Kwaheri Kenya!

June 23, 2014 By packus15 (Edit)

What a day! Today was my eleventh day in Kenya, my third day with my host family, and my first day at my internship. These eleven days have seemed like eternity, not in a bad way, but in an exciting way. Everyday has been filled from morning till evening; I have been experiencing the culture from those around me and am quickly learning to speak the language. Everything about Kenya is different from anything I have experienced before, thus it is a lot to process. Overall, I can already tell that these are going to be the most transformative nine weeks of my life, because I am learning so much from the Kenyan people. They are the strongest, most welcoming, happiest, most forgiving people that I have ever come across. I know that they will teach me many life lessons!

I have decided to categorize things and write about them whenever they come up.

FAMILY: Let me just start by saying that my host mom is the hardest working woman I have ever met! She single handedly takes care of the house, cooks all of the meals, raises five children, cleans, does laundry, and keeps the place running. She’s awake from 5 am to 11 pm every day. The roles of men and women here are different from what I am used to. The man of the house, my host father, is the only one who works; he gets up at 4 am every day and works until 5pm, sometimes later. But, when he comes home, he sits in the living room, reads the paper, and watches TV. He never cooks, cleans, or helps mama. This is just the way things are here, so I am trying to adjust.

FOOD: The great things about Kenya is that they eat the food they grow, I would say 90% of the foods that we eat come from the same county that I live in. The bad thing, that’s only ten foods! Every day, we have rice, beans, tea, chipati, potatoes, ugali, greens (grilled spinach or kale), fruit, and either chicken or beef. But the only seasonings they use are tomatoes and onions, so everything starts tasting similar. The food tastes great though! Chipati is Indian bread and when made fresh it is sooooo yummy! I am also a big fan of rice, so I don’t mind the rice and beans for lunch. Unfortunately, on day eleven, my stomach decided it was enough. Im hoping that after today my stomach will just accept Kenyan food!

WORK: I will be interning with WADADIA (Women and Development Against Distress in Africa) for the duration of my time in Kenya. WADADIA is an amazing community based organization that is working on creating better lives for women in Africa. Their major programs involve psycho-social support, reproductive health, and women’s empowerment, focusing on women suffering from fistulas, HIV Aids, commercial sex workers, and impoverished mothers. The work that they do is truly inspiring, because the entire community is evolved and the impact that they are having is large. That being said, even though WADADIA helps so many women, the system is still broken, there are still holes. That realization hit me pretty early on today. I had the opportunity to spend my first day in the field, learning about what WADADIA does.
Together with US Aid, we held a fistula information session in a small town outside of Mumias. A twenty-four year old mother attended with her little baby girl. She asked Habiba (the founder of WADADIA) a question in Swahili and then started to cry, saying she wanted to talk more in private. As she walked away, she took off the babies’ sweater, the little girls arms were the size of a quarter. I later found out that the little baby girl who was as small as a two month old, was in fact one and a half years old. This poor baby had developed a fistula at two months old, and all bowel movements stopped. She has been unable to grow since then. There are no pediatrics surgeons in the area who can operate, and if she does find someone, it will cost a lot of money. Unfortunately, because of the simple fact that no surgeon exists anywhere close by, who can operate on such a small baby, Habiba said she had no real solution. To me and the other American visitors, we were heartbroken. But today taught me a very important lesson. Sometimes we are powerless, but we have to have those days of feeling powerless in order to find the passion to come up with innovative solutions. I am not able to save that little girls life, no one in Kenya may be able to save that little girls life, but, if awareness about fistulas increase, maybe another surgeon could be trained, maybe mothers can learn about the early signs of fistulas and their prevention, so that cases like these stop existing. These are the thoughts that the day left me with. Thoughts and a heavy heart. But, as they say in Swahili, Mvumilivu hula mbivu, PATIENTS PAYS!

Until next time, Kwaheri!

Filed Under: East Africa Internship

**Personal Reflection**

June 28, 2014 By packus15

**From Middle Class to Millionaire**

Its interesting to me, because no matter who I am in the US, I am looked at as a millionaire in Kenya. In Kenya, people only spend within their means; they don’t have multiple credit cards or loan payments. They live simply and without a lot of material possessions. This idea of the differentiation in classes, is what reflects my American privilege. My host family in Kenya is in the upper middle class here, because we have running water, electricity, hot showers, and they are putting six children through some of the best schools in the region. But, in America, I live in the middle class, I am a first generation college student, and pay for most of my expenses on my own. Thus, if I had been born into the same family, but in Kenya, we would be living a class below my host family. This idea is one that I have slowly been able to wrap my head around. In the US I would never think of myself as rich or as someone who has money, but here everyone looks at you and only sees money. The privilege that I have being born in America, trumps other higher classes around the world.

**From Invisible to Celebrity**
Being a pale skinned, blue eyed, red headed woman, I knew that I would stand out in Kenya, but I wasn’t quite anticipating the reactions from others. I am the only mazungu in Mumias, a small town outside of Kakamega. The children will come and giggle, point, and stare at you but the second you say “how are you”. If I answer in Swahili, they don’t respond, but if I respond with “fine”, they start giggling and ask me more questions. The children learn English in school, so when they get the chance to use what they have learned, they get very excited. Its ironic though, because I want to learn to speak Swahili, so I try responding in Swahili, but they truly want me to speak English to them. It is not what I was expecting!

My host mother has lived here all of her life, so she is well acquainted. But, whenever I walk around town everyone has to say something to me. The men all want my number or to take a picture with me. The women ask me if they can have my hair and tell me I look “smart”. I have never been as aware of my surroundings as I am here, because people are always shouting at you wherever you go. Needless to say, I am ready to blend in again!

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**Safari Time**

July 31, 2014 By packus15

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Its funny how quickly you can adapt to a place. My host family has now become my family, I act the same way I do with them as I do with my family in America. My internship has become my daily job, like all other jobs I’ve had in America. I sometimes have to remind myself that I’m still living in Kenya, im still in Africa! This point really hit me last weekend when we were in Naivasha and saw Giraffes and Zebras. That’s when I said ” okay you are in KEYNA!”. It was unreal to be only ten feet away from a giraffe and have it look you in the eye, and then turn back
and continue eating. It was also very cool seeing baby giraffes and zebras interacting with their mama’s, they are so playful!

This weekend its time for another safari in Masai Mara. Im excited to see the big five (hopefully!)

The adventure continues because after all, T.I.A., This is Africa! :)

Filed Under: East Africa Internship, Immersions