calling. Without it, you can’t do the work.”

We toured the parish’s school ground and classrooms, which ranged from preschool classes, a sowing room, to a computer lab. We checked out the Br. Andre Andre Dispensary, adjacent to the parish field. The parish visit was overall encouraging, with each location offering at the very least ideas for future UP connections.

Already filled with a days-worth of sites, we headed over to see a (very successful) community loan organization that practices a revolving loan scheme: basically, micro-financing. It’s worth noting that Kenyans are said to be an incredibly industrious and business-minded people, and of that I have no doubt. The extreme of Kenya’s entrepreneurial spirit was quite poignant in a man we saw hauling a cart full of couches, an effort that will probably earn him just a few shillings. The organization was so successful, it had expanded to offering healthcare coverage for families.

We next stopped off at a medical facility that combines medical preventative care for mothers (mostly with HIV or TB) with community health workers. We asked one nurse what keeps her oing despite all the adversity. She said that the very interaction “encourages my heart, I’ve
always wanted to serve the poor.. I think my prayers were answered.” Now that’s the kind of person you want.

We finished the day with mass at a home in Dandora. The service was probably 90+ percent in Swahili, and located in a room so small that it spilled out into the next room, the hallway, and the bottom floor! Clearly, it was a happening place! However, by this point, we were all so exhausted that sleep with probably the next thing on our to-do lists. However, before we could leave, a table was place between us and the exit, and LOADED with food. It was at this point I realized that we would have to eat our way out.

For all its filth and injustice, Dandora is truly a community and is home for so many good people. I only hope that some UP students will have the opportunity to experience what we saw today.

If you’ve thought that some of the aforementioned things said about Dandora or Kenya in general seem to parallel situations and/or social injustices in the world, then I’m glad I’m not the only one that thinks that. We should understand that we too struggle with many of the same issues and injustices, if only by varying degrees. Together we can come together to unify our sympathies, interest and missions. That my friends, is solidarity.

Filed Under: East Africa Internship

Trip to Nairobi

July 6, 2009 By Moreau Center

Today we took our first daytime drive into the capital of Kenya, Nairobi. There’s a saying here that in America they talk about the weather, but in Kenya they talk about the roads. And I believe them! Even though our driver, Fred, drove slowly and carefully, we still tilted and jumped at every turn. Speed limits here are also more like suggestions than a hard-and-fast rule. Once in the city, I felt like everyone was moving like they were already late. It’s a marvel how much industry and business is compacted into what seems like a handful of city blocks. The level of commotion was seemed to dwarf that of cities like Seattle or Portland.

One peculiar omission from the city seemed to be the homeless. Our driver said this can partly be due to the fact that Nairobi is during the day largely filled with commuters (a sentiment many of our own cities share). But one way or another, there’s no hiding the fact that there exists a large poor population here. We know, because we can see Kibera every day we wake up.

Filed Under: East Africa Internship
Day One

July 5, 2009 By Moreau Center

We made it, no problems! After only 24hrs of flying we arrived in Nairobi, Kenya. As we left the downtown area on our way back from the airport our driver from the Holy Cross said “welcome to the real world” and just like that our journey began. When we arrived at the formation house the brothers had made us a wonderful warm dinner, and welcomed us with wide arms, but after traveling and a lack of sleep we knew we had to head to bed.

As I write this morning I sit in a small computer room with one window and all I can see is Kibera, the largest slum in East Africa, home to more than 1.3 million people, yet it is peaceful from a far. I hear birds chirping and an occasional rooster.

This morning started perfectly with a wonderful morning yoga session and then a light breakfast of bread and tea. We are excited to get out and explore the city today as that is our main goal for day one, to get to know where we are.

UPDATE:

Our East Africa Initiative journey to Kenya was safe and sound. However, our flight from Amsterdam to Nairobi was bumpy and volatile due to cloudy weather conditions. Thanks to God we landed safely.

We will be heading to the city center and outskirts of Nairobi in a few hours. The official program’s operations will begin tomorrow (Tuesday). Next week we will be traveling to Western part of Kenya, back to Nairobi, and next we will head to Northern Tanzania.

We were treated to delicious Kenyan foods. Birds from a nearby neighborhood were singing melodically as though they were welcoming and bidding us a nice stay. Stay tuned for more bits of updates next.