The Beginning of the Journey

June 11, 2014 By zang16

I am currently sitting in the Dulles Intentional airport outside of gate A15 and coming to the realization that this trip is actually happening. In order to prepare for this moment I have gone through a series of informational meetings that have left me feeling very prepared for this trip. There are four of us traveling to Kenya from UP and we met monthly throughout the second semester to prepare. During some of these meetings we were also fortunate enough to meet with a number of former interns that helped shed some light on what are internships would look like. All of the former interns gave a variety of valuable information but the one thing that was consistent was the idea to go in with no expectations. I have mixed feelings surrounding this idea, it is scary not knowing what is going to happen but at the same time it is exciting to have endless options. I do not know how this adventure will end up or what it will entail, what I do know is that it will be an experience that I will remember forever. I will continue to make entries in this blog every week of the trip keeping everyone up to date about how everything is going and what I am doing.

First week in Kakamega

June 27, 2014 By zang16

The first moment of the trip when I really knew I was no longer in the US was when our bus packed full of people and luggage exited out of the Kisumu airport onto the highway. Not only was everyone driving on the wrong side of the road, but there seemed to be little regard for any sort of traffic laws if they even existed. There were motorcycles and bikes shooting through the smallest gaps and cars that always seemed to be coming straight at us before making the slightest adjustments to avoid the collision. Our driver however was not phased in the slightest, zooming around cars and squeezing through the tightest of spaces with only the headlights illuminating the path. It was a memorable ride for sure and an interesting introduction to life in Kenya.

It has only been one week since that ride but so much has happened in between that it seems like ages ago. This past week has been packed with Kiswahili lessons, informational sessions and navigating my new surroundings. While both the Kiswahili lessons and informational sessions have been extraordinarily helpful the most exciting parts have been the trips around Kakamega. My first venture into town I did not get very far, just down the road to one of the many local marts but even in the short trip I could feel the tremendous energy of the town. The roads are rough and made out of dirt with many bumps and valleys, requiring one eye to always be watching the next step which was very difficult with all the activity going on. In just are short walk our group passed at least three street vendors and about a dozen piki-pikis (motorbikes) and boda-bodas (bicycles) which can be hired for a short ride, this was a small sample of what we would find in the heart of town. Walking around in big group brought a lot of stares and attention, but most of this attention was positive. While waiting outside the atm an elder women
came up to our group and greeted each of us individually with a very heartfelt handshake and welcome to Kenya. I have felt a similar kindness and welcoming attitude from many other people I have met here and this feeling has helped me feel more and more comfortable with each passing day.

On Tuesday I got to meet with my supervisor for my organization, James, and got to know a lot more about the organization I am going to be working for. My organization is called the Western Water and Sanitation Forum (WEWASAFO) and they work in a variety of different fields. James is the programs coordinator and is also a civil engineer so he quizzed me a little about what I have been learning. The organization seems great and I am very excited to begin working with them and see all the great work they are doing.

As the week went on I got into a nice pattern of Kiswahili lessons in the morning followed by afternoon trips into town for various reasons. One of the highlights so far was on Thursday when we had a scavenger hunt for different food items that we would then use to cook lunch. All of the interns were divided into groups of four and given an ingredient list along with how much each item should cost. All but one item was supposed to bought from the market where bargaining is very necessary since often you are first given the mazungu (foreigner) price that can be three to four times what the locals pay. My groups first stop was at a stand close to the hotel we were staying at, there we were able to get three tomatoes and two onions for 20 shillings, roughly 25 cents, and we were able to do it using mostly Kiswahili. After all the groups had collected all of the items we gathered in the FSD office to cook lunch. There were mangos, guacamole, rice, carrots and an assortment of other fruits and vegetables, it ended up being one of the best meals I had had yet.

Friday, we went on a group trip to Kisumu which is about a two hour drive south of Kakamega and the third biggest city in Kenya. In order to get there we took matatus which are vans that serve as public transportation. In each mutate there are about 16 very small seats but the number of people that end up traveling in them is closer to 25 making it a very smushed ride. The lack of space combined with the very bumpy roads made for a rather uncomfortable ride, fortunately the scenery is beautiful providing a slight escape from the cramped conditions. In Kisumu we had lunch at a nice local restaurant which had a rooftop patio that provided a beautiful view of the surrounding neighborhood. Kisumu borders Lake Victoria and is known for its fish so I decided to give it a try not really sure what to expect, when it came out I was at a bit of a loss what to do. It was served as a complete fish with the tail, skin, head, eyes and mouth all there, it looked as if they had just thrown it on the grill and then covered it in sauce. There was also no utensils with the plate so I sat for a minute staring at it trying to figure out how I was supposed to go about eating it. I eventually gave up and asked Pollyenne, the local programs coordinator who helped lead our group, how I was supposed to eat the fish and she stated like it was obvious to just use my hands. So I found a ridge and just pulled it open and sure enough it came right up revealing all the meat. It ended up being quite delicious and when I thought I was finished Pollyenne came back over and showed me a part of the head that was sweet if you sucked on it, after some convincing I tried it and was rewarded with a very interesting taste that I couldn’t quite handle, but I was still proud of myself for trying even though I couldn’t bring myself to eat the eyes. After lunch we hopped in some tuk-tuks, which are three wheeled taxis, and went on a
very entertaining ride through the city before arriving at Lake Victoria. At the lake we hopped on canoes and got a very pleasant tour of part of the lake and where able to spot a number of hippos.

Overall the first week was very fun and exciting and while there were some challenges I didn’t feel too overwhelmed. While I thoroughly enjoyed this first week I feel that I have almost maxed about the time with the larger group and that its time for me to move on and be more on my own. For this reason while I am nervous to meet my host family and begin working the nerves pale in comparison to the excitement I feel. I will try to keep this blog as updated as possible, but I have experienced some technical difficulties so I will not have access to the internet as often as I anticipated so they may end up coming in bunches rather than on a week to week basis, but I will continue writing them regularly.

Filed Under: East Africa Internship

Week mbili (two) in Kakamega

July 3, 2014 By zang16

This past Saturday, the 21st of June, I finally got to meet my host family. From the moment I entered the family they were all very hospitable and welcoming. Within the first few minutes I was offered tea which would be the first of many. I spent the weekend getting to know the family, on Sunday I went to church with the oldest brother Dennis, 18, and enjoyed a few world cup games with the entire family. I have gotten to know Dennis pretty well as he is interning at the same organization as me and want to study civil engineering at the University in the fall. He already feels like a brother and has really helped me transition to my new family. I also really enjoy spending time with my mama, who I often watch the news with and discuss various things. Overall while there have been some challenges with my new home, like bucket showers and very inconsistent power, I feel very comfortable and a part of the family.

This week I also started my internship with Western Water and Sanitation Forum (WEWASAFO) and I have been blown away with how much I have learned and experienced in this one week. I was able to go out into the field four out of the five days this week and was able to really get a grasp on what my organization does. On Tuesday and Wednesday my organization was hosting a visitor, Crissy, from the Water Project which is an organization based in the US that raises money for local organizations like mine who are working to address issues with water and health. Her job was to visit all the projects WEWASAFO has finished and are working on, so I got to tag along and see all the projects as well. In total we visited about five school and three communities ranging all over Kakamega County. When we pulled into the first school the kids were abuzz with excitement sneaking glances at us and gathering closer to us muttering muzingu, foreigner in Swahili, walking around I felt like the pied piper with a crowd of kids following me. At the schools my organization had constructed or was in the process of building water tanks and VIP latrines, VIP stands for ventilated improved pit which is very different from very important person. The tanks were made of layers of concrete and wire and hold 30,000 liters of water which came from the gutters of the surrounding buildings. Fortunately I was with James, who is a civil engineer, during our visits so he was able
to describe the construction process behind the tanks as well as why they designed it in the way they did.

Mixed with the visits to the schools were journeys to the local communities where WEWASAFO had built protected springs. Protected springs are cement structures with pipes where the water come out, they are built around natural springs and create cleaner water. With the new protected springs community members are able to get clean water faster. Surrounding the springs WEWASAFO works with community leaders to have trainings regarding sanitation and health as well as picking five homes to build new pit latrines. One of the recipients of the new latrines was an elderly couple. We first met the wife outside her home and she showed us how the walls around the latrine were almost finished. She then told us how grateful she was for the new latrine because there old one was falling apart and the hole was too big, her husband was blind she said and struggled to get to the old latrine and even fell inside once. Hearing this was shocking as I could scarcely imagine a worse experience, hearing her story really reinforced in me the importance of what my organization was doing. The wife then took us inside the house to meet her husband who we quickly found out was 94 years old. He was struggling with some health problems but was still quite talkative and began telling us stories about how he served in World War II and had been a cook for the British for a while. It was amazing to consider all the places he had been and all the places he had seen. He had been living in the small farming village where he was now for about 20 years and had been blind for about 15 of those, but even as he was going blind he continued to work his farm and tend to his land. I felt honored to meet him and have a chance to hear his story. There were many other inspiring stories that I heard during this one short week but that one definitely stood out the most. Seeing everything my organization has done and everything they are working on has been inspiring and humbling, I am greatly looking forward to working with them all this summer and I am hopeful that I can help in any small way.

The past two weeks have been a truly eye-opening experience and have left me very excited for the rest of my time here. I have decided to change the way I post and am now going to post smaller more frequent entries so the next one should be coming much sooner.

Filed Under: East Africa Internship

The Little Things

July 3, 2014 By zang16

There are many little things about Kenya and Kenyan people that I would have never expected so I would just like to take a little time to acknowledge them. The first and funniest in my opinion is the obsession with Spanish soap operas dubbed in English. My mama’s favorite is Corazon Indomitable and we even had to switch from world cup games to watch it. Many of us interns are also becoming hooked and the never ending drama is often discussed when we meet up. The second thing that I never would have guessed, but makes sense when you think about Kenya’s association with the British, is the frequency that everyone takes tea. I think my personal record is five cups in a day and I average around 2.5 but hat is nothing in comparison to most people. There is the morning tea when you wake up, then ten o’clock tea in the office, another
cup when you get home from work and sometimes a final one before you go to bed. My mama was telling me that while people are talking they can go through a whole large thermos by themselves. The last little thing is I think a nice reflection of how social Kenyan culture is, for whenever you enter an office or meeting you go around and shake everyone’s hand no matter how many people are there. The handshakes are often accompanied with a hello or how are you and they really build a comfortable communal atmosphere. There are many other differences between my new and old home and I am slowly but surely adapting to almost all of them.

Filed Under: East Africa Internship

The President, Stone and Grant

August 7, 2014 By zang16

I wrote this post a few weeks ago but was just able to post it now

It has been a while since my last post and a lot has happened since then: I have seen the president, visited a crying rock, and written a grant. In order to keep things straight I’m going to break down this post into sections starting with his Excellency honorable Uhuru Kenyatta.

The President

Almost every night I watch the news with my family so I have slowly started to grasp the major themes of Kenyan politics and since I know everyone reading this is very interested in Kenyan politics I am going to give you brief overview. Like in the US there are two main parties right now CORD and JUBILEE but there not parties like in the US there more of coalitions of different parties who work together. The current president is Uhuru Kenyatta who is part of Jubilee and is the son of Kenya’s first president, he is also indicted by the International Criminal Court. His main opposition is Odingo from cord who ran against him in the last election and has been having lots of rallies since then and is currently demanding amendments to the new constitution. The driving force behind the parties doesn’t really seem to be policy related but rather tribal as Kenyans tend to vote for people who are their tribe. From what I have understood there seems to be about 48 or so tribes but each one of those have smaller tribes within them, overall its very complicated. Anyway there is a lot of tension right now between the parties and they are both constantly saying the other is corrupt and politicizing thing and incompetent, some things are universal.

How I came to see the president was really on accident. It was Saturday and our group had just finished a workshop at the FSD office and had about an hour till lunch so we decided to walk around town. As we were walking on the main street we noticed a large crowd gathering down the street with lots of police with very big guns so naturally we decided to walk towards it. Just to get this out of the way we were never in any danger, the rally was completely peaceful and civil with no one getting hurt. As we were walking towards the masses one of the other interns I was with mentioned that the president was coming to town today so that’s what the rally must have been about. Just as he was saying that a procession of cars began to come down the street. The first was a military looking truck followed by a number of black escalades, there was
people waving at the cars and different important people in the cars waving back and then low
and behold the president of Kenya drove by decked out in camo and a smile on his face. The
procession stopped at a stage that had been erected outside one of the super marts, a strange
place for a rally I thought. The first person to speak was the deputy president, like the vice
president, but it was hard to hear and in Kiswahili but he seemed to get a good response from the
crowd so some people liked what we has saying. Quite a crown had gathered with people
climbing nearby trees and buildings to get a better view, although it was more civil then every
concert ive been too with nobody pushing or shoving for a better spot. There was plenty of
security with guards posted all over each one of them carrying a very big gun. About half way
through the speeches we left walking to another one of the many marts around to get some
popcorn. On our way out the procession was leaving and we got another chance to see the
president who I swear waved right back at me. Overall it was a very exciting experience and
interesting to see, but more importantly I just have to see Obama to complete my Kenyan
president checklist.

The Stone

The crying stone is a giant rock that looks like a face and during a few months of the
year water drips from its “eye”, it is one of the most famous places in Kakamega. I went to
check it out with my host brother and sister, Dennis and Michele, and the other three UP
interns. We were not completely confident on how to get there as Michele was the only one who
had been there before and that was in Primary school, none the less we figured someone knew so
we began talking to one of the Matatu drivers. After some discussion Dennis and Michele
arranged a ride for us there so we all hopped in a very hot sweaty car for the journey, fortunately
it wasn’t too long. When we got there we were greeted by a group of kids ranging from 8 to
14ish and they helped guide as along the path. The path seemed to go through a few people’s
homes but they didn’t seem to mind strangers walking through their land. The stone was not far
at all, only about a five minute walk till we were close, but that’s where we ran into problems. In
order to see the stone you had had to pay a small view to one of the elders of the community
what sat near the trail. Dennis and Michele first approached him to ask about the price and after
some discussion they reported back 500 shillings. We had had other friends visit and they had
said that they only paid 70 for a group of three so it was obvious this guy was trying to rip us
off. This happens a lot because people assume that mzungus, foreigners, have a lot of money
and don’t know the prices. We had hoped Dennis and Michele would get us around this but
apparently we would have to negotiate instead. Eventually after about 15-20 min of back and
forth with various threats to leave we settled on a price of 200 shillings and up we went.

While the stone was not currently crying it was still very impressive although I struggled to see
the face. There was also an amazing view of the surrounding Kenya countryside and a great spot
for a small picnic. While by the stone I met a local who began telling me about the history and
tradition surrounding it. According to him it had once been a great king who had fled from his
land and was then frozen and turned in to rock, he pointed off in the distance to another large
rock and said that that was his queen. The tradition of male circumcision also had something to
do with the stone although I did not quite understand exactly what he was saying. After seeing
this small attraction I am even more excited to visit hellsgate and masai mahara two of Kenya’s
renowned national parks. The journey back to the city was much smoother as we were able to
hop on a matatu for a reasonable price. The day was ended at a restaurant with a milkshake, which tasted amazing in the unending heat.

**The Grant**

Every intern for FSD has the opportunity to write a grant proposal to request additional funding for a project they are working on with their organization. I decided to go for this grant to help start a project with my organization. The project is the construction of an ecological sanitation (Ecosan) latrine at Mwiyala Primary School, one of the local schools. Here is the executive summary of the grant which will give you an idea of what the project is all about:

The Western Water and Sanitation Forum (WEWASAFO) currently works with ten schools in Kakamega County one of which is Mwiyala Primary. Mwiyala Primary serves over nine hundred students but is ill equipped to manage all of their health and sanitation needs. The boys there need 8 more latrines and the girls 10, but they are running out of space to continuously build new pit latrines. Constructing a two door Ecological Sanitation (Ecosan) latrine addresses both of these issues as it gives the girls an additional two facilities and it is a permanent sustainable solution. Unlike pit latrines the Ecosan latrine is elevated and the waste is not stored underground but on top of it. This combined with the fact that urine and feces are separated allows for the waste to be removed from the latrine.

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**Mid-Term Retreat**

August 7, 2014 By [zang16](#)

*This post was written on July 28th*

This past weekend we got out of town and went down to Navasha for our midterm retreat. It is kind of crazy to think that half the trip is over already, in some ways it feels like I have been here forever and other times it seems like just a few days. Navasha is about a six hour drive from Kakamega and that isn’t a very smooth 6 hours. While some of the roads were smooth the majority were very bumpy and when we finally reached our campsite I was quite eager to escape the confines of the overcrowded matatu that we had been traveling in. While the conditions were rough the ride down was not without excitement, as we spotted a number of zebras and even a few giraffes on the side of rode. When we got to the campsite we were also greeted by a number of black and white monkeys jumping through the trees, these glimpses of wildlife were only a taste of what we were going to see.

On Friday our group split into two with about half of us riding bikes and the other going to Mount Logonot. I went with the mountain group so at the break of dawn I was up and piling into another matatu. Mt. Logonot is an active volcano that erupted a few hundred years ago and now has a giant crater at the top, so the hike had three parts: hiking up, hiking around the crater and hiking down. We started heading up the mountain and at first the trail was easygoing with only a steady incline allowing us to easily view the beautiful landscape that lay below us and the
antelope in the distance. We quickly realized that the beginning had been a tease as the trail got very steep and turned more into a scramble then a leisurely walk. The trail was covered with what seemed like sand and with every step forward you slipped back a few inches making progress very difficult, to add to the pressure there was a swarm of school kids behind us and rapidly gaining. With an extra push I was able to beat the school kids to the top and treated with an amazing view of the surrounding landscape as well as the crater that lay below. When the entire group made it to the top and we started circling the crater. The edge of the crater was far from smooth with many peaks, the highest one was about a third of the way around and we decided that was where we stop for lunch. The hike there was tough at parts with us sometimes almost on all fours, despite the challenge it was fun and the view we got at the top was spectacular. After having our lunch it was time to go down. I quickly realized the easiest but probably not the safest way to go down was just to run. The journey around the crater and the trip down went much faster and was a lot of fun. Throughout the entire hike we were treated with an amazing view and overall it was one of the best hiking experiences I have ever had.

The next day on Saturday we went to Crater Lake, which was similar to Mt. Logonot in that it was also a volcano that erupted, the difference was that this one had been filled with water. Surrounding the lake was a small “forest” that was home to many animals. I got within a few feet of giraffes and zebras and was able to see antelope, water buffalo and different kinds of birds in the distance. It was amazing to be walking among the animals and they were surprisingly calm only slowly trotting away when we got to close. The lake itself was also quite stunning and had attracted about nine or ten giraffes who were eating right beside it. There was also a small resort next to the lake and a floating restaurant that had some of the best food I have had in Kenya. Seeing all the animals got me even more excited for the next weekend when we are going to Masai Mara, one of the best safaris in the world.

The entire retreat was a nice break from the grind of work and a nice way to see another part of the country. I also got some good news at the end of the weekend as my grant got accepted so I will be beginning to work on that in the coming week. The last half of my trip should be even busier than the first and I am excited to get started on my project.

Filed Under: East Africa Internship