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Introduction
Leigh Swigart

It was a great pleasure to lead the intensive writing seminar of the 2013 cohort of Sorensen Fellows. This group of six Brandeis students was selected through a rigorous competitive process in fall 2012. Those ultimately chosen to serve as Sorensen Fellows demonstrated a number of qualities seen as critical for their success “in the field” – maturity, ability to handle unforeseen challenges, real curiosity about their internship sites, respect for different cultures and viewpoints, and, perhaps above all, humility.

The 2013 cohort went their separate ways last May, having prepared during the spring to document their experiences in detail, open themselves to new ideas and experiences, and support each other through frequent group emails. Abie and Cynthia worked in Kenya – one as a newcomer to the country and the other as a “foreign local” – with organizations that help marginalized populations overcome barriers to social and economic well being. Nelly and Hannah’s internships were with NGOs dedicated to bettering the lives and educational outcomes of children in Senegal and Uganda, respectively. Hailey learned the inner workings of a large and well financed non-profit in New York City that aims to promote and protect reproductive justice. And Damiana faced the dual challenge of working in an under-resourced obstetrics clinic in Bulgaria while coming to terms with an adult perspective on her native country.

What impact can a summer internship by students from a private university in the United States make on the work of social justice-oriented organizations, whether at home or abroad? How much can the Fellows expect to contribute as young adults and scholars, often with a limited experience of “the real world”? What are the limits of their appropriate engagement in activities designed to effect change, especially when they are working in a society not their own?

And after their internships have ended, how can they take their summer experiences and use them both to round out their undergraduate education and prepare for what comes next in their lives?

These were just some of the questions the Sorensen Fellows discussed and grappled with over the course of their semester-long reflection and writing course. They read and analyzed the writings of fiction and non-fiction authors, taking note of how they approached difficult subjects – how to struggle against discrimination and poverty, when to acknowledge the benefits and responsibilities of privilege, how to come to terms with the status of “outsider” – and also of the literary techniques they used to express themselves. Exposure to a wide variety of expert writers helped the Fellows take their own field notes, carefully compiled during their internships, and transform them into the vivid and informative essays found here.

This anthology is the result of their many weeks of reflection, analysis, and tireless writing and rewriting. As reflected in the title, the 2013 Sorensen Fellows did indeed embark on parallel paths, not only in the dedication they showed to their respective internships, but also in their efforts to dig into their own and others’ experiences, ask hard questions, scrutinize interpretations, and critique each others’ writing.

It has been a privilege for me to join them on this journey. I have seen the Fellows evolve as thinkers and writers, and their sheer enthusiasm and warmth has also restored to me some of the confidence I used to feel in the world and its possibilities. Whatever the 2013 Sorensen Fellows do once they leave Brandeis, we can be sure it will be a tribute to the program that gave them the opportunity to engage in the summer internships described here.

Damiana Andonova ’15, from Chicago, Illinois, is an aspiring obstetrician majoring in Health: Science, Society and Policy. She explores her interests in obstetrics through many disciplines including art, literature, philanthropy, and research. She is the founder of the Brandeis University March of Dimes Council, is a research assistant at the Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism, and has been involved with several women’s health NGOs. Damiana traveled to Bulgaria for an obstetrics internship at a hospital in Blagoevgrad, and collected health narratives of community
members, patients, health policy makers and health workers in an effort to generate discourse and explore the use of literature as a healing form of the arts.

Cynthia Wangui Charchi ’14, from Nairobi, Kenya, is double majoring in Health: Science, Society and Policy and Economics with a minor in Environmental Studies. Having lived in several countries including Kenya, the U.S. and South Africa, she has become aware of the disparities in health care access and treatment. Her passion for sustainable and equitable distribution of resources, particularly in the slums of Kenya, led her to intern with Kenya Social Ventures, which supports local projects in the slums. She assisted the Power Women’s Group, which provides HIV-positive women the technical skills, materials and market to sell craft items. Cynthia documented the stories of the women in order to humanize the experience of HIV, while also putting a face to their products.

Hailey Magee ’15, from Stillwater, New Jersey, is double majoring in Politics and Women’s and Gender Studies and minoring in Social Justice and Social Policy. She is the president of the Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance, was a member of the Ethics Center Leadership Council, and is a blog contributor for the non-profit organization About-Face. Hailey interned with NARAL Pro-Choice New York. She worked at the intersection of policy and grassroots organizing, advocating for the Women’s Equality Agenda, an omnibus bill presented by New York Governor Cuomo to advance the status of women regarding health policy, sexual harassment, discrimination and more. Hailey also researched state representatives’ and mayoral candidates’ policy stances and wrote memos on current legislation.

Nelly Schläfereit ’15 is originally from Germany but has lived in Geneva, Switzerland for most of her life. She is majoring in Anthropology and International and Global Studies, and serves on the executive board of the Anthropology Club. Nelly works as a German BUGS (Brandeis Undergraduate Group Study) tutor and is involved with the Center for German and European Studies. Her passion for working with children brought her from Switzerland to Costa Rica to Senegal, where she spent a semester before beginning at Brandeis as a midyear. It was in Senegal, interning at a shelter for women and children, that she first discovered her interest in Africa. For her Sorensen internship, Nelly returned to Senegal and interned with Pour Une Enfance, a humanitarian organization that works with young street children and child beggars attending Koranic schools.

Abie Troen ’14, from Jerusalem, Israel, is majoring in Film Studies. Abie studied at the Israeli Academy for Sciences and Arts together with Jews and Arabs, and became particularly interested in artistic creation within a politically and socially complex reality. After serving in the Israeli Defense Forces as a combat paramedic, he attended the Sam Spiegel Film Academy in Jerusalem where he worked as a photographer and cinematographer on projects that dealt with social inequalities within Israel. He interned this summer with KENASVIT, the Kenya National Alliance of Street Vendors and Informal Traders, creating a documentary database of film, photos, interviews and clips of their projects on the ground.

Hannah Young ’15, from Branford, Connecticut, is majoring in Anthropology and International and Global Studies with a minor in African and Afro-American Studies. She serves on the boards of the Brandeis African Students Organization and the Anthropology Club. After interning with Sports Helping Empower Women in South Africa (SheWinS) in 2011, Hannah became interested in community development and women’s empowerment in southern Africa. She presently serves as the secretary of the SheWinS board. With the hope of gaining a broader view of the African continent, she traveled to Kampala, Uganda for her Sorensen Fellowship, and worked in the Education Centre of Uganda Youth and Women’s Effort Fighting AIDS (UYWEFA), in an attempt to provide equal education opportunities to orphans and vulnerable children who have been impacted by HIV/AIDS.

Leigh Swigart, Ph.D. is Director of Programs in International Justice and Society at the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life at Brandeis.

Sorensen Fellowship Program

The Ethics Center’s Sorensen Fellowship program honors Theodore C. Sorensen (1928-2010) for his lifelong commitment to public service and for his 10 years as founding chair of the Center’s International Advisory Board. Ted Sorensen was policy advisor, legal counsel, and speechwriter to President John F. Kennedy. He practiced international law for four decades, and was a widely published author on the presidency and foreign affairs. The Sorensen Fellowship seeks to engage Brandeis undergraduates with constructive social change on the international stage, an appropriate tribute to Theodore C. Sorensen.

Ted Sorensen with President Kennedy
Through the Lens of Birth and Illness: Rediscovering My Native Country

Damiana Andonova '15

But what about the moment one enters the world? To what lengths do societies go to ensure a proper birth? And more particularly, in light of our century’s focus on the concepts of human rights and justice, how do societies ensure that every person begins life on an equal footing, brought forth under the best possible conditions? Regrettably, this concept seems to have eluded our modern discourse.

I often think of my native country, Bulgaria, when I ponder this question, mesmerized by my childhood memories and the stories I was told.

My aunt was born on the side of a road, her birth assisted by a woman driving down a dirt and rock path — the only person to pass in hours. My aunt’s mother, an orchard farmer, would name her daughter after the driver who stopped to help her during one of life’s biggest, grandest milestones.

My maternal grandfather was an ambulance driver who remembers driving up the foot of Pirin Mountain on a call to drive a woman to the hospital in winter. He remembers driving down the mountain, tires skidding, unable to control his vehicle, while a woman in labor screamed in the back. He stopped the car and delivered her child. He was only a driver, not a paramedic.

As courses and internships in America fed my unquenchable fascination for obstetrics, I couldn’t forget about the stories I heard of Bulgarian births in the ’70s and ’80s, which seemed not only to produce a laugh in America, but also to strike a personal nerve because the poverty they illustrate hits so close to home. The striking comparisons of stories I had heard in Bulgaria and births I had observed in America made me realize that justice starts in the delivery room. Captivated, and perhaps bewitched by the mysteriousness of my birthplace so estranged temporally and geographically, I wondered, “What is childbirth like in Bulgaria today?”

With this question in mind and a flood of childhood memories, I packed three suitcases and headed to Bulgaria for an obstetrics internship in an under-resourced municipal hospital. My mind was filled with fantasies of what it would be like to arrive at Sofia Airport and reunite with my grandparents and uncle for the first time in over a decade.
Expectations Abound

On a packed, thickly aired, 14-hour flight, the gnawing excitement of returning home destroyed any possibility of rest. My mind gave birth to great expectations as I recalled memories of my native country.

I remember wearing a white fur coat while digging into a barrel of freshly imported olives from Greece, courtesy of my godfather, a jeweler from Thessaloniki.

I remember always wearing extravagant dresses with tulle underneath, walking to the park next to my home, being on the terrace watching sun seep through the kiwi and grapevine ceilings.

I remember climbing my grandparents’ cherry tree.

I remember walking around the church garden — looking into the water fountain.

I remember the smell of big succulent figs, and them melting in my mouth.

I remember having not one person to take care of me, but many at once.

I remember the suitcases and suitcases of Barbies, of other toys, of stuffed bears that my parents would send me from America.

And I remember the not so great memories of a boy throwing my shoe in the ditch near a playground and kids saying, “Haha, haha, your parents left you here,” and I remember believing them because I was very angry and threw great tantrums.

Whenever my uncle would say, “Hey look at the camera and say hi to mom and dad,” I would squint my eyes and pout my lips: “I don’t see them in the camera.”

These glimpses of my past were tossed about in a whirlwind of excitement and anxiety.

Bulgaria had to have changed since I left as a child. Only a few weeks before my flight, I skimmed through the headlines of Bulgarian newspapers. I learned that because of mass emigration and low fertility rates, Bulgaria’s natural growth rate was -5.5 per 1,000 in 2012, the lowest natural growth rate in the world. An article about the U.N. Population Fund Report of 2011 stated that Bulgaria’s statistics didn’t follow the high natural growth rate trend experienced by other developing countries.

The same report also mentioned the State of the World Population Report of 2011, which projected that the Bulgarian population would decline to 5.4 million by 2050. Demographic transitions, I thought, were possibly the cause, as I was sure I would see Bulgaria beginning to rise out of a bad economy. And health statistics were impressive. The infant mortality rate, along with more specific perinatal, neonatal, and post-neonatal rates were low, much lower than those of the United States. Having done the research, I had no idea what to expect of a country with such a distinctive status—a small, poor country with low fertility rates, socialized healthcare, and generous support for couples and new families seeking assistive reproduction technologies and maternity leaves. Population statistics made me worry I would not see many deliveries, and the wealth of information I had read about socialized health care and the breadth of resources available to new families made me wonder just how obstetrics in Bulgaria had changed.

And still, I thought about what it would be like to hug the people who raised me as a child.

After I landed and secured my luggage, I found my grandparents looking nervously around in the lobby. I waved and screamed, “Baba!” I suddenly became speechless. In the arms of my grandparents, no words felt right to say. But no arrangement of words could express my awe at the view as we drove 140 kilometers from Sofia to Kresna — I babbled endlessly. Passing through Blagoevgrad — the city that I would be traveling to for my internship — felt surreal. It finally hit me — I was in Bulgaria. This used to be my home. Driving the final 40 kilometers to Kresna, I was in a state of shock and wonder — rediscovering the Kresnian Défilé as it was now, as I never remembered it. I was relieved to at least know that my daily 40 kilometer commute in an un-air conditioned bus would be a scenic adventure. The sun, it seemed, was hugged in the bosom of the Pirin and Rila Mountains.

Thinking back, I could hardly have conceived the degree to which reuniting with my family would influence my internship at the hospital. My expectations of contemporary Bulgarian life were tested and my concept of the kind of medical professional I aspired to be were continually reshaped. Over the two and a half months I spent in Bulgaria, my relatives and patients I met in the hospital provoked a constant state of introspection. My experiences at the hospital were transformed into the topics for dinner conversation and coffee talk as I invited my family to teach me about the norms of my native country’s medical culture. And still, I constantly asked myself questions about what would make a good clinician, how care should be coordinated to ensure just treatment of all parturients and, perhaps most importantly, what kind of welcome babies deserve when they enter the world.
Cheated Memories

Every day feels like a Sunday… . It’s a small village hidden between two stretches of cliffs, like a défilé, where everyone knows everyone. Its residents make do. Some own little convenience stores with items you might expect in a dollar shop in the U.S. and where their vegetable stands resemble our gum sections at 7-Eleven, or say, Walgreens. Others are welders, repairing what old cars they find, or some neighbor would drop off something broken, and they’d fix it…. Women stay at home cooking, cleaning, and taking care of a vegetable garden or the chickens, or some grandchildren. There are seniors and there are teenagers and toddlers, but the parents are mostly all gone—gone off abroad cleaning other people’s houses, watching other people’s children, taking care of other people’s grandmothers and grandfathers, caring for other people’s gardens.”


Going back to my childhood home in Kresna, I no longer saw it through the rose-colored glasses of childhood. Everything was essentially the same, but I now saw everything the way it really was. Sun dripped like wet paint over kiwi and grapevines, which hung on plastic piping and rusted scaffolding. Everything was calm and golden, except for the background noises the welders made, the banging and clanking of metal here and there.

The women stayed at home minding house duties, breasts hanging under big loose dresses, unwilling to wear – but really unable to afford – bras.

The cherry tree at my grandparents’ house was turned into neatly stacked firewood in the shed.

In Kresna, I was still everyone’s Damianche. Although they said, “it was as if you had come home from a very long weekend away,” there was a tension that divided us. I wasn’t sure if it was their realizing, throughout the course of my stay, that I had changed, or if perhaps they expected me to be different than who I was last summer, but I am sure I disappointed a great deal of people. We all had gone on our own trajectories, and we had grown far too apart for childhood memories to glue us together. Returning home also reminded me of how allergic I was to kiwi and grape flowers, to linden trees, and to the pollen of all kinds of grasses.

My great-grandmother’s front yard looked the same as I remember it — filled with hydrangea, fire lilies, and peonies — but it had been left untended, for nobody could afford the time to mind the flower garden, the cracked concrete stairs, or the rusted green fence. As I saw the concrete floor, I remembered walking up to a few women sitting and snapping green beans. I saw the rusted metal table near the bed of fire lilies where my great aunt Bobby, Baba Anny, and Baba Coco used to make lutenitsa and churn butter. Going back home after so long, I found the familiar strange.

Now, all of my octogenarian great-grandmother’s efforts were concentrated on keeping the home neat, the vegetable garden glowing and growing, and a happy chicken well fed. The sheep stables, to my disappointment, had been deserted. I remembered how I had hugged a baby sheep and fed it milk from a baby bottle. The lamb would have disappeared a few days later, and while eating lamb for dinner, my grandmother would reassure me that my lamb was lost in the forest.

The luscious church garden that I loved as a child was now the only green patch of grass in the upper town. The park paths I used to walk were broken, bricks missing. The kindergarten I used to attend was so small, the fence so rusted. Everyone was so sick. One of my internship goals that summer was to collect stories. It was ironic that I was already overwhelmed by stories of sickness and pain after the first two days of my stay in Bulgaria — a week before I began my internship. I had not once asked to hear these stories, although I was honored to listen. I was even more overwhelmed to see pain transforming into illness and illness transcending poverty and wealth. People seemed to suffer from all sorts of afflictions, whether they were affluent or not.

Memories of my birthplace felt so cheated, it was hard to breathe. In a twisted way, my allergies weren’t the only reason I wished to not see.

Stepping Up to the Unexpected

My First Days at the Hospital

Blageovgrad looked more like some small town with half-demolished buildings than a “city.” The grass was uncut, creeping from broken sidewalk concrete, while those who walked upon it were laden in Gucci, Zara, Prada, Armani, Chanel, Dior… every brand you can name. In a way, I expected this. I expected to see a country emerging from the crevices of a bad economy.

The hospital, on the other hand, was not what I expected.

My supervisor was a large man, towering over everyone like an eagle soaring overhead, with a commanding authority often left unvoiced. He was, in fact, a man of very few words. And I realized this during my very first five-minute encounter with him. Upon my arrival, I found that three departments – obstetrics (labor and delivery), gynecology, and neonatology – were sutured together on one hallway as the floor above underwent remodeling.
Whereas I felt I learned about medicine by humiliation in America, in Bulgaria I felt I learned by fear that a nurse would snap at me.

On the first day of my internship, I watched three abortions occur one after the other. Having never seen the procedure in the United States, I inspected the room and intently watched the patient, not daring for one second to look between her legs. I remember comparing that day to an assembly line.

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It was extremely hard to observe an abortion the very first time, but the more I saw, the more emotionally detached I became, and the easier it was to watch a dilation and suction curettage. Watching the manner in which the patients were awakened from anesthesia, however, and hearing the gossipy conversations between the medical staff while their patients were unconscious, made me feel uneasy.

On my second day at the clinic, I walked across the hospital garden to the surgery department. It was in the surgery OR that I met a fashionable anesthesiologist wearing Diesel jeans, who, upon learning of my presence, was excited to teach me a few things about his profession. He requested that I set up an IV on a patient undergoing surgery. Having never used “sharps” on patients before, I nodded and said no – remembering that in Bulgarian, to nod is to disagree; to shake your head left and right is to agree. I had deep reservations. “What if I hurt the patient?” – “You won’t.” – “What if I do it wrong?” – “I’ll tell you how.” – “Does she know I am going to do it?” – He laughs. “She consented to being treated by my team. Grab an IV bag.”

As I fumbled to open the packaging, I noticed a souvenir clock from the local Hotel Alen Mak hanging on the sky blue wall tiles over the counter with the medical supplies. I thought it was humorous and perhaps a bit unsettling that the OR would use a freebie clock to keep official time. Time stood still and yet I could feel the tachycardia of my own heart. He verbally instructed me as I assembled the IV kit. His command “Relax!” didn’t help, but I managed to rein in my fear as he instructed me to feel the vein, to puncture, and to remove the needle once the IV was in place – “Very good for your first time.” I finally exhaled. He went on to explain how he monitored anesthesia: “Anesthesia is much like flying planes. You worry about takeoff and landing, not so much about the flight....”

Leaving the OR and going into the office where the surgeons scribble notes, smoke cigarettes and ponder what to do after work, I was quickly called back into the OR to scrub in. I was excited to be able to observe a surgery so soon. I scrubbed in, but touched my mask to readjust it because my allergies had become unbearable. The sanitary technician screamed. I scrubbed in again. She was angry that my supervisor made her waste her time teaching me how to scrub in for a laparatomic right ovarian cystectomy – the removal of an ovarian cyst. I, on the other hand, was anxiously excited to observe. Whereas I felt I learned about medicine by humiliation in America, in Bulgaria I felt I learned by fear that a nurse would snap at me. I was paralyzed in fear the first moment I realized I was assisting. My phone rang twice in the operating theater. I did not know at the time that ringing phones, incoming texts, and emails were not something to be ashamed of, and so I looked up at my supervisor, and then across to the nurse, who said, “Phones ring all the time, do you want to take it?” “No.” I would soon find out phone calls can be taken – nurses can hold the phone next to your ear – and cigarettes can also be smoked right outside of the OR.

Walking back from the laparatomic cystectomy in the surgery building to the obstetrics department was one of the few times I was alone with my supervisor for more than a few minutes. We walked quietly for some time, each of us thinking of different things, and he said to me, “We probably do it differently here, but you
know, we get the job done.” I felt at a loss for words, and so I said, “Oh yes! I really enjoy being here. It’s so...interesting.”

It was as if we were heading back from hitting an iceberg, both aware of its significant size, understanding that there’s not a rug big enough to hide it under, knowing all the while that the hard part was over. I knew from then on, I would always ask what I would be doing at the clinic ahead of time, so I could be emotionally prepared.

That same day, I saw another abortion. I had seen a great number in only two days. But that day, coming home, I was greeted by hundreds of butterflies on the sandy, rocky Jane Sandanski Street in Kresna. I spun around, and in the moment, more than a hundred butterflies lifted off the ground, to join in my excitement, in the celebration of what would be a lazy afternoon in a hard-working town.

Looking back to my first week at the hospital, I see that I took no time to process observing that assembly line of abortions except for when I came home to Kresna and painted. I used black, red, and dark green as I drew a watercolor of a woman on a gynecologic chair with legs strapped to the stirrups, an anesthesiologist and his assistant, a bunch of nurses, and a man sitting on a broken, immobile dark green chair between the stirrups. I remember drawing a red line for the plastic tubing coming out between the legs of a lifeless woman, passing under the table, draining into a collection apparatus, blood splattered a bit on the floor and on the lower side of the wall. A month into the internship, I outright refused to watch any more dilatations and curettages, electing to spend time in the NICU instead.

Butterflies and scenic bus rides often were the mental transition I needed in order to try to stop thinking about medicine when I arrived home.

**Gynecologic Surgery**

In the OR, urgency was an unheard of concept. Perhaps it was the heat, or the repetitive anticlimactic mood, but time stood still even though the hands on the Hotel Alen Mak clock moved. Hot plates were scattered about the orange tile floors heating basins of instruments — these were what they used at the clinic as autoclaves. We often started very late. I was surprised to see how doctors performed lengthy, fatiguing procedures because of the lack of technological resources. I remember being fascinated with a rather bloody conization of the cervix using Sturmdorf suturing — a procedure used to diagnose and treat cervical dysplasia by removing abnormal cervical tissue. I stood positioned behind the surgeon, as two other physicians stood next to the patient holding her feet in a dorsal lithotomy position — the OR table did not have stirrups. During the operation, the medical personnel chatted about a concert by the Struma River, and the conscious patient would ask every 30 some minutes, “Is it going to be over soon?” The anesthesiologist, with his Diesel jeans and Birkenstocks, sat on the empty OR table to my left, talking to his assistant and occasionally laughing, while the OR nurse asked for a cough drop and a cup of water. The patient needed to be moved up and so the nurse and I had to pull some of the sheets while someone else lifted her up a bit. Nearing the end of the operation, the gauze was running out. It was hot and so we opened the windows.

Listening to the medical staff talk about other things when treating patients reminded me of the time I observed a cesarean section in Chicago when the physician talked about a patient’s shoes as she lay awake staring at the ceiling. I wondered a great deal after the surgery if the patient would have had a better experience if the physicians could perform LEEP as I had seen it performed quickly and rather bloodlessly in Chicago as well. I wondered, too, if availability of such technologies would have made for a speedier procedure with fewer personnel involved.
I recall a great deal of laparatomic cystectomies performed over the course of the summer. It was always a probable cyst, never for certain, because there was only one secondhand ultrasound machine which lacked a vaginal transducer, making it hard to see. Observing these surgeries was always surprising because I would learn about adhesions, myomas, and various other conditions, often instead of the suspected cyst. And while I did watch a few cystectomies, many of the surgeries ended up being more complicated—sometimes metamorphosing into total abdominal hysterectomies.\textsuperscript{15}

I remember a particularly difficult surgery to watch. The nurses, constantly irked by their work, rolled their eyes, stormed by, exhaled annoyed sighs at the physicians, at the tactless recent medical school graduate who tiptoed over near the OR table, breathing heavily in the surgeon’s ears. I stood away from the surgeons so as not to be a nuisance. I had learned from previous internships to mind my manners and modulate self-interest in the interest of the patient. The cystectomy slowly turned into a hysterectomy and a bilateral salpingo-oophorectomy. Uterus, ovaries, fallopian tubes, everything had to go. Clinical presentations indicated this, and the physicians didn’t want to risk more severe complications. She was a complicated patient, in their eyes. In my eyes, a very poor patient, one who would wake up feeling lighter, but oh so heavy in her heart. One by one, tissue pieces and organs were cut away, thrown haphazardly into a steel basin on the orange tile floor. She had children, but she would have no more, I thought, perhaps, since she had the closure I needed after watching such procedures. I never got to find out what happened with the patient afterwards. I didn’t even get the comfort of a diagnosis.

I remember one laparoscopic cystectomy\textsuperscript{16} on a young 14 year old girl. Observing the laparoscopy was more frustrating than watching laparatomies because I had to watch the team of physicians wrestle with the equipment, inexperienced with controlling it and using the camera. I was so afraid to judge. The young girl cried before the surgery. I promised her that I would be by her side the entire time. Holding the patient’s hand as she fell asleep, and then watching the surgery, was the first time I was afraid something could go wrong. I left the OR while the doctors finished and hurried past her parents. I didn’t want them to see me. I knew they would ask a question I did not want to answer. Still, they saw me and followed me to ask how their daughter was doing. I bit my tongue. What was I supposed to say? “Everything is going to be okay,” I said. I didn’t want to lie the very first time I was going to speak to a patient’s family. I felt so guilty, not really knowing if everything really was going to be okay. And so I left early that day.

I recall this sweet post-menopausal woman complaining of bleeding. While observing her exam, around the corner of the physician’s shoulder, I saw something that concerned the physician and me. A week or so later, I walked down the hall with a physician to meet the patient’s daughters and tell them that their mother had endometrial cancer. He did all the talking. I could only manage, “I am very sorry,” as I watched these women overcome with pain, sorrow, and even guilt. The words the physician had spoken hit them across the face, and yet they felt it in their stomachs as they clutched their bags closer to their waists. Leaving the room, I heard each sister blaming the other—if only one of them had taken her in to live with them it would have been caught earlier, they argued.

Watching gynecologic surgeries, I would always make a note of questions to ask the surgeons. Every time, a surgeon I befriended would clarify all the clinical information I knew little about. She would answer my questions like an introductory chemistry professor – almost completely, but not quite, and all the while I knew she was judging the extent of my aptitude and understanding from every question I asked. There were such things as stupid questions – and those I dared not ask, especially not in front of patients.

Observing “interesting procedures,” and observing the patients undergo them, I felt ill at ease with myself. Hating the manner in which the insides of patients’ organs were revealed to me but reveling in what I saw and learned incited strange conflicting feelings of guilt and excitement. It was tough to watch many things happen in the surgical OR, but those were tougher days for the patient, who not only had endured long wait periods scared and confused, but would receive potentially terrible news once conscious. To mention nothing of the pains they would experience post-op, both physically and mentally. I wondered how long it would take for them to feel whole.
once again, to feel ownership of their own bodies once again.

I had difficulty coming to terms with the bloody violence of surgery — the way surgeons impose themselves upon patients, the way they cut.

The novice doctor once said jokingly, "We're not putting the sheets on the surgery patient to separate the face from the body, we're separating medicine from barbarity." His sarcasm, callous, rough as were his hands, made observing difficult.

And my grandmother knew I had a hard time. She knew it because the lights would go on in the middle of the night, as I stood awake tormented by violent bloody nightmares. It was never the guts and organs I dreamed about. It was always the cutting of the flesh, the bloodletting, the dull scalpels that stole my sleep. And so my grandmother turned to folk remedies to restore my sleep. I moved my bed so that when lying down, the soles of my feet wouldn't face the door. I washed my face and let the water run in the sink after waking up from a bad dream. I baked bread and handed it out to neighbors. I sipped wine and ate some of this bread with honey—all little superstitious doings that perhaps helped a bit by distracting my thoughts.

I often thought of the role of the archetypal observer in the corner of the room. For much of the beginning of my internship, I felt like a ghost walking in the shadows of physicians. I felt like a ghost in my own birthplace. For much of the beginning of my internship, I felt like a ghost walking in the shadows of physicians. I felt like a ghost in my own birthplace.

I realized at one point that I anything that could reverse or ameliorate burden of watching—unable to say or do anything to tell, I felt I had to figure out what to do.

What My Great-Grandmother Said About Doctors

I was sitting on my great-grandmother's cot the very first time I asked someone in Kresna to tell me about his or her health. As this woman I loved so much sat hunched over she said,

"Doctors don't know how to be doctors anymore. They touch you with your clothes on."

I still recall the rather frustrated, laughing manner in which she spoke those words. I sat there awed. My great-grandmother, a tobacco farmer, and mother of three, had never heard of the invocations of Abraham Verghese, whose words on bedside manner and the patient-physician relationship bewitched me one evening in a health policy and literature course. And yet, she had arrived at the same conclusion as he.

"I am a physician practicing with cutting-edge technology. But I'd like to make the case to you...that when we shortcut the physical exam, when we lean towards ordering tests instead of talking to and examining the patient, we not only overlook simple diagnoses that can be diagnosed at a treatable early stage, but we're losing much more than that. We're losing a ritual. We're losing a ritual that I believe is transformative, transcendent, and is at the heart of the patient-physician relationship...I'd like to introduce to you the most important innovation, I think, in medicine, to come in the next 10 years, and that is the power of the human hand—to touch, to comfort, to diagnose, and to bring about treatment." – Abraham Verghese

I was given many opportunities at the hospital to touch, to feel, to learn. I felt compelled to touch and yet, I also felt compelled to listen. The most exciting part for me was observing and sometimes assisting with vaginal deliveries. I was encouraged to ask questions and learn about labor. With time, I was shown how to stop and start a fetal heart monitor. I was also shown what I should look for and when to alert a physician or nurse if a midwife was not already in the room. Two different physicians showed me how to monitor cervical dilation. With the physician instructing me, I would say to the patient, "Is it okay that I check right now? Are you comfortable? I know that relaxing is not exactly natural at this moment, but I hope..."
you can so that I can properly check.” This was not my favorite part of labor. My favorite part of labor was another kind of touch. When the parturients were in their rooms, sometimes screaming, sometimes moaning, sometimes entirely silent, I liked to go in and sit with them. Most of the time, we got to know each other pretty well. Other times, we talked with the attending midwife, who would work as a partner with the obstetrician. When everyone knew each other, I felt much better about the events in the delivery room.

When the patient knew me, I felt good about the delivery. While I couldn’t control what was said and done by other staff, the patient would always know what my job was — standing on her right, not just holding her arm to make sure her IV did not get damaged during labor, but also holding her hand during the delivery. I felt that perhaps this must have been helpful. After all, her husband would not be allowed in the department and she would have no one else’s hand to hold. She was also in great pain because patients were only given a local lidocaine injection if an episiotomy was performed. No other anesthesia was administered, but many women received oxytocin in their IVs to induce labor.

I did not judge women for screaming or not. I smiled. I adjusted their pillows when instructed to. I asked the nurse to replace the IV when needed. When episiotomies were necessary, I stayed after labor and worked with other staff to hold the patients’ legs in a dorsal lithotomy position when suturing had to be done. I filled a pot of warm water and brought it to the doctor when asked to (there was not readily available running hot water). I did not say anything most of the time. When I did speak, I said, “Congratulations.” I said, “Thanks for letting me be a part of this special moment. Best wishes.” I would then scurry over to the nursery to get a glimpse of the baby once again.

I would also sometimes walk into rooms of new mothers and talk to them. I remember once speaking to a mother who had just delivered her miracle baby after several years of miscarriages and in vitro fertilization. I liked hearing stories because they engraved in my mind that the patients were people with feelings that must be recognized and respected. It was in my best interest as a young clinician-in-training to listen.

But there were times I was encouraged to touch and discouraged from listening. And those times broke my heart.

Difficult Lectures: The Treatment of the Roma

Outright, ruthless, unapologetic discrimination has plagued the Roma community for thousands of years. I knew that as a fact before visiting Bulgaria this summer. However, since my return to America, I can no longer simply just state this as fact. I feel the need to paint images.

— Journal Entry, August 10, 2013

In the beginning of my internship, when I first visited the NICU, my eyes fell upon a darling little one with dark blue eyes, raven, pointy hair that stuck out, and a cute nose. He was perhaps the most darling of all the babies in the tiny NICU and nursery. He had an IV placed on his forehead—there was no other vein large enough for the adult-sized IV needles that were all the NICU had available. As I held him for the very first time, passing nurses gave me odd looks. One stopped and asked, “Of all the ones you could be holding, how did you manage to pick up the Gypsy one?” This question upset me a great deal. I wasn’t sorry I couldn’t discriminate a Roma baby from non-Roma one. Frankly, it wasn’t a skill I wanted to learn. Vocalizing that, however, was not possible, and so I was regularly lectured on a topic I wanted to know nothing about.

Once, before a delivery, a physician said, “You see pain experience is all about intelligence. See how this Bulgarian woman has not made a sound? Of course she knows that birth is painful. This other one [a Roma] on the other hand thinks she’s the only one going through childbirth and wants her relatives to hear her scream outside.”

Another time, I was observing a C-section, when a neonatal nurse took the baby and said, “What an ugly Gypsy.” This kind of comment was not an isolated occurrence, and it made me think. This was not the sort of welcome I thought babies deserved. Earlier in the C-section, a sanitary tech had said, “Third C-section and she’s only 21? Shouldn’t the post-op pain teach her something? We could just, you know, cut them [the fallopian tubes].” Confounded by her joke, I was so upset I couldn’t speak. I was comforted by the fact that others felt she took her joke too far, too. Discrimination was clearly so deeply rooted in Bulgarian society, there was little I felt I could do. But it was sad to hear these comments from the mouths of those whose hands were trained to heal.

One morning, in the doctor’s office, a physician told me about a case she had had overnight. A Roma mother had to be delivered via cesarean section because her baby was in an incomplete breech position with the baby’s foot sticking out. She had not panicked, the physician said, like she would have if it were not a Gypsy baby,
because she knew “they were so resilient.” Just like that, she offered me an example of medical discrimination. She would have acted faster, would have panicked more, if it had not been a Roma patient. Stories like this were eyebrow raising, and I was happy to not have had the burden of watching it occur before my eyes.

The obstetrics care I had been observing had deeply torn me to pieces – watching ruthless, unapologetic, in-your-face discrimination occurring in the delivery room and in the obstetrics OR. My internship was drawing to a close and I wanted to do something. I decided I would offer to take pictures for all parturients who undergo C-sections and then I would email them to the mothers later, so that they were not shortchanged on the experience of giving birth. I took care to follow the words of physician idols like Abraham Verghese, and also Henry Cushing and William Osler. I recalled my great-grandmother’s opinion as well. I wanted to make sure I stood out as someone who really believed justice starts in the delivery room.

I already felt like a ghost, powerless and ineffective, so one must imagine how I felt when assisting a cesarean section on a young Roma mother in Bulgaria. Imagine an obstetrics operating room, with sky blue square tiles, a Bulgarian Orthodox icon of the Virgin Mary and her Son, and a swarm of health care workers. I stood on the patient’s right, the classic position of a clinician. To say I was excited, nervous, and freaked out would not be an understatement. I had changed my gloves twice because I had touched the patient’s forearm the first time when I turned to her and promised I would do my best, that my physician mentor would be on the patient’s left, and that I would be assisting him. I told her another physician would be in the room and ready to scrub in if needed. I told her how happy I was for her, and how honored I was to be part of this moment of her life and her child’s.

Once born, I wanted to touch her child, and whisper kind words of welcome. I wanted to say, “May you exceed everyone’s expectations, and amaze them to see the ‘you’ that you are meant to be.” This never happened. My plans went awry when one of the health workers said, “What a black Gypsy baby” as we pulled the baby out. I wanted to scream. I grew angry, but under my scrubs and mask, no one could see. Once again, I felt like a ghost. I wanted to scream on behalf of the child’s mother, who under general anesthesia could not witness the disgusting welcome her child had received. After the surgery, in the nursery, I touched the baby’s hand and whispered an apology. On my way out, I congratulated the big brother.

If it was this hard for me to watch discrimination in the proverbial delivery room, I kept thinking how difficult it was for the mothers. I kept thinking about what it must be like for a Roma woman to let a doctor she distrusts bring her child into the world. And I kept on thinking about Joseph Campbell’s words about the mother and baby transforming as heroes through childbirth. Is there any more courageous hero than a Roma mother in Europe, I thought?

Failing

Walking to the obstetrics/gynecologic/neonatology department one day, I was stopped by a young Roma woman holding a baby. “Remember me?” she asked. I didn’t remember. My mind went into a frenzy: how did I know her? When I finally recalled that she was a previous patient, I smiled, remembering her screams, and frowned too, remembering how she was screamed at. I had kept her company during most of her active labor. I felt so sorry, so ashamed that I had forgotten her. The mother’s face was honey, as were her eyes and hair. Her baby was too beautiful for words. We had a little chat — doting on the baby, asking if there were any clinical complications, business as usual. She wished me a good workday. Heading toward the obstetrics clinic, I felt discouraged. I had promised myself I would follow the examples set forth by the physicians I admired. I wanted to treat every patient with the very best compassion that a physician can offer. I wanted to put into action what I believed to be a universal truth – justice starts in the delivery room. And here I was, a young clinician-in-training, and this encounter made me think I had failed to do the only task I had assigned myself over the summer.
Conclusion

I remember one day when exciting music and the banging of drums broke the silence of a lazy afternoon in the hospital. Startled, I was intrigued to find out what it was as the nurses and medical staff rolled their eyes. It was a Roma celebration outside of the hospital for a Roma baby that had just been discharged. A physician was very helpful and took a photo of me standing outside listening. She said, “It is annoying for us, but I can understand how it is interesting for you.” It was more than interesting to me. It helped shape my whole philosophy on what it means to have a proper birth.

Watching this celebration and many more thereafter reaffirmed my belief in giving every baby the hero’s welcome. Joseph Campbell once wrote that all heroes have a miraculous birth. When I think of the amazing journey a baby makes—from growing up from a pair of cells, to doing a total flip onto its head, to its daring passage through the birth canal, to taking a breath for the very first time, I dare to say that the birth of a baby is pretty damned miraculous. I believe that birth makes every mother’s child a hero, no matter their ethnicity, deserving in their own right to a riotous and doting celebration with music and fireworks, affection and respect. I believe in warmly receiving every baby with the same excitement, curiosity, and celebration that children of many monarchs have received. I believe in that sort of equality.

But right now I have a chief complaint, and I fear no folk medicine, no esteemed physician can help. My chest feels heavy. It is often hard to exhale when thinking of my summer in Bulgaria. I’d like to think that the heaviness in my chest stems from the overwhelming beauty of my town despite all the pain and illness that I saw. But in reality, I think I’m suffering from the terrible illness that consumes those who leave a part of their life behind.

Notes


7. A parturient is a woman in labor, one about to give birth.

8. Traditional vegetable spread with earthy tomatoes, spices, and red peppers.

9. Laparatomic cystectomy is the removal of a cyst through a large surgical incision, vertical or horizontal, in the abdominal wall. Particularly, the surgeries were exploratory laparotomies.

10. Neonatal Intensive Care Unit

11. An autoclave is a laboratory and clinical tool used to sterilize instruments and other laboratory or clinical equipment. This includes surgical tools, speculums, forceps, etc.

12. Also known as a cone biopsy, a conization of the colli uteri, or the cervix, is a surgical procedure in which a cone is excised in order to remove affected tissue and/or obtain tissue for diagnostic testing. Sturmdorf suturing is simply a measure taken to repair a defective cone and to prevent bleeding. Source: Emmet Hirsch, email to University of Chicago Clinical Professor in Obstetrics and Gynecology, November 18, 2013.


14. Loop Electrosurgical Excision Procedure, a procedure that can also be used to treat neoplasias of the cervix, commonly known as cervical dysplasias, of the second stage or higher. Source: Emmet Hirsch, email to University of Chicago Clinical Professor in Obstetrics and Gynecology, November 18, 2013.

15. Total abdominal hysterectomies are surgical procedures to remove the uterus and cervix, whereas partial hysterectomies involve the removal of the uterus only. Total abdominal hysterectomies involving the removal of the fallopian tubes and ovaries are called hysterectomies with (bilateral) salpingo-oophorectomy.

16. A laparoscopic surgery involves the use of a laparoscope that guides surgical manipulations with a camera and screen. It is considered to be less invasive and modern as it involves several small incisions rather than a large incision (a laparotomy).

Passport

“You must go.” With that I became a deportee at the age of 22.

Working with Project Plus One, a group dedicated to implementing sustainable health care and development programs in Timor-Leste, made it imperative for me to actually make a trip to the beautiful island country. Therefore, I began planning the trip, and these preparations included the application for a fellowship that could sponsor me to further Project Plus One’s mission in Timor-Leste and in particular at the Bairo Pite Clinic. When I was awarded the Sorensen Fellowship, I was ecstatic at how wonderfully the Fellowship goals aligned with my own. My plan had been to go to Bairo Pite Clinic and work to create a system that could be used to ensure that disabled individuals receive the treatment they require without the discrimination attached to being disabled.

I got my ticket and travel papers in order before I set off. Having travelled to other countries, I knew how imperative it was to have the correct travel documentation. Therefore, I made a series of phone calls after my online visa applications, for reassurances from the various consulates whose countries I would be passing through on the way to Timor-Leste, including Singapore and Indonesia. What I had forgotten to check at the door was my innocence.

My trip to Timor-Leste was plagued by a couple of small but complicated hitches from the outset. For instance, I had to have my departure postponed two days, as my airline could not see my flight plan from Indonesia to Timor-Leste since it had been booked with another airline. They gave me a couple of days to find proof of that connecting flight, which I did. When I went back to the airport, the staff hassled me a little bit by asking for additional supporting documents, such as sponsorship documents, although the consulate employees I had spoken with assured me this was not required. I showed the airline staff my Sorensen internship overview as well as my mother’s bank statements, which they analyzed closely before reluctantly checking me through to Amsterdam.

I should have realized that this was a glaring warning sign about my future trip. At that point, I probably should have listened to the inner turmoil in my heart. Everything should have gone a whole lot more smoothly but I was determined and, even more so, I was stubborn. So I ignored my misgivings. I got to Amsterdam and waited out my long 14 hour layover before boarding my flight to Singapore. During my flight, I checked in with the crew to verify the legitimacy of my travel papers as I wanted to avoid any more hitches. I was cleared to continue my journey. By this time I was about halfway to Timor-Leste. I was so close, I could taste it. There was no turning back. I landed in Singapore and had hardly been there 40 minutes when I was yet again flight-bound to Indonesia.

On the plane I met a very nice French man and a young Timorese girl who both indulged me as I practiced French and Tetun on them. I was so thrilled. I had already made a Timorese friend and we were making plans for Bali and Dili and the hotel. She was nice. We got to immigration and I had all my papers ready. I walked up to the counter where a pleasant-looking man stood. His one striking feature was an oversized big front tooth that seemed to take over his smile. I handed over my documents. He looked down at my papers then back at me. (To this day I wonder whether I should have chosen to wear a different T-shirt since the one I had on read “I am Proudly Kenyan.” I guess I will never know.) Anyway, his smile turned into a frown as he told me my visa and
passport were "no good." My heart began to sink but I kept a smile on my face as I probed him to tell me what "no good" meant. He silenced me and ushered me into a small room off to the side of the counters. Emblazoned in big letters was the sentence that put the fear of God into me. The sentence was, "The penalty for drug traffickers is death."

While it may seem a bit of a leap to automatically connect my being African to being a suspected drug trafficker, I thought it was pretty logical. According to the latest World Drug Report (2013), the recent trend is for African countries to act as a valuable transit point for drugs such as heroin and cocaine coming into Asian countries. In fact, Indonesia has reported increased trafficking of methamphetamine by African groups. Though I couldn’t be sure why they were singling me out, my fear was based on these reports, and on the stereotypes of Africans I’d read about by African groups.1 Though I couldn’t be sure why they weresingling me out, my fear was based on these reports, and on the stereotypes of Africans I’d read about in Asian countries. In such reports African countries are sometimes grouped as a unit without reference to the individual nations. Here I was in this foreign airport, having my documents scrutinized by a foreign authority, paralyzed by the fear that he might extend the transgressions of some Africans to all of us. My identity to the Indonesian authority was “African.” Could he imagine that an African would be traveling to an Asian country on a service trip? Weren’t service trips made by Africans a preposterous notion, seeing that our continent was known as the Dark Continent, even among other poor and developing nations? So even if I was never told what “no good” meant, I had a feeling.

I sat in that airport office as everyone around me moved in and out, totally ignoring me. All the while I wondered who was currently holding my passport, as it seemed to be changing hands pretty quickly – something I was silently observing but trying not to panic over. Finally, after a tense 20 minutes, a man walked to me and handed me back my passport along with a flight itinerary and luggage tags. He told me, "You must go."

I was escorted from that room like a criminal. All airport staff and security gawked at me, probably under the delusion that I was some drug trafficker who had just been caught. Airport personnel with high clearance were able to stop me to go over my documents and hear the story about this young African deportee firsthand, as the initial toothy man was among those in my escort, before smiling and turning away. I remained silent as waves of humiliation flowed over me. A few paces behind me was a young airport officer who had been monitoring the progress of my situation. He kept eyeing me and telling me he could help me, but the way his eyes kept running over my body made me sure that his was not the kind of help I needed. So I kept declining his offers. He didn’t let up. I felt nauseous, even though there was nothing he could do to me without getting past the three beefy security guards who were herding me through the airport along with two disgruntled flight attendants. All of us were involved in delaying the last flight leaving the airport for Singapore so that I, the deportee, could be on that plane. Fifteen minutes later I was at the terminal. Somewhere during the quick walk through the airport my bags had been brought and loaded onto the plane. I got on board and the minute I sat down in a broken seat in the last row in economy, the pilot announced they were cleared for takeoff. Everyone on board was able to tie the delay to me and many people in the cabin glared at me. But who could blame them really?

I was in Indonesia for a total of 40 minutes. My plan to intern at the Bairo Pite Clinic in Timor-Leste had disappeared.

This experience made me realize that it is easy for a person’s identity to be reduced to what is written on a piece of paper. It’s funny how our passports and birth certificates can determine the course of our lives. I never got an explanation for why I was denied entry into Indonesia, but I could only surmise that it was due to the fact that I was African. It took me a long time to actually accept what happened – not just the deportation process, but also the mere fact that my Kenyan passport may have linked me to drug traffickers and deemed me unworthy of access to a country. The Kenyan emblem made me a risk that the Indonesians were unwilling to take. To the rest of the world, I was Kenyan and from that they could draw whatever assumptions they wanted as to my identity, which emphasized my outsider status.

It is true I am Kenyan and proudly so, but that is only a part of who I am. In that Indonesian airport I was never given the chance to show the other aspects of my identity. That is what plagued me even months after. My identity had been reduced to what was on a piece of paper.

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1. Though I couldn’t be sure why they were singling me out, my fear was based on these reports, and on the stereotypes of Africans I’d read about by African groups.
Foreign Local

“Where are you from?”

“Africa.”

“Well you are weird and you talk different and your name sounds funny.”

This was definitely not an encouraging start to my early childhood in St. Louis, Missouri, where I spent the better part of my formative years learning two separate cultures: the house culture where we spoke my native tongue, Kikuyu and the national culture, the American one. The rest of my childhood was spent in Kenya like my cousins and the rest of my family. But in the end, the experience of living in two different countries has helped shape the person I am today. Sadly, the confusion that comes with this experience is I cannot consider myself either fully Kenyan or fully American. By Kenyan law I could not, at the time, hold dual citizenship so I knew I could never officially be both. But I have also learned that the deficit goes deeper than my citizenship. It has led me to a creative definition of myself as a “foreign local.”

The term “foreign local” was coined by a couple of my Kenyan friends who, like me, found it difficult to re integrate into society due to our exposure to other cultures that had altered our lifestyles and our perceptions. This exposure put us in a class that made associating with people from different income brackets in Kenya very difficult. We were not rich in the conventional sense, just rich in experiences and knowledge. My opportunity to travel made me believe I had seen it all. However, this may also have been simply my overconfidence and my taking a lot of things for granted.

All I know is by the time I returned to Kenya after the grueling 64 hour trip from Indonesia, I had forgotten all about my self-forged identity as a foreign local. What I needed was empathy from my fellow Kenyans after the traumatizing and humiliating experience of deportation. Instead, what I received was indifference. That made the transition home even more difficult.

Over the course of my life, I have grappled with the question “who am I?” Not because it seemed like a question to lose sleep over but because I have been genuinely confused. I have faced rejection after rejection but the most painful one has been from my own people. Other Kenyans have rejected me for not being “Kenyan enough.” It was as though there was an invisible scale I was standing on that tipped against me. I never knew there was a standard measure of “Kenyanness,” but be that as it may, I fell into the “not enough” category.

This is why, upon my return from Indonesia, I had so much trouble securing a replacement internship – I was once again seen as a foreign local. While there were many opportunities for people such as myself who had studied outside Kenya, these were not at the grass-roots level where I wanted to work. People had no time for me, as they considered me an elite educational snob for choosing to go to university study abroad. One look at my resume, and I was labeled a spoiled rich brat with possibly no “real” skills, as that is the stereotype of many Kenyans who have studied abroad. What the potential internship supervisors failed to do was make the distinction between me, a Kenyan who received the opportunity to study abroad, and the children of powerful individuals in Kenya, especially politicians, who saw it as the only option for their children. They disregarded my possible merits and judged me off a piece of paper, just as the Indonesian airport authorities had done with my passport. Once again, my identity had been reduced to what was written on a single paper, this time my resume. Once again my “paper identity” had worked against me. This paper identity was getting ridiculous.

In my search for a new internship site, I sent out mass feeler emails requesting a volunteer opportunity in Kenya or any other African nation. I hit every NGO I could find. Making appointments, showing up at offices, and dropping my resume and cover letter everywhere I could. Nothing turned up. It is sad to admit this, but it is much easier to find an opportunity in Kenya while outside of Kenya, because Kenyans are mighty competitive. If site supervisors or human resource managers believed some random foreign local kid was trying to steal a job from “real locals,” they thwarted any efforts. I was frustrated and disappointed. Here I was, wanting to work for free and even pay them a stipend to accept me, wanting to be mentored and wanting to learn from others, but no one was giving me the time of day. All I could do for the first month back in Kenya was want.

This dismissal by my fellow Kenyans was nearly as painful as the rejection I experienced in Indonesia. I became a walking contradiction. I was a Kenyan national rejected for being foreign while in Asia, but I was similarly rejected for being foreign among other Kenyan nationals.

Once again, my identity had been reduced to what was written on a single paper, this time my resume. Once again my “paper identity” had worked against me.
Was I making a real impact on their lives? I felt there was a disproportionate gain between the members of these groups and myself – that is, I gained much more from them in terms of knowledge and exposure than they did from me. I was, after all, basically an outsider with just a couple of insider insights. I could not speak for a community that lived so differently from me, despite all of us being fellow Kenyans.

In the end and perhaps ironically, I managed to secure an internship with an organization run by an American: Kenya Social Ventures (KSV). The leaders of KSV saw my value as someone with local knowledge of Kenya and Kenyans, and perhaps with more insight into the inner workings of Nairobi slums. This was only partially accurate. I do understand Kenyan customs and speak Swahili, so I had more insider knowledge than some at KSV. But as a foreign local, I was still an outsider to slum dwellers, despite having done some previous work with this demographic.

Kenya Social Ventures
Kenya Social Ventures is a new, multifaceted organization that seeks to have a lasting impact on the lives of underprivileged Kenyans through grass roots efforts. Some of the projects the organization has undertaken include strength and training programs with secondary schools, social business development in the slums, HIV/AIDS and cervical cancer awareness, long term rainwater harvesting in rural villages, and agricultural logistics among farming groups. My main internship goal for the summer was to document the stories of the people involved in these local grass roots projects, in order to give KSV content for its advertising materials, to put a “face” on the programs it is supporting, and to open access to an international target market and audience by providing information to build the organization’s website.

While I was with KSV I was attached to two particular projects in Kibera, the largest slum area in Nairobi, and home to 60% of Nairobi’s population. The first project involved a group called Power Women’s Group, comprised of women who were HIV-positive and seeking economic self-empowerment via craft making. The zeal and persistence that these women possessed in the face of stigmas attached to their health status were remarkable. I learned so much about the local informal market, their perspectives on NGOs, and possible solutions to the flaws of health promotion programs currently in the slums.

In the second project I worked with a group called the Victorius Bone Shop, which was an all male group that had come together from different situations to make crafts out of animal bones. They overcame many challenges as they set up their shop and faced setbacks in their production in the form of city council disruptions, looting during post-election violence and competition from other “bone crafters” in the region. (They were one of 15 small crafting shacks.) Their efforts were truly formidable and the level of organization they achieved without having received formal training was amazing. In fact, they were so successful that they taught the skills of informal business management and accounting to others for a fee. I was impressed by the amount of innovation happening right now – not just in the slums of Nairobi but also in slums across Kenya, and possibly even in other parts of the African continent.

That being said, aside from documenting the stories of these men and women and providing KSV with content for their website, there was not much else I could do for the members of these two groups. Was I making a real impact on their lives? I felt there was a disproportionate gain between the members of these groups and myself – that is, I gained much more from them in terms of knowledge and exposure than they did from me. I was, after all, basically an outsider with just a couple of insider insights. I could not speak for a community that lived so differently from me, despite all of us being fellow Kenyans. Though my writing for KSV could give them a voice, I feared it might be ineffective. What if my position as a foreign local was actually a disadvantage for them? What if they were rejected merely because they had me on their side?

Kibera
My work in Kibera was not without its challenges. For one, before I began to work I realized just how misinformed I had been about the slum and its residents. Like many other people, I was working with one-sided information. Kibera’s infamy arises from the fact that the individuals living within this community are on the extreme end of the income spectrum. There are 2.5 million people living in Kibera, representing approximately 60% of Nairobi’s population yet occupying only 6% of the city’s land area. There is mass consumption of drugs and cheap, potent, and potentially lethal locally brewed beverages such as changaa. The residents deal with insecurity, open sewers, poor
medical facilities, high rates of HIV/AIDS, entrenched poverty and deplorable living situations. Even if you want to broaden your knowledge of life in Kibera, all you come up with is a couple of articles giving reference to the poverty we already know about. You are likely to see pictures of dirty children with tattered clothes, or else be invited to try a “slum tour,” a concept I find utterly degrading, although I am starting to see its benefits in the economic sense. But I get ahead of myself.

Almost everything you find about Kibera online, in papers and so on does little to paint a picture different from the general stereotype of slums. If anything, you are left almost fearful due to the mystery surrounding the area. As an outsider, not knowing what to expect is the scariest feeling in the world. I am no stranger to this fear and anxiety. When I first learned that I would be working there, I tried to recall articles that I had read, or stories and news reports I had heard about Kibera. All that really stood out in my mind was the abject poverty and lack of security.

So, on my first day there, I was a true foreigner, not just because I had never been in Kibera but also because I was holding on to hearsay and articles to form an opinion. Ironically, this is a trait often seen in tourists. It did not help that, although generally accurate, the only pictures available of Kibera capture the abject poverty – the narrow, muddy and littered pathways, the dirty-looking children with tattered clothes, the open sewage and unsanitary living conditions. Though the pictures capture a certain reality, they speak little of the people living that reality. Nonetheless, such pictures painted my subconscious with a desperate image. The physical environment coupled with my outsider status shaped a bias that I only came to realize I possessed when reflecting on my experience after I returned to Brandeis.

### My Kibera

Before working in Kibera I had visited Soweto – one of the largest slums not only in South Africa but also on the African continent. I had also visited Mukuru, a smaller slum in Nairobi. So I figured I wouldn’t be too shocked by Kibera. In fact, I remember being pleasantly surprised on my first day.

I was with the rest of the KSV team. Because we were going in together, we drove as far into Kibera as we could before we got out of the car and continued by foot. I remember preparing my nose for the unpleasant and sometimes foul smells that marked out areas with spilled sewage or pit latrines. Though the smell was there, it was not nearly as pungent as I expected it to be. As we crossed abandoned parking lots and got onto the characteristic littered narrow and muddy pathways between the slums, we found ourselves surrounded by a plethora of half-naked children who were eager to shake our hands. They especially wanted to touch Blake, my supervisor, who was the only mzungu (white person) in our small group. We walked and talked with ease. No one seemed too bothered about our presence even if they could see we were all strangers by the way we carried ourselves. I did not feel out of place and there was also strength in numbers. I remember feeling fascinated by the different domesticated animals that roamed freely through the lanes. I wondered how the owners told the chickens apart, as they were all the same without any visible tags. I guess that was the beauty about communal living. What belonged to one person belonged to everyone. Even though there was financial insecurity, as I came to learn during one-on-one interviews, everyone seemed relatively content. They may not have been living a king’s life but they could certainly be deemed happier than many who were.

The busy vegetable market and all the vendors who lined up along the roads gave life to this community. I came to realize that seeing, reading, learning and experiencing the slums are very different things. It's incredible how falsely the members of this community are depicted. While walking I spotted a particularly juicy avocado so I pleaded with the rest of the team to stop for a little break. We had been walking for about 40 minutes anyway so I proceeded to the vendor with the overturned crate who was selling the beautifully ripe avocado. (I love avocados – they are my weakness). He spotted the company I was in and so quoted me a ridiculous price for the avocado. (50 shillings, about 60 cents). We began to haggle over the price and during our negotiation process I came to learn so much about this vendor. His name was Macharia, he had a wife with four children, and he came from the same place as my mother, Kiambu. We proceeded to play the "do you know...?" game, as almost everyone in Kiambu knows someone or other. I discovered he had heard of my grandparent. Having found a common ground, I guess he realized I was not as foreign as he thought, so he quoted me a much lower price (10 shillings, about 15 cents, which is about the right price for avocados). Though to some this haggling is tedious, I found it enlightening. It really humanized my experience in the slums.

Thoroughly pleased with myself, I bid Macharia adieu and headed back to my group who had been watching me from a little way off with mild amusement. One of the team members was a Kenyan who had grown up in Kibera but had managed to get out through a series of opportunities. He knew how anxious I had felt about going into Kibera for the first time. With a simple pat on the back, he conveyed all his feelings to me. I was accepted into this community. I even felt accepted.
We walked past a group of middle-schoolers singing nursery rhymes to toddlers as they awaited their teachers in shanty-like structures. Finally, we found ourselves in front of the dull blue painted shack that housed the Power Women’s Group (PWG). Blake introduced me to the women who were there at the time, and explained my role to them as well, for I would be working to capture their voices. After he and Julianne, the head of PWG, walked me through the daily operations of the group, I was allowed to set up my first interview. I was very nervous as my Swahili was a bit rusty and a tad too formal for the kind of conversation I wanted to have during the interview. Flora, one of the other Kenyan interns, noticed my initial hesitation when Blake gave me the go-ahead to start the interviews, so she pulled a chair up next to me and my first interviewee, Atieno. I said a silent thank you to her, pulled out my notebook, poised my pen and began my first interview.

Atieno

Atieno was a brilliant, young, dark-skinned woman who had been at the peak of her adult life when it was deemed “over.” While heavily pregnant with her seventh and last child in 2004, she began to feel like all was not right. In fact, she joined a group, similar to KSV, for women who are HIV-positive. After the birth of her child, she went through various spells of illness that left her weak and emaciated. It was then again that she suspected the cause, but she never sought confirmation. At this point, it was better to assume than to hear the truth. It was only when her last-born began to fall deathly ill and battled similar spells that her eyes accepted the truth. With this truth came numbness. Both she and her child were tested and found to be HIV-positive.

Now Atieno knew the truth, but that truth was laden with burdens of reality. Both she and her child required medicine. But with her weak constitution, she could hardly keep up with casual temp work. They were sick. They could see the drugs they needed but could not access them. So close yet so far. The numbness from her helpless situation made her realize one absolute truth. It hurt less if she expected less. Therefore, by the time I was entering her world via KSV, inquiring during her interview about her hobbies, dreams and aspirations – or rather lack thereof – she was ready with a response. With listless eyes, a raspy voice and irregular breathing, she looked me dead in the eye only to ask, “Is there any use in liking food when you have none?” I caught my breath and closed my eyes.

Though heart-rending, her logic was in no way flawed. It was her reality. Atieno’s identity, like mine, had been reduced to what was written on a piece of paper, though in her case that piece of paper indicated her HIV test results. These results now “define” her, according to society. But why didn’t she seek out a different definition for herself, instead of simply settling into her paper identity? Upon reflection, I realized that Atieno’s story and the story of my own tumultuous summer were in some ways parallel. Although others may try to define us through a single story or identity, we do not have to accept this single story or identity for ourselves. This is easier said than done, however.

Inside outsider

Over the rest of my internship I followed a similar routine, which included going to Kibera to capture the stories of the participants in the two KSV projects I was assigned to, then coming home to construct their stories before presenting them to my supervisor. My days began like this: I would wake up and begin my “preparations” for Kibera. I would take a 15-minute shower with just regular soap so as not to smell different from others. Thinking about it now, I realize just how twisted that sounds, but it is the truth. I was desperately trying to blend in, to be bland, to fit in with this disadvantaged community in the hopes that they wouldn’t realize that I was the foreigner among them. After my shower, I would sit on my bed in a contemplative state as I tried to pick out “an appropriate outfit.” It had to be something not revealing, as that would attract attention, but also not too conservative, as girls my age in Kibera would not dress in an overly conservative fashion. I needed to be in jeans that were somewhat but not too stylish. I had a pair of bell-bottoms that were a dark murky blue that I must have bought when I was about 17 years old. They had sorely outgrown me in that they were looser than I remembered and had well-placed holes. I would always throw on a plain baggy T-shirt that I would then tuck into my jeans. My shirts never mattered, as I wore sweaters daily with a big scarf (regardless of the weather) to hide the feminine features that might attract unwanted eyes. I was, after all, a young woman walking along the paths of Kibera alone. I was voluntarily placing myself in a “suspect” environment (as my mum constantly reminded me), so I needed to be conscious of the dangers facing girls. Rape happened to be one of the things that flitted across my mind whenever I made these daily trips to Kibera. It was why I carried a Swiss army knife and pepper spray. Rape was a very “real reality” and I would be a fool to expect I would be the exception. Better to be paranoid than naive. My shoes were practical, slightly weathered and disposable if need be. No obnoxious jewelry, no sunglasses, no hats, no headphones – nothing. After looking at myself in the mirror I was satisfied. I was ready. But was I? Every morning I asked myself this question, hoping I was.
On one particular day, I went through my regular routine – which on this occasion included a particularly heavy breakfast of freshly blended fruit juice, oatmeal, eggs, toast and tea – before heading out. As I was about to leave the house to walk to my bus stop, my mother, who was leaving for work as well, insisted on giving me a ride. I was not too keen on this, as her car was a bit too flashy (although it pales in comparison to cars in the States), and because I was going to pick up my bus from a somewhat dodgy place. I was fidgety the whole ride to the stop, trying to figure out my strategy for exiting the car without drawing attention to myself. I was glad my anxiety wasn’t showing, as my mother was already fussing over why I was going to the slums alone and not with the rest of my team. I gave her the same dull answer that I always did: “I can’t wait for everyone’s schedule to match up, mum.”

At the stop, I hardly waited for her to land her parting kiss on my cheek when I was halfway out the door. Fixing myself up some more, I cautiously glanced around to see if anyone had been watching me. There were a few glances in my direction but nothing too suspicious. I walked slowly toward the sheltered benches at the bus stop and leaned as casually as possible on a pole, greatly resisting the urge to pull out my phone. My iPhone would attract too much attention, so I passed the time humming to myself while counting cars. Finally, my first bus arrived. I got on and quickly scanned the bus with my eyes. It would be important where I would sit, as I did not want to be squeezed in between people at the back. That would make me a prime target for pickpockets and it would be difficult to exit the crowded bus. I chose an aisle seat near the door. A prime seat. I tried to act as casual as possible. I had already put small denomination notes and coins in my pocket so I could avoid having to open my bag to pull out money. Additionally, I wanted to have change as larger notes attracted attention.

Two buses later, I stood at an intersection that led to either the crowded narrow pathways of Kibera or continued on to the main road. I took a deep breath. I could do this. I walked. Not too fast but not too slowly either. I took short but confident strides. Not too confident, as I was still kind of confused finding my way around Kibera since everything looked the same. All the stores along the road, the products being sold, sights, smells and even the people seemed familiar but I looked out for landmarks. My heart leapt at the sight of the abandoned parking lot that I knew I had to cross. All the while I maintained the façade that I fit right in, although I knew people could tell I wasn’t from there, that I was not one of their own.

As I walked, I tried to neither make eye contact nor look down, as that would be a sign of either disrespect or weakness in Kenya. I cut through the abandoned parking lot, walking past children and dogs lounging lazily atop the skeleton of what was once a car. The end of the parking lot led to the street where the Power Women’s Group (PWG) structure was located. At the sight of the dull blue paint, I quickened my steps. I could see the goal. I was excited. I got to the structure and found the women inside. They were with a group of foreigner tourists who were on a slum tour, or possibly a religious mission trip. They sat huddled on green plastic chairs as Julianne described the mission, vision and core values of PWG. I grabbed one of the plastic chairs and sat down as quietly as possible but not quiet enough to remain unnoticed. Some in the group turned their heads in my direction and with either a faint smile or nod of the head acknowledged my presence. As soon as I sat down, I began to fumble through my bag in search of my notebook and pen so as to make note of what Julianne was saying. I was so caught up in taking notes that I completely failed to realize that I was next to the tour guide who was guiding this group of foreigners. I looked up to see him staring at me with mild amusement. I think he had been watching me the whole time.

He reached out his hand introduced himself as Peter. He told me that he was raised in the slums but had been sponsored to go to high school and college. His story was cut short by the noise of the moving of plastic chairs. The presentation was over and the members of the group were getting ready to take a tour of the shop before leaving. Peter asked one of the PWG women something about the organization in Swahili but I guess she hadn’t heard him, so I responded to him instead, in Swahili. I kind of knew the ins and outs of the organization since I had been working there for a while now.
But at the end of the day he was right; I just didn’t want to admit it because admitting it would lump me into the same group as those foreigners he was guiding through Kibera. The only difference is that I would be a foreigner in my own country, and to my own people.

Nothing could have prepared me for his reaction. His head snapped back in my direction and the look of genuine shock and confusion cramped his face. He took my hand again and asked me, “Wewe umetoka wapi?” “Where are you from?” I told him I was from Nairobi. He tilted his head and gave me a quizzical look before saying, “Nairobi yako na yangu ni tofauti. Wacha nikusalimie tena na mikono.” “Your Nairobi and mine are very different; let me shake your hand once more.” I interpreted his remark to mean that the Swahili I spoke was learned and formal, an atypical style for normal conversations. With that, he went back to his group. He left me to stew in my own thoughts.

I was taken aback. I was mad. Mad that he had basically implied that I wasn’t really Kenyan and even madder that all the meticulous prepping I had done to look the part was lost on him. His tone, his facial expressions, just everything about the way he spoke to me did not sit well. But at the end of the day he was right; I just didn’t want to admit it because admitting it would lump me into the same group as those foreigners he was guiding through Kibera. The only difference is that I would be a foreigner in my own country, and to my own people.

Conclusion

Every day we use one form of a paper or another to indicate who we are. Whether we present a driver’s license, college ID, birth certificate, or resume, we risk being reduced to what is on those documents, losing the multiple dimensions that make up our personhood. Although I have always known that there is more to me than what was written on a piece of paper, my experiences over this summer have made me aware of how easy it is to be reduced to the same one-dimensionality as the piece of paper I handed in to an immigration official or a prospective employer. The challenge is to reject this reductive identity and allow one’s multifaceted self to shine through.

Notes

1. UNODC, World Drug Report 2013 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.13.XI.6). Nigeria has been most frequently cited as the origin of methamphetamine, a substance most commonly found in Ecstasy pills.


4. Ibid.

Fighting for Choice: Navigating the Streets and Politics of New York City

Hailey Magee ’15

August 15, 2013

Two weeks after leaving New York City, I’m sitting cross-legged on my bed, skimming through an uninteresting novel, when my phone rings. I jump up, excited at the prospect of some sort of communication with the outside world. Transitioning from the ceaseless energy of New York to my dull, rural hometown of Stillwater, New Jersey has not been easy. I peek at my cellphone’s display and am pleased to find that Sage, one of the closest friends I made in the city, is calling.

“Sage!” I answer, happily anticipating a call wrought with the nitty-gritty details of our lives. “How have you been?”

Silence. It bubbles on the line, growing heavier and heavier with each passing moment. Suddenly it breaks with a guttural sob as sharp as a whip. Sage is crying, hysterically crying, interspersing unintelligible words between breaths.

“Hails,” she finally gasps, “I’m pregnant.”

My breath catches in my chest. I drop my book, forgotten, on the floor. The irony of her admission is not lost on me; I spent my summer working for NARAL Pro-Choice New York, an organization that advocates for women’s reproductive rights.

“Oh, Sage,” I breathe. “How?” Sage and I had discussed our preferred methods of birth control earlier in the summer; months ago, she’d gone to her healthcare provider and had gotten a copper intrauterine device (IUD), one of the most effective forms of birth control.

“I don’t know how it happened,” she says, her voice breaking. She explains that she went to the emergency room for stomach pain, and the doctor informed her that she was five weeks pregnant. Due to the physical barrier created by the IUD, the fetus was forming outside of Sage’s uterus. She wouldn’t be able to carry it to term even if she wanted to.

Sage has to get an abortion to protect her health. For years I’ve known that one in three American women will get an abortion in her lifetime, but until this day, I’ve never been aware of personally knowing someone who had.

“I just can’t believe this happened,” she says, over and over. “We were so careful...I never thought I’d be one of those girls who needed an abortion.”

In that moment, as I watch Sage shrink the scope of her entire character and personhood down to this one small fact, this one small scuff on the timeline of her life, I become enraged. I cannot let Sage internalize the rhetoric of the anti-choice movement as the lens through which she views herself: Baby killer. Monster. I cannot let my best friend, one of the strongest, kindest, most sympathetic people I know, paint herself in this way.

“Sage,” I tell her firmly, wishing she were beside me so I could place my hands on her shoulders and look her straight in the eye, “this does not define you.”

I feel her silence on the line. I continue, “Abortion is a medical procedure. Women get them all the time, to preserve their health, like you, or because they can’t afford to have a child. You’re not alone in this, and it doesn’t change who you are.”

Again, I hear her sniffing, and we continue to talk for a few moments before she tells me she has to go. She hangs up and I am lost in my thoughts, my eyes wet. There is a beautiful sort of paradox to the moment: I desperately wish Sage didn’t have to go through this experience, but, simultaneously, I have never believed more in the work I do. Hearing someone’s story firsthand – particularly the story of a best friend – confirms one’s commitment to a social movement the way nothing else can. I sigh and sit with my head in my hands, staring, unseeing, straight ahead.
NARAL Pro-Choice New York

June 1, 2013

I breathe deeply as I stand on the threshold of 470 Park Avenue South, New York, New York. It’s an ornate 20-story building that blends into the skyline, casting what appears to be an infinitely long shadow across the screaming hot pavement. A non-profit connoisseur after years of involvement in feminist activism, I’m typically underwhelmed by non-profit offices: cramped, cluttered spaces lacking heat or air-conditioning. Even before entering NARAL Pro-Choice New York’s office, nestled on the seventh floor of this building straight out of The Architectural Digest, I know my summer internship will not be quite what I expected.

NARAL Pro-Choice New York is a state affiliate of NARAL Pro-Choice America, one of the two most influential reproductive rights organizations in the United States. NARAL was once an acronym for “National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League,” but in 2003 the organization opted to use only the acronym. (Understandably. The title was a mouthful.) Its mission is to protect women’s rights to choose abortion by mobilizing people to support pro-choice candidates and pass pro-choice legislation at the federal, state and municipal levels. NARAL also educates individuals about abortion, birth control, healthy pregnancies and comprehensive sex education — all crucial elements of the pro-choice agenda.

Wondering what role I will play in the political machine that is NARAL Pro-Choice New York, I walk through the heavy front doors. The lobby is dimly lit; five elevators wait patiently for visitors. Nerves jangling, I ride up to the seventh floor. When the doors open with a ping, my pupils dilate with pleasure as I take a speedy mental inventory of my surroundings. Directly behind a set of immense glass doors “NARAL Pro-Choice New York” adorns the wall in a shimmering golden font.

The space is beautiful, but vacant. I’m surprised that I’m the only person here; intern orientation was supposed to begin promptly at 11:00, and it’s three minutes to. Suddenly, a man I assume to be Christopher, my intern supervisor and NARAL New York’s community organizer, emerges from a cubicle cluster. He is a stout, muscular black man, casually dressed in a grey T-shirt and black pants.

“Oh, hi!” he blurts, clearly taken aback by my presence. “You must be Hailey.”

I tell him that I am, in fact, Hailey, and he smiles and nods before launching into a long-winded apology that oh my god, he is so, so sorry, but he sent me the wrong date of intern orientation, it’s Monday not Saturday, but it’s been such a busy week at NARAL because there are only 19 days until the legislative session ends and Governor Cuomo really, really needs to get the Women’s Equality Agenda passed and they’ve just been absolutely swamped with paperwork and memos and god-knows-what-else but since I’m here, would I like a tour of the office?

I had never thought I would find someone who speaks as quickly as I do. His energy is absolutely contagious. Inspired, I follow Christopher curiously, taking in the office. He shows me the activist room, filled with colorful posters and an entire shelf dedicated to pro-choice merchandise: buttons and stickers and T-shirts galore. He shows me where I’ll be working – a cubicle twice the size of those you see on TV, with a window overlooking the city – and the board room where we’ll be having meetings. It is an activist’s paradise. Already, I feel a part of something much bigger than myself.

Though there are many causes I staunchly support, reproductive rights activism has long been my passion. Denying women basic medical needs – abortion, birth control, etc. – is, in my opinion, our nation’s biggest affront to women’s equality. In order to become successful, autonomous individuals, women must be able to plan their families in a timely and affordable manner.

In the monumental 1973 Supreme Court case Roe v. Wade, the Court ruled that women had the right to abortion until the point of fetal viability – that is, the point at which a fetus can survive outside the woman’s body. Typically fetal viability occurs between 24 and 28 weeks into pregnancy. In 1992, women’s reproductive rights were restricted in Planned Parenthood v. Casey, in which the Court ruled that individual states may impose restrictions on abortion care as long as they do not “unduly burden a woman’s right to choose.”

Then the floodgates opened. Since 1992, states have been furiously passing restrictions on abortion. Most common are time limitations like 20-week bans. Other restrictions take the form of consent laws (requiring a woman to receive consent from her parents and/or spouse before receiving an abortion), mandatory

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ultrasound laws (requiring women to undergo a medically unnecessary, invasive ultrasound before having an abortion), and laws that impose undue burdens and requirements on abortion clinics.

Since 1995, the state and federal governments combined have passed 754 anti-choice laws. The time for pro-choice activism is now. My personal connection to the issue is harder to explain because I have never needed an abortion – but just because I haven’t needed one yet, doesn’t mean I won’t in the future. Statistically, one in three women will have an abortion by the time she is 45. Abortion is a common medical procedure, and any effort to restrict women’s access to it is an assault on women’s health care. Period.

So, that’s why I’m in New York City. I’ve chosen to live at New York University (NYU) in the heart of the Village, and I spend my first week acquainting myself with the city. Each morning I wake up at nine. Blessed by the Housing Gods with a lofted triple, I try to minimize noise for my roommates’ sake as I prepare for the day ahead. I slip on my sneakers and throw my hair up in a messy bun, packing as lightly as possible. I travel with a tiny backpack, just large enough to store my water bottle, my wallet, a map of Manhattan, and a small white notebook for jotting down my thoughts. Every morning I run my fingertips over the map, tracing the city’s spine from Harlem to the Financial District, and select a neighborhood to explore. The long straits of the avenues, the stilted lines of the streets tightly quilted into one another; I trace each route I walk on my map in red pen until it’s a crimson maze, no street left unexplored.

New York settles under my skin so quickly that by day five, I’m desperately in love with it. I want to move there. Transfer to NYU. Become a regular at the Starbucks on the corner with my chocolate chip muffin and Metro crossword. Maybe it’s the location itself; maybe it’s the incredible group of friends I’ve made who live with me in NYU’s Hayden Hall; maybe it’s the summer sun. It’s impossible to tell.

**Phonebanking**

**June 7**

To say the political process is a whirlwind would be a tremendous understatement. To be frank, the work I do at NARAL reminds me of the final five minutes in the final high school football game of the season. The clock guzzles down the seconds furiously. Cognizant of the massive victory they stand to gain if they win, the players are drenched in sweat, moving with unmatched ferocity and determination.

There are eight days remaining in New York’s two-year legislative session, and a vital piece of women’s rights legislation has yet to pass. On June 1, Governor Cuomo proposed The Women’s Equality Act (WEA), a 10-point piece of legislation that, among other things, would end pay discrimination, protect survivors of domestic violence, and codify *Roe v. Wade* in New York permanently. This means that even if the federal government were to retract women’s right to choose, women in New York would have legal access to abortion.

The bill is groundbreaking, both in its scope and the fervor with which progressive activist groups are seeking its passage. Unfortunately, the governor’s June 1 proposal date means that groups like NARAL morph from well-behaved advocacy organizations into snarling political animals on a deadline. We have just over a week to gather enough support to pass the bill. There’s a lot to do and a bunch of supporters to reach and the conservatives aren’t budging and **damn it**, one of the moderate Republicans we’d been banking on just pulled out so the Republican Senate Leader must really be putting the clamp down.

It is my second week of work. My fear of simultaneously breaking out into hysterical laughter and hysterical sobs does not seem so irrational.

I sit in the activist room, starry-eyed and dumbfounded, as Christopher explains the current situation to me, Iris, Cynthia, and Elana – NARAL’s summer intern cohort. We couldn’t have picked a better time, or a more confusing time, to intern here. Christopher explains that, much like the federal legislative process, the Women’s Equality Act must pass both the State Assembly and the State Senate before it can be signed into law by Governor Cuomo. Right now, the prognosis is this: the Act will pass the Assembly – a body of uber-liberal lawmakers – effortlessly. It’s the Senate we need to worry about.

The biggest obstacle to the Act’s passage is Dean Skelos, the Republican Conference Leader in the State Senate. He is refusing to bring the Act to the floor, effectively silencing hundreds of thousands of pro-choice voices statewide. To convince Skelos to give the Act a chance, we’re calling as many of his pro-choice constituents as possible, urging them to 1) attend a rally at his office, or 2) write letters to the editor in their local papers.

Phonebanking is never a particularly easy task, especially if the caller is making requests of the call-ees. Typically, I would consider this sort of work mundane, ineffective in the larger scope of public policy. Today, though, I know that the calls I make and the support I garner could vastly improve reproductive freedom in the state of New York. And so, sitting in the NARAL activist room, surrounded by the rest of the intern team, I begin to make calls.

Fifteen minutes in, I’m surprised I haven’t ripped half my hair out in frustration. I’ve made 30 calls. Fifteen went straight to voicemail, 10 were immediate hang-ups, four were picked up by adamantly anti-choice women who couldn’t understand
why they were on our list in the first place, and one was a grumpy 83 year old woman who “frankly, couldn’t give two beans about abortion.” (Two beans. She actually said that.) I’m losing my motivation and beginning to wonder how I can possibly change the world when the people I’m calling won’t even let me get a full sentence out of my mouth.

Sighing, I plunk the next 10-digits into my phone and wait with the receiver pressed to my ear, already feeling defeated. I’m calling a woman named Peggy Smith – who shares the same name as a member of my family, incidentally – and I brace myself for the inevitable beep of a hostile answering machine. In a surprising turn of events, though, I hear a friendly “Hello, this is Peggy. May I ask who’s calling?”

I’m shocked – a live person! A friendly-sounding live person I stammer and stutter and gather my phone script and pen and say, ever so intelligently, “Uh – uh – Peggy, hi, it’s Hailey from NARAL Pro-Choice New York and I was hoping you might be willing to help us and maybe write a letter or attend a rally maybe?”

There’s silence on the end of the line.

“Pardon?” she asks.

Annoyed at myself, I breathe, take a moment to collect my thoughts, and begin again, this time reading the phone script.

Ten minutes into the call, I believe I have found my new best friend. Peggy Smith, I’ve learned throughout the course of our brief conversation, is a “tried and true” feminist. She’s been volunteering with NARAL since 1969. Peggy had an abortion in her 30s, unwilling to handle the financial and emotional pressure of another child. (She’d already had three.) Her story is the norm: 6 in 10 American women having an abortion already have a child, and more than 3 in 10 already have 2 or more children. Feeling enormously lucky that she’d had the ability to plan her reproductive future, Peggy began to fight on behalf of the women who were not so lucky and risked being affected by conservative anti-choice legislation.

Her voice is almost musical, lilting like a pianist’s arpeggios as she recites to me the history of feminist activism. So shocked by her kindness and openness, I find myself nearly forgetting the purpose of my call, instead soaking up her experience like a sponge. In a bout of honesty, I explain to her that I am concerned about the passage of the Act, given the harsh political game and the time pressure we face.

“Honey,” she tells me, “they’re not gonna stop fighting this act. And you had better be damned sure we’re not gonna stop fighting them. Women need reproductive autonomy, plain and simple. And if we have to play some politics and go to some rallies to make these lawmakers see justice, then so be it. But don’t you ever give up.”

I compare Peggy to the woman who didn’t have two beans to give, and feel a bout of warm compassion in my chest. She’s right, of course, and given her 50-plus years of experience, I know it would be foolish of me to disagree. After collecting her information and entering it into our database, I wish Peggy a wonderful evening and hang up the phone.

I hum, grinning to myself, as I dial the next number on my list. I look up briefly and realize Christopher has been watching me for the duration of the call. He’s smiling.

Throughout the course of my internship, I partake in many a phone bank. I grow to love these calls – successful calls, especially – and I become more comfortable asking people I’ve never met to support my cause. However, the “people person” that I am, I much prefer to speak with constituents face-to-face. After the first two weeks of my internship, my cohort and I begin to embark on projects that propel us out of the activist room and into the New York City streets.

**Drive-and-Honk**

**June 18**

Within three minutes of entering the office, Christopher has given us a packet of petitions, a box of pens, a stack of “Equal Laws for Equal Lives” signs, and some clipboards, all contained in an oversized plastic storage bin. Today, Iris, Cynthia, and I are off to Staten Island to represent NARAL at an impromptu “drive-and-honk” at Senator Diane Savino’s district office. Savino, a Democrat, is a member of the Independent Democratic Caucus in the New York State Senate. Originally a huge proponent of the Women’s Equality Act, she has somehow become an unexpected obstacle in its passage over the weekend.

So off we go to Staten Island. As soon as the ferry docks on the other side of the river, the three of us meet the rest of our cohort: a bunch of representatives from other women’s rights groups in the city. We are a motley crew: eight women and two men, all in our 20s; white, black, Hispanic, Jewish; some dressed professionally in suits and ties, others in shorts and T-shirts. We’re all quite different, but our objective is the same: we want the Act passed as soon as possible. Our chants are to this effect, and are corny, even by activists’ standards. They include:

*There ain’t no power like the power of women, and the power of women don’t stop!*

*We demand a vote! We demand a vote!*

Ten minutes in and our voices are hoarse, our arms are sore from holding our signs high, and sweat has collected on our brows in the potent 5 p.m. sun. We chant to garner the attention (and honks) of the cars driving by.
Bus drivers honk nine times out of ten, without fail. Most of the men in their 20s and 30s whistle and honk; we can’t decide if they are expressing a show of solidarity or catcalling us. Some women drive lazily by, wholly disinterested, while others actively read our signs and, after a moment’s hesitation, honk with reckless abandon. By the end of the hourlong session, it’s difficult to determine how successful our event was – but if honks and cheers are indication, it’s clear that Staten Island supports the passage of the WEA. Getting back on the ferry, chatting animatedly with Iris and Cynthia, I am pleased with our expedition, but concerned. Our efforts aside, will the Act pass?

Two days later, I am met with a near-silent office when I come into work. Staff members sit at their cubicles, muttering into their phones, heads propped on their hands. I make my way to the activist room, preparing to start the day, when Christopher walks in and tells me what, deep down, I already knew: The Women’s Equality Act failed.

It failed. After months of NARAL’s intense campaigning, the New York Senate never brought the full Act to a vote because of the controversial abortion provision.

I feel so discouraged. This is a testament to how polarizing the issue of abortion can be. New York is considered one of the most progressive states in the nation, and the fact that a simple pro-choice provision could not pass here makes me wonder about the future of abortion access at a national level. If pro-choice legislation cannot pass in New York, I don’t know if it can pass anywhere. And that really, really scares me.

Surveying

July 10

One of the beautiful things about working at an organization like NARAL is that your work is never done. When the Women’s Equality Act fails, we allow ourselves a day or two at most to mourn – then it’s back to business. Here, my internship shifts to encompass a new duty: surveying. If you’ve ever walked more than five steps on a New York City street, you have, without a doubt, come into contact with a street surveyor. They’re everywhere, like ants or litter or other undesirables. You can spot them by the clipboards poised eagerly in the crook of their elbows and the identical T-shirts they wear, emblazoned with the logo and slogan of the organization for which they work.

There is a method to surveyors’ madness. Always smile. Always make direct eye contact. (Do you know how hard it is to make eye contact in New York City, when pedestrians’ eyes are constantly glued to the pavement or their handheld devices?) Don’t partake in ideological debates about your cause. And, most importantly, prepare yourself: you will be turned down, avoided, and cursed at much more often than you would like.

The idea of asking for money on a city street has never sat well with me. Seeing organization-sponsored surveyors standing in close proximity to low-income or homeless individuals, both groups asking for out-of-pocket donations, always seemed a cruel juxtaposition. What right have social justice organizations to ask for cash when thousands of people can’t even afford basic amenities?

Luckily, I’m able to make peace with my role as a surveyor because NARAL doesn’t toss us onto the sidewalk to ask for donations. Rather, I have spent the previous week compiling a 20-question survey, intended to gauge New York
residents’ perceptions of reproductive health accessibility in the city. It ranges from the broad to specific, including questions like:

- Have you or someone you know ever gotten an abortion?

- In your experience, is emergency contraception easily accessible?

- Did you support the Women’s Equality Act that protected a woman’s right to choose?

Our surveying methodology is strategic: in order to end up with a diverse selection of opinions from people of all classes and backgrounds, my friends and I rotate between each of the five boroughs of New York City: Manhattan, Queens, the Bronx, Staten Island, and Brooklyn. We stand in front of City Hall on Broadway, outside of a Starbucks brimming with flustered bankers in the Financial District, in the heart of a bustling street vendor fair in Brooklyn. We never go to the same place twice.

What shocks me most about my surveying experience is the extent to which many individuals are not even foundationally aware of the pro-choice/anti-choice debate. I first realize this stark knowledge gap on a hot day in early July. Smooth waves of humidity rise from the highway like ghosts, trembling and barely visible amidst the speed of the traffic. Every five minutes the subway groans and rattles, aggravated at being awoken from its fleeting sleep, as disgruntled commuters emerge from the train’s underbelly. It is hot and the very air is in flux.

Queens Plaza is a hub of activity. Whereas central Manhattan provides us a sampling of individuals on the upper end of the income spectrum, Queens is, on average, home to people less economically privileged. (The average “middle class” individual in Manhattan, for example, makes between $80,000 and $235,000 annually. In Queens, the median income is $26,234.)¹⁸ I’m looking forward to surveying here; it will be useful to get the perspective of low-income individuals because reproductive health information and services have historically been denied or inaccessible to less wealthy populations.

Standing in the center of the shade-less sidewalk wearing my black cotton “I Love Pro-Choice New York” T-shirt, I feel two fine lines of sweat trickle down the small of my back. In this heat, the likelihood of people stopping to fill out a survey is slim – and the likelihood of people being grumpy is guaranteed. In a show of strength, I swallow my grimace and glue a broad smile to my face.

At 1:15, the Q-train rumbles up to the station and spills a stream of teenagers onto the platform. Most look no older than 18; the boys wear low-hanging jeans and baggy T-shirts, the girls tight tops and tighter bottoms. They are a rambunctious group, joking and teasing one another good-naturedly.

It’s a long shot, but I have nothing to lose. “Hey, do you guys have a moment to fill out a survey?” I call out.

A few turn to look over their shoulders with distaste. One, a girl I figure to be about my age, takes pity on me in my desperate, sweaty glory, and turns around to take the clipboard from my outstretched hand.

Her group erupts in protest. “Tasha,” they groan, “come on!”

Tasha, whom I have already taken a liking to, glares at them. “Will you cool it and get over here?” she calls back, waving the clipboard threateningly. Slowly, the rest of the grumbling troupe meanders over, taking the surveys and pens from my hands. There is a moment of silence as they mull over the initial questions – biographical data, name, age, etc. Then, their pens still.

“What’s NARAL?” pipes up one of the boys I assume to be about 17.

I smile and repeat the catchphrase I’ve memorized verbatim. “NARAL is an advocacy organization that fights for reproductive justice. We support issues like a woman’s right to choose, comprehensive sex education, and birth control availability.” The group eyes me warily, listening to my explanation and then lowering their eyes back to their papers. Some chew on their pen caps.

“So what’s ‘pro-choice’ mean?” asks one of the girls. I turn to face her, surprised. In all my time as a pro-choice activist – at Brandeis, at home, and here at NARAL – I have never been asked that question. The pro-/anti-choice dichotomy is one of the most basic controversial issues of our generation – how can it be that these teens aren’t aware?
I explain that being pro-choice means supporting a woman’s right to choose to have an abortion. It is clear that some understand the concept, while others are still confused. Throughout the course of their survey, I am asked many similar questions, each more shocking than the last: “What is comprehensive sex education?” “Why does it matter if the mayor is pro-choice?” “They have laws about this kind of shit?”

Halfway through one of my explanations, a boy rolls his eyes and shoves the clipboard at me in frustration. “I don’t get this. I’m outta here,” he mutters. He is followed by two of his friends.

I watch them leave, disappointed and stunned by their incomprehension. Somehow, the very diction I’ve used to craft the survey is too complicated. Words that I now recognize as pro-choice jargon are unfamiliar to the ears of these teens. I realize that my survey is likely to further alienate people who do not understand by making them feel uneducated and embarrassed. If NARAL truly wants to cater to the needs of all people regardless of race or class, the organization needs to adopt a less lofty approach. We need to educate the masses. As the teens that shirked their survey illustrated, people will not support our cause or engage in the discussion if they don’t understand the matter at hand.

Jasmine Burnett

July 12

It’s easy to forget that abortion politics are inaccessible to some when I am working in an insular pro-choice environment. Occasionally, NARAL invites pro-choice figureheads to give presentations to the interns and staff. Sometimes they are mild-mannered, soft-spoken, and cordial. Sometimes, they say things like this: “I’m gonna say what the fuck I want to say, how I want to say it, when I get pissed off.”

This is my introduction to Jasmine Burnett, a self-identified queer, black feminist activist who has spent the better part of her 34 years smashing the patriarchy and stunning her audiences with profanity-peppered quotes. Barbed words boomerang out of Jasmine Burnett’s mouth like razor blades; their power is matched only by the intensity of her vibrant, multicolored clothing and sharp, short Mohawk. Four NARAL interns and six staff members sit around the boardroom table, simultaneously floored by Jasmine’s unapologetic tirade and quietly thankful that we have reached a point in time in which voices like Jasmine’s are central to our movement.

Jasmine Burnett is a community organizer much renowned in her field. She has come to explain to us the meaning of reproductive justice, a term that glides loosely from the lips of NARAL staff though many of us lack a comprehensive understanding of its meaning. Before, as my fellow intern Iris and I had prepared for the workshop and made our way to the conference room, we laughed snootily and tossed our hair, assuming the workshop would be an overview of what we already knew about the pro-choice movement. Five minutes in, as we sit dumbfounded in our chairs watching our paradigms get blown to bits by this steamroller of a woman, we realize we couldn’t have been more wrong.

Jasmine gives us the definition of reproductive justice: a combination of reproductive health access, services, and positive social attitudes at the intersections of race, class, and all identity categories. I learn that reproductive justice is an ideology best embodied by a never-ending list of factors that combine and overlap to form a colorful tapestry.

“So what’s ‘pro-choice’ mean?” asks one of the girls. I turn to face her, surprised. In all my time as a pro-choice activist – at Brandeis, at home, and here at NARAL – I have never been asked that question. The pro-/anti-choice dichotomy is one of the most basic controversial issues of our generation – how can it be that these teens aren’t aware?

Preparing for the Reproductive Justice Brown Bag Lunch.
I have never questioned the validity of our work before, but in this moment, I wonder: Is it enough? Are we masking our anger, sacrificing our well-deserved anger so we can function properly in the political machine? And if so, at what cost?

Reproductive justice is having low-cost reproductive health services available to all. Reproductive justice is the universal freedom to have healthy children, or not to have children at all. Reproductive justice is void of male privilege, white privilege, straight privilege, and class privilege. Reproductive justice is demanding medical services and social attitudes that we as women, and all people, deserve.

Throughout the course of Jasmine’s presentation I can literally feel my mind expanding. I follow Jasmine’s sweeping hand gestures and intense facial expressions as she paints for us the injustices of the world. It’s a lot to digest. To keep things interesting, Jasmine has brought with her a tambourine named Glory. She shakes the tambourine to celebrate moments of discussion that resonate with her most. Towards the end of the workshop, a staff member asks how we, NARAL Pro-Choice New York, can be stronger participants in the fight for reproductive justice.

Suddenlly, the work we do seems insular to me – too far removed from the struggles on the ground. Where is the anger? Where are our demands? The Women’s Equality Act, NARAL’s brainchild, its baby, didn’t pass. Texas recently passed a sweeping anti-choice bill that bans abortion at 20 weeks and shuts down the majority of the state’s abortion clinics, despite Wendy Davis’s epic filibuster and the fervent protests of pro-choice activists nationwide. Right now, pro-choice activists have a lot to be angry about – and we’re sitting in a boardroom, eating cheese and crackers and shaking tambourines.

Logically, I understand that social movements need multiple components. Some organizations do grassroots work, talking with folks “on the ground,” rallying, partaking in civil disobedience. Some organizations, like NARAL, advocate the politics of policy, working with the upper echelon of the state’s public servants to pass a pro-choice agenda. I have never questioned the validity of our work before, but in this moment, I wonder: Is it enough? Are we masking our anger, sacrificing our well-deserved anger so we can function properly in the political machine? And if so, at what cost?

Reflections

I mull over these questions for the entirety of my internship experience. By the end of my stay, I realize I’m leaving with more questions than I came with. If I’m working for a policy organization, am I becoming so immersed in the upper echelon of decision-makers that I’m forgetting to educate the masses? How do I make people care about this issue if some people are not aware this is an issue at all? How do I help people understand that even the most “pro-choice” places can be hostile to women’s rights?

I unpack some of these questions with Christopher in my exit interview. I have said my tearful goodbyes to my NYU friends; I’ve officially moved out of Hayden Hall. This is my final destination before I leave the city for good, and as I enter the NARAL conference room for the last time, I get goosebumps on my arms.

Christopher and I sit across from each other at the enormous conference table. I give him feedback as my supervisor – all positive – and he gives me feedback on my performance throughout the course of the summer, saying I have “fire, wit, and humility” enough to carry the pro-choice movement. I feel a potent glow in my heart at his words – Christopher does not dispense compliments lightly – and though I feel a heavy sadness as we hug goodbye, I’m inspired by his certainty that I will continue to make a difference.
Outside, my mom is leaning against the building, coffee in hand; she will drive me home to Stillwater, New Jersey. It’s only an hour away by car but feels so, so much further. Realistically, I know Manhattan is home to millions of people; my eight-week stint is a mere blip on the radar of New York City’s timeline. But standing there, surrounded by the sounds and smells of the city that has become my home, I experience a heartbreaking bout of nostalgia. I know I will never in my life feel this particular way again.

On the first day of my internship, Christopher said to me, “Ask questions here. Learn everyone’s story, their history, their beliefs. Everyone got involved in this work for a specific reason.”

Why did I get involved? What’s my story? I’ll sum it up this way: one in three. By the time I am 45, it is a statistical absolute that I will know at least one woman who has had an abortion. They are our mothers, our sisters, our best friends, ourselves. They are photographers, writers, CEOs and politicians. They are white. Black. Hispanic. Atheist. Catholic. Wealthy. Poor.

One day, it could be me. It could be me just like it was Sage; just like it was the hundreds of women I spoke to on the streets of New York City. Restricting women’s access to abortion and birth control negatively alters the course of millions of women’s lives.

Now that I’m back at Brandeis, I’m working for NARAL Pro-Choice Massachusetts as a Campus Campaign Organizer. I’m mobilizing activists on my campus, but sometimes it doesn’t seem like enough. In early October, a Nebraska judge ruled that a 16-year-old foster child could not have an abortion because she was “not mature enough;” in September, Ohio passed a mandatory ultrasound law. Across the nation, states are incrementally restricting women’s right to choose.

Sometimes I feel like I’m fighting a losing battle. It would be easy to become disenchanted with the pro-choice movement; the anti-choice voice is loud, powerful, and currently screaming decibels above our own. But every time I hear another woman’s story, I see Sage. I see myself. I see the hundreds of women I spoke with this summer whose lives would have been drastically, drastically different if they hadn’t had access to reproductive health care. Their stories keep me inspired. They keep me fighting.

Notes


5. Ibid.


Impressions of Talibés and Islamic Education in Senegal

Nelly Schläfereit ’15

This first encounter with talibé children was on a hot morning in September during my first trip to Senegal in the fall of 2011. I remember clearly how these boys boldly came up to me in the street, asking for money, not only making me uncomfortable but also triggering a curiosity in me that made me want to research these children’s lives in more depth and find out the history behind the practices that they were involved in. Why were they ever-present on the streets of Dakar, coming up to me asking for money? Where was this money going and why were they dressed in rags and covered in dirt? Where did they live? I did not know anything about these boys, their stories or the complex traditions that lay behind their presence in the urban landscape.

Although I was able to answer some of these questions during my first trip to Senegal through casual conversations, it was not until I started my studies at Brandeis a few months later that I really concentrated on the subject, in one class about Francophone Africa and another about child development. However, doing academic research and writing papers did not provide enough of an explanation for me. I needed to observe and interact with these children in order to better comprehend their situation. So two years after my first encounter with the talibés, I returned to Senegal to intern with Pour Une Enfance, an organization that focuses on improving these boys’ lives on a daily basis.

The Debate

I know that international organizations such as UNICEF1 and Human Rights Watch2 have published reports that call attention to the talibés’ lack of access to formal education opportunities and their difficult living conditions, among many other aspects of this religious educational system. These international organizations, along with many smaller non-governmental organizations, have been trying to raise awareness of what they consider inhumane and dangerous aspects of the talibé institution and have spearheaded many international initiatives to mitigate these.

However, during my studies I could not help but notice that such reports condemn this religious system, deeply rooted within Senegalese society since the spread of Islam, without necessarily considering the local rationale for it.
and a T-shirt. After sharing my breakfast – the first day of my internship: a long skirt an outfit that I think will be appropriate for from under my mosquito net, and choose singers, starts playing on my roommate's of the up-and-coming Senegalese pop Gindima It is a Monday morning at seven o'clock. Une Enfance, I hoped to be able to explore weeks I would spend interning for Pour I left for my internship. During the eight root ed in Senegalese society – before this practice as part of the religious system other from an insider perspective, justifying understanding of "children's rights," and the system as based on the international perspective, condemning the talibé I was aware of these two different Islamic religious belief.4

Additionally, some parents believe that sending away one of their children to study with a Qur'anic master (in most cases, only one child per family will receive this kind of intensive religious education) helps to ensure the reproduction of religious practices, and, by giving up the benefits of keeping their child at home, they ultimately seek to be rewarded by God. In short, the motivation of most Senegalese to send their children away is deeply rooted in their Islamic religious belief.4

I was aware of these two different viewpoints – one from an outsider perspective, condemning the talibé system as based on the international understanding of "children's rights," and the other from an insider perspective, justifying this practice as part of the religious system rooted in Senegalese society – before I left for my internship. During the eight weeks I would spend interning for Pour Une Enfance, I hoped to be able to explore these different viewpoints at a deeper level.

It is a Monday morning at seven o'clock. The song Gindima by Aida Samb, one of the up-and-coming Senegalese pop singers, starts playing on my roommate’s cell phone in order to wake us up. I appear from under my mosquito net, and choose an outfit that I think will be appropriate for the first day of my internship: a long skirt and a T-shirt. After sharing my breakfast – a cup of Nescafe and a piece of baguette spread with margarine – with the other volunteers, we leave the house and walk towards the route nationale, where we are going to catch a collective taxi.

All I know about the organization I will be working with is the little information that I have been able to gather on its website and through the conversations that I have had with my site supervisor, who is also my host father, since my arrival a few days earlier. For now, all I know is that the organization is attempting to ameliorate the living conditions of the talibé children through providing them with an infirmary, literacy classes, sewing classes, and games and activities.

My feet move slowly through the warm sand. We finally arrive at the center after a 10-minute walk from where the collective taxi has dropped us off. A fence encloses the property on which stands a rectangular, dirty yellow building. In front of this building, a well is being built. As I cross the door of the fence I see a few children sitting on the front steps, waiting for the volunteers and interns to arrive. I recall my previous encounters with children who looked just like these during my first trip to Senegal. Their torn clothes, their dirty hands and feet, and the mischievousness in their eyes are the same. These are the talibé children whom I will be working with for the next eight weeks. Their shy smiles welcome me.

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Islam in Senegal

Although I have chosen to work with the talibés in the city of Mbour, I know that these children are present in the streets of all major cities of Senegal. This rather small country of about 13.1 million, located at the Western tip of Africa, is considered part of the Muslim world. In fact, the majority of Senegalese, around 94 percent of the population, are Sunni Muslims.5 The religion is and has been omnipresent throughout the country since the 11th century and has great influence in both the public and private spheres.

Today, practically all Senegalese Muslims are affiliated with one of the four Sufi brotherhoods that are present within the country. The term Sufism refers to the mystical aspect of Islam, meaning that Sufis focus on a deeper understanding of God than that which can be attained solely through practicing the five pillars of Islam (witnessing God's oneness, praying five times a day, giving alms, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and making the pilgrimage to Mecca if able). Although these Sufi orders are characterized by some noticeable differences, they also share some common aspects. For example, the hierarchy within these orders is usually set up in a similar manner. A caliph, a man who can trace his descendants back to the founder of the particular order, heads each one of them. Below the caliph, elders referred to as sheikhs are responsible for passing on the religious knowledge and education within the order. These sheikhs are also commonly called marabouts. The last rank
within the religious hierarchy of the Sufi orders is that of the talibé. This position is that of the student, also seen as the seekers of the Sufi way. Each talibé has a sheikh or marabout who as his spiritual leader teaches him everything that he needs to know about religion and gives him guidance throughout many levels of life. In return, the talibé submits to and serves his spiritual leader.6

The children, who are sitting in front of the center curiously examining a skinny kitten that is trying to get up the steps, are part of this religious hierarchy. Most of them are probably still at the very early stages of their religious education, as most seem to be between the ages of four and 16 years old. They do not particularly pay attention to me. I am not surprised. I am probably just another intern coming for a short period of time in order to help out at Pour Une Enfance. I know that these talibés are part of this system that has been in place in Senegal for centuries. I know that the Sufi orders are among the most important institutions within Senegalese society, influencing every aspect of the country’s workings, including social relations, cultural expression, economics and politics.7 However, I also know that many of these children, entrusted to their marabouts by their parents at an early age, live a childhood that is anything but easy. Most of them wake up early in the morning and spend their days studying the Qur’ān. When they are not studying, most of them are roaming the streets to collect money for the marabouts and even to find the meals that are not always provided by their spiritual leaders. I have come to Senegal not only to learn more about these children and what their living situations are really like, but also to try to improve their daily routines and to bring an open mind about the talibé institution, trying to understand the reasoning of all opinions.

I take a few colorful balloons out of the storage room and blow them up. A horde of 15 children comes running my way. I throw one of the balloons in the air and one of the boys quickly jumps over to catch it and immediately thrusts it back into the air. A wild game of passing balloons around the game room begins. The children jump and run around and their cheerful laughter fills the room. They do not get tired of the game. Fifteen minutes later we are still passing the balloons and the children are still as energetic about this simple game as they were at the beginning.

I cannot help but think about what their daily routines would be like if this center did not exist and if they did not have the opportunity to play games like these with the simple materials provided by Pour Une Enfance. They would probably be roaming around the streets of Mbour, just like those talibés that I first encountered in Dakar, asking passers-by for a few francs CFA.8 Maybe they would be waiting in front of the house of some family for the mother of the household to call out “Talibé!” in order to give them the leftovers of the last meal, just like I have observed my host mother doing for the past few days.

According to a Human Rights Watch report on talibé children, many marabouts are accused of neglecting the nutrition and health needs of the children that they are guiding in their Qur’ānic education.9 Many of the children I see in front of me are wearing dirty clothes that have more holes than cloth, and some of them have crusts of dirt covering their bodies. I also know that they are not all being fed by their marabouts on a regular basis, or even at all, because Souleymane, my supervisor, has assigned me and the other volunteers to a project of serving breakfast to the children every morning to ensure they get at least one meal per day.

It is nine o’clock and some of the children whom I have been playing with get impatient and ask me what time it is. When I tell them, they give me back the balloons and run off. I do not understand what is going on. My supervisor fills me in. They have to go back to their respective daara, the Qu’ranic schools where they recite and learn the Qur’ān.

Daaras are informal educational structures that are meant to ensure the Qur’ānic and basic religious education of children. They are generally led by a marabout who is both the main teacher of the school as well as the person in charge of the talibës attending it. The children are usually sent to these schools by their parents who live in more rural parts of the country, with the wish that their children will lead lives as pious Muslims, dedicated to God. The talibé children who come to the center on a more or less regular basis are from many different daaras in the area of Mbour. Although some of these schools are nearby, some of the children have to walk for over an hour to get from their daara to the center in the morning. I find out that there are specific hours during which they have to be present at the daara to learn so they cannot be at the center. However, some of the children stay longer because their schedules are different.

My next activity is going to be a puzzle. I help the children piece the few dozen cardboard pieces together. I am not sure that they actually understand the concept of a puzzle, as they are trying to force pieces to fit one another that just don’t. We finally finish. The picture on the puzzle depicts a scene from The Lion King. I would be surprised if any of these children knew about the movie, yet they are proud to have completed the task and are eager for me to take many pictures of them with their completed project.
One of the volunteers who has already spent a few weeks at the organization makes a sign for me to come into the storage room. He gives me a handful of candy that he has bought and tells me that we can distribute these among the talibés. I don’t really think twice about it and go outside to hand them to the children. But as soon as they have spotted the candy, they go crazy! I should have thought about this before. Suddenly I am surrounded by what feels like a hundred little hands stretching towards me, pushing each other out of the way. One by one I give out the candies, trying to make them understand with my almost non-existent knowledge of Wolof, one of the local languages spoken in Senegal, to stand in a line so that I can hand it out to them one at a time. I cannot seem to make them understand this concept so I give up and just hand candy to as many hands as I can. I notice that the crowd of children around me is not getting smaller at all. I look up and realize that some of the talibés have been standing next to me since the beginning, asking for more and more candy even though they have already been given some.

It is clear that these children rarely get treats like candy so they jump on any opportunity to have as much of it as possible. Even though it is only my first day of work, I already start asking myself a question that will follow me during the entirety of my internship. Is the work of Pour Une Enfance making any difference in the lives of the talibés? And if so, is this difference of any deeper meaning than filling the children’s stomachs in the morning and entertaining them? I know that there are many other organizations throughout the country that do the same type of work as Pour Une Enfance, and all of them think that they are improving the lives of the talibés. But I am not sure in what ways their lives are truly bettered.

Finally, my first day at the Center is over. I am overwhelmed by a collection of first impressions. Although I already had a pretty thorough background on who the talibés were and how this practice was incorporated into the Senegalese society, today was the first time I interacted with them in a situation where they were not asking me for alms on the street. It is as if this was the first human interaction with them that did not immediately highlight the difference in status between the children and myself. They were not asking me for something that I had and they needed. Rather we shared some moments together through games and laughter.

With the group of volunteers, I walk back to the place where we can catch a taxi. It seems like an eternal walk through the sand, under the burning hot sun. We finally get into a collective taxi that will take us close to where we live. While we are waiting for the taxi to leave, a few talibés come over and ask us for some money. In a way, this is very ironic. I think that I am able to recognize some of the faces that I saw earlier that day at the Center. Indeed, one of the volunteers who has been at Pour Une Enfance for longer knows some of their names and greets them. After he jokes around with the children for a short while, our lack of Wolof language skills making it impossible to have a real interaction, the taxi finally leaves. When we get home, I lie down on my bed in the little room that I share with one of the other volunteers, just to take the morning in and reflect on my first impressions. So many things happened. It was just the first day. The first day of many to come when I would teach and learn and come to know better these children who are part of such a complex religious and social institution.

When we get home, I lie down on my bed in the little room that I share with one of the other volunteers, just to take the morning in and reflect on my first impressions. So many things happened. It was just the first day. The first day of many to come when I would teach and learn and come to know better these children who are part of such a complex religious and social institution.

Pour Une Enfance

Pour Une Enfance was founded by a French woman who believes that it is important to help and support the talibé children through their hard daily lives. By offering them access to medical care and emergency treatment, as well as the opportunity to attend French literacy classes, sewing classes and recreational and educational activities, the organization strives to not only offer the children a more healthy and hygienic lifestyle but also to give them a chance at learning skills that might lead to future professions.

The name the founder chose for this particular organization is particularly interesting to me and clearly illustrates the initial discontent that she must have felt for the system of which the talibé are part. Pour Une Enfance, meaning “For a Childhood” in French, suggests that these children are deprived of a childhood, something that the organization
strives to give back to them. However, the discussion does not end here. Even though in a French woman’s eyes these children do not have much of a childhood – at least in the sense in which she understands it – can we simply assume that the Western idea of childhood is applicable within the Senegalese context?

Just this small snapshot of the organization’s founding and its name clearly indicates that Pour Une Enfance is aligned with the position held by most international organizations on the Senegalese system of Qur’anic education. Although the goals of the organization seem very pragmatic, over the time of my internship I start to question more and more the position of the outsider within the whole of this structure. Why was it that this organization was founded and run by someone who only knew Senegal as a visitor and tourist? Why were most of the organizations like this one run by foreigners? Was there no initiative on the part of the Senegalese themselves to address the talibé system? Did they not have the means to start up their own organizations, or did they simply not see the same level of misery in the lives of these children?

A few days later, Souleymane tells us that we are going on our first visit of a daara. This particular one is not far from the Pour Une Enfance center. In the morning he advises all of us girl volunteers to dress appropriately, meaning something that completely covers our legs. We diligently follow his instructions; we do not want to look unprofessional for this visit. I am personally very curious about what I will see. I have heard extreme stories of the very poor living conditions of the talibés. In fact, according to a Humans Rights Watch report, most of the daaras in urban areas of the country go hand in hand with issues such as overcrowding and lack of sanitation, hygiene and running water.

A little group of volunteers, led by Souleymane, walks through the sandy roads that run between the very basic looking cement houses of the neighborhood. After 10 minutes we arrive in front of a metal gate, crookedly hung in between two cement walls. Souleymane pushes it aside, and we make our way into the front yard. Some chickens are running across our way and I can discern between two cement walls. Souleymane pushes it aside, and we make our way into the front yard. Some chickens are running across our way and I can discern the chanting of the talibés boys in one of the adjacent rooms, probably reciting the Qur’an in unison. A fully-bearded man dressed in a long white boubou, the traditional Senegalese attire, and a cap that many religious figures in Senegal wear, walks out of the house. He shakes Souleymane’s hand to greet him. Being in front of all the volunteers I stretch out my hand to shake the man’s hand, following the Senegalese etiquette of always shaking someone’s hand when greeting. Souleymane awkwardly motions at me to take my hand back. He later informs me that marabouts do not usually greet women unless they are married to them. I feel a little bit ashamed of my mistake, but nobody seems to make a big deal out of it and the marabout invites us to sit down on a mat that he has laid out on the floor for us. The marabout and Souleymane engage in conversation, in Wolof. The marabout does not speak French. He was only taught Arabic in addition to the local languages that he grew up with. Once in a while, Souleymane translates the conversation to us, but only very briefly and I have no idea about all the detail that might be left out. Apparently, they are talking about the center, its goals, projects and the necessary collaboration with the marabouts that the Center wants to develop.

For about 20 minutes, as we listen to a conversation that we cannot follow, we try to peek around to get a better image of what this daara is like, and what the rooms are like in which the children live and study. After the conversation finally comes to an end, the marabout shows us around. We look into the room where the talibés are reciting the Qur’an. There are about 40 boys crowded into a small area, kneeling on the floor, holding their wooden tablets on which they have written a verse of the Qur’an, reciting it in unison while rocking their bodies back and forth. The marabout informs us that he only educates children from the neighborhood, so there are none who live with him in the daara. I am disappointed, as I had wanted to see how some of the children who regularly come to the center live. But before I can even express this disappointment, Souleymane informs us that we are going on from there to visit another daara.

It is getting hotter and hotter and the sun is burning down on my head. We have been walking for about 20 minutes and we are still looking for our next destination. Souleymane is asking random people on the street to point us towards the daara that we are looking for, but everyone sends us in a different direction.
Finally we arrive outside of what is a rather nice looking compound compared to the other houses in the neighborhood. An older man welcomes us; his wife is preparing a meal in the background. I do not make the same mistake as the first time, I only nod and greet him with a confident "Salaam maalekum!" – the Senegalese greeting borrowed from the Arabic language.

We do not stay long and the marabout designates another man to accompany our group to the place where his talibés are housed. My expectations about the living conditions of this place drop immediately. The children definitely do not live in the nice compound that their spiritual leader lives in. We walk a few blocks away and arrive in front of a rusted door that is the entrance into a dark cement compound. Inside, there are three near-empty rooms. Inside one there are a few pieces of clothing and two thin mattresses filled with holes, thrown on the ground into one of the corners. The room has one minuscule window that barely lets in any light, let alone fresh air. This place looks abandoned, but the man tells us that this is the room where the children live. As we walk back outside, I see a box filled with wooden tablets and pages with Arabic scriptures on them. Some of the reports that I have read back at Brandeis during my research about the talibés come to mind. Although some of them described even worse places, this is not so far from what most of them reported. There is no running water and the man explains to us that the nearest well is about a 10-minute walk away. I shudder at the thought of about 50 young boys between the ages of four and 16 living alone in this dreary place.

On our way back to the Pour Une Enfance center, and even throughout the afternoon, I keep thinking about our visit to the two daaras. Although I have been interacting with the talibés for days now, it was the first time that I had come into contact with their living environment. I could finally put their lives into context, by seeing what their lives were like outside of the confines of the center. As I was thinking and reevaluating this experience, I became conscious of the fact that it was necessary to also put the images that I had seen earlier this day into the context of the larger Senegal society and an average Senegalese person’s way of life. Walking through different neighborhoods of Mbour, and even recalling some of the living environments that I had seen during my first trip to Senegal in various neighborhoods of Dakar, I realized that many of the reports about talibés that I had read in the past were based on a Western perception of what we value as good and bad living conditions. In fact, on many occasions I had seen Senegalese families that lived in worse conditions than the places we had visited that day.

During my first trip to Senegal, I encountered a life and society that could not have been more different from what I had known back home. Even though I had many international experiences – being born in Germany, growing up in Switzerland, going to high school in the United States and traveling to many countries throughout Europe and some Latin American nations – I entered an unknown world, with many challenges and situations that I had to adapt to. Now that I had come back to Senegal for the second time, I was reminded of the fact that not only was the society I was living in structured in a completely different way from what I grew up with, but also that the norms and values were drastically different from what I had known. Although the daara that we had visited that morning seemed like a morbid, dirty and unhygienic place to live, poor families all throughout Senegal were living in similar conditions. Running water was not a given, I realized, but rather a privilege that only a small percentage of the country had access to.

Being conscious of this reality that I had not always considered, I continued to question the work of organizations such as Pour Une Enfance, trying to improve local children’s lives. What was the ultimate goal that the people founding these organizations were trying to achieve? I knew that Pour Une Enfance, specifically, was not trying to eradicate the talibé practice in Senegal, as some others wanted to. But they did still approach the entirety of the practice as something that needed to be battled.

The volunteers

Except for the doctor who runs the infirmary, the team of Pour Une Enfance is entirely made up of volunteers, including both locals and international visitors. The local team consists of Souleymane, the administrator and head of all local operations; Ababacar, who is in charge of the literacy program; and the two “talibé mothers” Maguette and Nogaye. Although I was not able to completely figure out Maguette’s reason for working with Pour Une Enfance, I would like to write a little bit more about her and the relationship I was able to build with her during my internship, despite the fact that we did not share a language.

Maguette is a 27 year old woman who volunteers daily at the talibé center. Her radiant smile lights up in the morning when she sees me coming in through the metal gate that separates the Center’s land from the rest of the neighborhood. “Nelly!!! Ça va?” Her French is very limited, as she never had the opportunity to attend school when she was younger. Now the interns are teaching her the basics when there is not much to do around the Center. She has four children, her oldest daughter being 13 years old. This means that Maguette
had her first child at the age of 14. I can’t help but think about the kinds of things that I was doing when I was 14 years old. While Maguette was settling down with her husband, preparing to be a housewife and mother for the rest of her life, I was doing the contrary: spreading my wings and getting ready to leave home to broaden my study experiences. I was applying to boarding school in the United States.

When I look at Maguette’s story and then look at mine, comparing our two narratives, it becomes real to me: as much as the difference in our economic status is always present, what makes us even more different is the past and future opportunities that are unequally distributed between us. While Maguette had to assume real life responsibilities at a young age, I was getting ready to live far from my family for the first time, being given the opportunity to learn another language and learn about another country and culture. I wonder if such opportunities could have ever appeared in Maguette’s life – given that she has only had a religious education and cannot read or write in French – and if they had, how would it have changed the course of her life?

These are thoughts that go through my head daily when I spend yet another morning sharing work and laughter with Maguette. Even though we do not speak a common language, we have become very close friends. Even though so many things separate us, we share and enjoy the same moments together. And even though we have had such different pasts, we are now volunteering for the same organization. I wonder how she would explain her reason for her being here, her motivations for working with Pour Une Enfance.

In order to complete and support the Senegalese team, the organization also recruits volunteers from overseas throughout the year. Most of these volunteers come from Europe, more specifically Francophone European countries – France, Switzerland and Belgium. These volunteers come for many different reasons, which becomes noticeable through the work that they choose to do at the organization. During my internship, I saw volunteers ranging from a father trying to show his spoiled 15 year old son the hardship of some children’s lives in this world, to young university students like me who became interested in the talibés and decided to deepen their knowledge about them by working with Pour Une Enfance firsthand. All of us got placed into the same host family, not only working together but also living together. The different ideas and points of view that each volunteer brought to the organization diversified the work that Pour Une Enfance tried to achieve, with each intern valuing different aspects of it more than others.

I am sitting on the steps in front of the door of our host family’s house with some of the younger volunteers who have also become my close friends over the past few weeks. It is late afternoon and finally cooling down a bit. We are looking out onto the wide street in front of the house. Across the way, Doudou, one of our neighbors, waves in our direction. I start discussing the leadership within the organization with two other volunteers. For all of us, it does not make sense that the president lives in France, only spending a few weeks per year actually in Senegal. During the rest of the year, Souleymane acts as the local head of the organization. However, he also works for a hotel in the neighboring town of Saly, the main tourist destination in Senegal, abundant with fancy resorts bordering the beach. So he, too, does not have the time to completely invest himself in the work of the organization.

Over the course of the eight weeks that I spend in Mbour, I become more aware of some of the loopholes that exist within this type of organization. One of the major issues that seems to arise over and over again is that of the disconnect between what the organization’s president from France wants to achieve, and what is actually happening locally. This is not only because the Senegalese members of the organization do not necessarily have the time to implement all the president’s plans, but also because of the differences in the way that the Pour Une Enfance leadership in France and its Senegalese team members conceptualize priorities. For example, the leadership is trying to emphasize the importance of the French literacy classes more, because to them it seems like a crucial skill for the talibés’ future, whereas the Senegalese team focuses more on the daily distribution of breakfast to the talibés – an initiative that was developed during my internship time – because it answers an urgent ongoing need.

When I begin to notice these disconnections, I realize that they mirror the disparity that exists between the international community’s view and the local perception of the talibé institution itself. In fact these disparities continue to demonstrate the contrast between what we could refer to as the “outsider” and “insider” perspectives. While both sides carry valid opinions, they are rooted in different values and experiences, which often seem to be misaligned.

During one of the daily breakfast distributions at the center, I think about the importance of this meal for these children. Every boy receives a little plastic mug filled with warm, sugared milk and a fifth of baguette bread with margarine spread on it. Once they have realized that we are starting the distribution, the room becomes rowdy, and within seconds about 20 little hands surround me asking to be served first. For a few minutes they push each other around, and loudly throw words at each other until the last one has gotten...
served. Then they finally all sit quietly on the mats and the only noise that can be heard is the slurping of the boys sipping their milk and the chewing of their bread. In their faces I read satisfaction.

I recognize that, even though the organization that I am interning with might not always be as efficient as it could be in terms of working towards its stated goals, these simple gestures that my coworkers are taking, such as providing one meal daily to the talibés along with other services such as medical care, might actually make an immediate difference in the lives of these children. On the other hand, for the projects that need more regular time investment on the part of the children, such as literacy and sewing instruction, the success is less guaranteed and it takes more effort and time on the part of the organization to establish a suitable program.

However, I am an outsider as well. In large part, all I can do is observe. I observe what the lifestyle of the talibés is like and what their living environment is like through the lens of my own experiences and my personal set of values. Even though I might think that my thought process is the right one, the person next to me, who grew up within the context of Senegalese society, might have a completely different opinion about the talibés and whether their lives are harsh. During my internship at Pour Une Enfance, I was not only able to assist the organization in implementing some of the projects that it was working towards, but I also learned to value differing opinions on the very work we were doing.

One of the local volunteers calls us into a room where all the talibés have gathered. It is the last day of my internship. Soon I will return to the world I have grown up in, taking back many memories, some of them happier than others. One of the boys starts to say something in Wolof, and Ben translates it for us. He thanks us for coming to the Center everyday. I am touched. After all, maybe it did make a difference to these boys that I came all the way to Senegal. Later that day when Souleymane and I talk about my now completed internship, I discuss with him the recurring doubts I have had during my internship about my place within the organization, and my personal purpose for being here. He looks me in the eyes and says: “Nelly, you came all the way over here for these children and they know that. That is enough.” Although I don’t know if this answer is enough for me, I accept it as the only one I will receive for now.

When I begin to notice these disconnections, I realize that they mirror the disparity that exists between the international community’s view and the local perception of the talibé institution itself. In fact these disparities continue to demonstrate the contrast between what we could refer to as the “outsider” and “insider” perspectives. While both sides carry valid opinions, they are rooted in different values and experiences, which often seem to be misaligned.

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Notes


6. Ibid., 34.

7. Ibid.

8. Franc CFA is the currency of Senegal. 1 US dollar currently equals 486 CFA.


10. Ibid., 43.
In the city of Nairobi, in an industrial building, in a noisy, crowded room with cardboard walls, Samuel Mburu writes down and then files away the stories of thousands of street vendors who sell fruits and vegetables, secondhand shoes and clothes in the Kenyan capital. In the sewers of Nakuru, Charles Mwangi and the members of the Manyani Football team are picking plastics to sell in bulk in order to earn a living and empower themselves. In the heart of Kisumu, Tony Kwatchet carefully notes the sales of the different traders in a chart in his big black notebook.

The activities I will be writing about have happened, are happening and will continue to happen long after this is written; the experiences, impressions and reflections I am writing about concern a limited period between June and August 2013, while I was filming in Kenya. But my story too continues to evolve.

As a film student who studies the art of storytelling, I learned a lot from KENASVIT’s work and their process of creating a narrative. KENASVIT’s main goal is advocacy – taking the lives, challenges and struggles of street vendors, organizing them into one collective narrative, centered upon one conflict, in order to promote their causes in one voice. The union leaders who met and befriended me led me through the chaotic streets, pointing out what they saw as important and what they wanted me to see. A mound of waste, decorated by colorful plastic bags and rotting vegetables; the city county jail surrounded by a high fence and barbed wire; the small halls where members would meet – fragments of life that together create the narrative arc of KENASVIT, the narrative arc of my film. In KENASVIT’s work as in my work, some images are in sharp focus, while others remain outside the frame.

KENASVIT’s story is a powerful one.

It is the union of the informal sector, which includes roughly 10 percent of Kenya’s population. Although the union has only a few thousand active members, these members represent three to four million informal traders. They are the voice that speaks with the authorities to insist that the vendors be recognized and their rights protected by the government.
The union was created in 1999 in the aftermath of serious clashes between street vendors and the city councils. The city councils were intent on changing the image of Kenya’s cities. They needed clean streets, tall buildings and prosperous corporate businesses to project an image of progress and development. They were determined to rid the cities of the thousands of street vendors who congregated in makeshift markets. Selling fruits and vegetables, secondhand shoes and clothing and blocking the sidewalks where they hawked their wares, they were held responsible for creating congestion and filth, and viewed as a major impediment to progress. As a result, the city councils tried to outlaw street vending, and used brutal violence against anyone who broke the law, although they did not hesitate to accept bribes from those who could afford to pay rather than be arrested for vending. This situation was the status quo, with millions of Kenyans working on the streets in fear of losing their livelihood, and desperate to evade the local authorities.

Throughout this period, the vendors were also quietly taking action. In Kenya’s major cities, including Nairobi, Nakuru and Kisumu, traders formed small grassroots organizations to assist one another. These groups operated on a small scale. Members helped each other evade the authorities and raise the money to pay fines and bribes or replace confiscated merchandise. But they still lacked the ability to negotiate with the authorities.

A significant breakthrough occurred with a 1999 research project conducted by Professor Winnie Mitullah of Nairobi University. Professor Mitullah set out to study the challenges vendors faced, and to search for possible solutions to their conflicts with the local authorities. She concluded that their situation was exacerbated by the fact that the street traders were not organized and lacked representation. Mitullah believed that if the traders united in an organization that would speak for them and negotiate their rights with the city councils, they might resolve the conflict and improve their conditions. She began by connecting the different grassroots groups she encountered in each city, and then connected the vendors from the different cities. She tried to implement the structure of trade unions to unite vendors from the grassroots to the urban to the national level.3

Sixteen years later, agreements have been signed between KENASVIT and local authorities in Nakuru, and formal markets have been set up for the street vendors in Kisumu. Due to KENASVIT’s lobbying, the national government has even passed a bill recognizing these small businesses as part of the economic system, protecting them and giving them rights. But there is still much work to be done; the agreements are fragile and are not yet fully implemented. In Nairobi, no agreement has been reached and the city council is relentless. City askaris (soldiers), in plainclothes are out in force on the streets, fining, arresting, demanding bribes and otherwise harassing The union leaders who met and befriended me led me through the chaotic streets, pointing out what they saw as important and what they wanted me to see. . . . In KENASVIT’s work as in my work, some images are in sharp focus, while others remain outside the frame.
Balancing each of these realities – what I saw with my eyes, what I was shown, and what I knew I was supposed to see – was not always easy, especially as a privileged outsider, deep in a foreign country for the first time.

In the small office in Nairobi where he collects the vendors’ stories, Samuel Mburu hopes KENASVIT will bring about better relations with the urban authorities. Charles Mwangi, chairman of the Manyani Football Club in Nakuru, is determined to empower the youth of his neighborhood. In Kisumu’s fish markets, on the shores of Lake Victoria, union leader Tony Kwatchet dreams of making KENASVIT the largest trade union in Kenya. KENASVIT is comprised of thousands of individuals, each one carrying a different perspective and personal narrative. So, paradoxically, while KENASVIT strives to speak as one voice, at the same time it is speaking with thousands of different voices.

Of these thousands of voices, I decided to film seven, belonging to unique individuals who told stories that were very distinct and personal, but at the same time shed light on the broader picture. As I filmed each member I was made aware of a different perspective, the different ways to tell personal stories, my role in telling those stories through film, and underlying it all, my own story. I had to balance and frame through the camera three different kinds of realities. The first reality is the visual record created the moment I aimed the camera to capture life in the congested streets of the Kenyan cities. The second reality is that which each individual wished to show or tell about, as they directed me to notice and focus on their personal stories. And the third reality is the one that if I framed it correctly, would serve the best interests of the Union. Balancing each of these realities – what I saw with my eyes, what I was shown, and what I knew I was supposed to see – was not always easy, especially as a privileged outsider, deep in a foreign country for the first time.

Three encounters with three of the KENASVIT members I filmed in Kenya left significant impressions on me, helped develop my understanding of the nature of my project, and raised serious questions about the process of filmmaking. As I recorded the voices of Samuel Mburu in Nairobi, Charles Mwangi in Nakuru and Tony Kwatchet in Kisumu, I learned about the process by which stories are told, both behind and in front of the camera.

Samuel Mburu, NISCOF’s secretary, sat across from me, behind a small desk. He was my first friend in Kenya. He welcomed me to Nairobi, took me in, made me feel comfortable, and provided me with my first insights into the way the Union operated. I directed one of my two cameras at Samuel and turned it on. The Nikon reflex was less obtrusive than most video cameras, and allowed people to act relatively freely and openly even with it turned on. I hoped that having the camera present and recording from this initial stage in our relationship would allow Samuel to begin to feel comfortable being filmed. As it turned out, the camera did not make Samuel uncomfortable. In fact, it had the opposite effect.

Samuel straightened his back, placed his hands on the table, smiled broadly and looked directly into the lens:

“Fifteen years from now, I am so eager to be an international journalist, because I can see that I am interested, to finding and digging deeper to the root cause of every story. So I hope and pray to my God that my dream will come true…”

Samuel is 34 years old. He sells women’s clothes in a tiny room off a street in central Nairobi. Despite the fact that he earns a meager living, he volunteers long hours as the secretary of NISCOF. His role involves making his way through the crowded streets, meeting with union members, notifying them of messages handed down from the national union, and inviting them to educational workshops and rallies. He is responsible for writing
everything down, everything from meetings to casual conversations with the traders on the city streets. Samuel records their dreams, hopes, complaints and designs in his notebook, and later files them in cabinets in the office. And, as he said, Samuel dreams of being a journalist.

“… Today, we shall undergo an interview with the members of NISCOF in their working sites. Among the questions we shall ask is the following – how long has he or she been working as a street vendor? What is the relationship with the local government? If there are challenges they are going through – we shall capture them in the interview… Each interview should take between 10 to 15 minutes depending on the different issues the different traders deal with… Clothes vendors, shoe shiners, service providers, vegetable vendors, booksellers – we will interview them all – and conclude by asking them where they want to be… 15 year[s] from now.”

He straightened up like a news anchor. “Once more, I am Samuel Mburu. Thank you, God bless.”

Marching through the streets, with my small and large cameras, we drew a great deal of attention. But as soon as the onlookers realized that Samuel and I were engrossed in our own conversation, that he and I were working together – a student and a street vendor acting as journalists – they left us alone.

Filming with Samuel allowed me to observe how this grassroots NGO operates, and how it tries to do something nearly impossible – unite informal traders. Samuel knew members’ spots and corners throughout the city:

“Here’s Grace’s spot” – selling locks on a cement step near a bus stop.

“Here’s David’s corner” – selling corn on the sidewalk with his granddaughter.

At one point, after several hours of filming interviews, Samuel beckoned. “Come here.” A mound of waste, decorated by colorful plastic bags and rotting vegetables. Rising above it, ironically, was a huge pink sign advertising laundry detergent. “Just look at it! Filth everywhere! We pay the city council taxes, 50 shillings – and for what?”

While I set up the tripod to capture the image, Samuel paused and made a request.

“Can you take my picture?”

I was surprised. “Here?”

“Yes! Me holding the camera. Like a journalist.”

As I looked through my reflex camera at Samuel holding the large camera, the filth underneath and the giant poster above, I realized that I had made a serious mistake in the way I was filming that day. I imagined the film I had come to Kenya to produce would feature him as the main protagonist of the story, leading viewers into the world of Nairobi’s street vendors. The film would focus on him empowering street vendors and, through the union, transforming the lives of members of the informal sector. I was inspired by the fact that he volunteered to do this work, that he was not paid to be a leader, and actually sacrificed his earnings for the time he spent organizing. Seeing him at work gave me strength to put in extremely long hours and sleep little with the hope that I’d make the best film possible. If he was putting in such great efforts to make a difference in the community, who was I to let go? NISCOF and KENASVIT’s cause was so worthy, their determination so great – my efforts were small in comparison to their trials and tribulations. As passionate as he was about creating a civic voice, to give street vendors a clear and powerful say over their destiny, so was I determined to find my own cinematic voice that would powerfully tell the Union’s story. His endless ambition fueled my endless ambition.

“Where do you see yourself in 15 years?” I heard Samuel’s voice emanating from the editing software. The responses varied only slightly. One after another, the traders answered that they’d like to open...
Of that day spent with Samuel, there are two still images that stand out the most. They both express Samuel’s role and mine. In the first image, (see page 41), Samuel is standing on top of a heap of garbage in Nairobi. In the second image, (see below), Samuel is interviewing a shoeshiner in the market. In the first picture I am in the frame, holding the camera, responsible for telling Samuel’s story, while in the second picture I am unseen, and it is Samuel who is conducting an interview to be captured on film. Samuel is using my camera and it has become a marker of his status. He has gained a voice through my camera and through my voice.

This difference between the first and second picture remained with me that night, and the questions in voice and storyteller followed me into the next city I worked in, Nakuru. Who is telling the story? Can I really tell someone else’s story for them?

Mid-July. Fourth Week in Kenya
Kingdom Seekers Evangelical Church Studio, Nakuru

Charles Mwangi was nervous. So was I. But while I hid my apprehension behind a mask of professionalism, Charles shared his feelings. I tried to make him feel comfortable, to give him a sense of safety in front of my camera and asked him, as he sat hunched on the interviewee chair, to speak his mind.

“This is hard…. The camera at your face – so you think ‘What’s behind the camera? What’s the reaction?’... At the beginning I had an idea of what I can say but when I started talking I went flat… Am I straight to the point? Or am I just uttering words?”

Charles was far from just uttering words. He was speaking eloquently and with great passion. But the story he was trying to tell was complex, and he was anxious, as was I, that he would get it right. This unique recording session was taking place in the Kingdom Seekers Evangelical Church of Nakuru’s studio, a professional studio we had found, which up until that day had been reserved for filming evangelical ministers preaching the word of the Lord. Today marked the end of a long and strenuous process of filming, the final step in my attempt to make a promotional video for KENASVIT that focused on Charles’ youth football club, the Manyani Football Club.

I had met Charles three weeks earlier, right after leaving Samuel Mburu, NISCOF and Nairobi. I had been in Nakuru barely 24 hours, and was being given a speedy tour of all of KENASVIT’s work in the city. That same morning I was introduced to a group of widows who hawk goods at the bus station, a collective of disabled street vendors who sell cigarettes in the city’s parks, and an organization of single mothers who knit woolen sweaters they sell together on Nakuru’s streets. Each of these groups wanted me to film them as part of my work promoting the Union, and each of them had a “good” story. But when I met Charles, the charismatic 30 year old team chairman of the Manyani Football Club.
Club team, I knew I had found the story. A story Charles was very eager to share with the camera and me; a story I was ambitious enough to try to capture on film and tell.

Charles Mwangi lives in the Manyani neighborhood, one of the poorest sections of Nakuru. Historically many of its youth have been involved in drug dealing and crime. When a wave of violence spread through Kenya following the 2007 presidential elections Manyani was a hot spot, and the community suffered many casualties, especially among its youth. In a desire to heal the wounds and to organize, educate and empower the youth, the community leaders created a football club. After the community contributed and collected small donations they hired a coach and built a small shack where the club could meet. But the funds they collected didn’t cover expenses, Charles explained, so in order to sustain themselves the players began waste picking. Working with the youth twice a week, members of the community went to the local dump and sewage area to collect plastics and metals, which they sorted, stored and later sold in bulk. KENASVIT provided sessions to teach club members about the hazards of waste picking and how to protect themselves in the city’s dumps. The Union’s support was not financial but rather educational. So, while the club received professional training that helped them with waste picking, they were in desperate need of a sponsor who would support them.

The opportunity to film Charles and his team was a “win-win” situation: for me, representing KENASVIT, and for Charles, representing the team. I would film the club’s story and create a video KENASVIT could use to showcase its work with youth. The team could use the film to publicize its work and connect with potential donors.

But this superficially simple “win-win” entailed a complex dynamic. In order for either party to “win” I had to capture not only images of empowerment, but also images of poverty and lack. Both Charles and I were aware of this. He mentioned more than once that the youth playing football did not have shoes. And so the camera followed, tilting and panning in search of the muddy, shoeless feet that were chasing the ball. He took me to film where the club stored the piles of waste the members had picked, and emphasized their desire to find other means of sustaining the team, stating directly that if only they had donors, they could do so much more. I filmed the tall heaps of plastic collected from the dump and tried to make them look as aesthetically filthy as possible.

We were both supporting and using each other. The camera’s powerful presence cut between us: Abie, the privileged outsider photographer, and Charles, the “unprivileged” storyteller. But at the same time, it united us in our effort to find images that we both knew would tell the story and bring donations.
time, it united us in our effort to find images that we both knew would tell the story and bring donations.

After two weeks of filming I left Nakuru and returned to Nairobi, where I shut myself in and began editing the footage I had accumulated. Looking at the clips on the editing timeline I felt excited. A narrative arc was developing, beginning with poverty, trials and tribulations, and concluding with empowerment and hopes for a better future for the youth and the community. The joint effort and days of filming that Charles and I had invested would surely produce successful results. At that point I let Charles understand that the filming was over and he should wait for me to finalize the editing. I did not yet know we would have a crucial final encounter at the Evangelical Church Studio.

When I began writing and then testing a third person voiceover for the clip I realized my American outsider voice could not, and probably should not, narrate the Manyani team’s story. Words like “poverty” and “empowerment” sounded hollow, even patronizing; they fundamentally lacked the meaning they had when it was Charles saying them. Who was I to be the narrator? It struck me that while I had had up till now, and would have in the future, control of the visuals – from the first day of filming till the last day of the editing – I could have Charles take charge of the sound. In Nairobi I had nearly missed providing Samuel with the center stage in front of the camera. Now I wanted to give Charles Mwangi the recording microphone and let him narrate his story.

I called Charles from Nairobi and told him I wanted him to narrate. Prepared with a text I had written and with a short demo clip, I returned to Nakuru. Viewing the clip, Charles saw different flaws in the story I had written and edited and pointed out which parts he thought needed to be better emphasized and which parts needed to be cut down. But viewing the demo clip Charles also saw that he was the protagonist of the video, and that in his voice he would shape and narrate his own story.

Back at the Evangelical Church studio I watched Charles sitting nervously, lights shining on his face. I was conscious of trying to edit myself out and put Charles center stage.

“It’s… the impact. Am I talking words only or is there a point?…” He looked me in the eyes and said, “I was reading your face… And then – your reaction – your movement… “

Could I really edit myself out of the story? Even if I could edit out the privileged voice of a narrator, could I edit out the privileged audience? Or was the privileged audience precisely who we were both targeting? Were they the real people behind the camera?
He continued. “I do public speaking – and in public speaking what you tell the audience matters a lot so this – there are a lot of questions you ask yourself. First you avoid repetition. Second of all – you want to gather all the points to the people who are listening to you.

“You ask yourself” – he paused – “am I conveying the point to the audience? So – in this case the audience is – a camera.”

Late July. Fifth Week in Kenya
Central Business District, Kisumu

We were sitting in a small park in Kisumu, Kenya’s third largest city, where 30 street vendors had gathered. These were men and women, informal traders from the central business district who sold their wares on the streets. For roughly an hour each of them, in turn, had gotten up, addressed the group, spoken loudly, and stated their case. Some of the traders’ faces expressed discomfort, anger, disappointment; others excitement. They were discussing a new market being built in the city through KENASVIT’s advocacy and funded by donations from the European Union. The market was meant to be a catalyst for progress and a blessing for the community, providing a stable indoor workplace with facilities for the traders. Yet many saw it as a curse. The new market had space for only a few hundred traders, and could not accommodate the thousands of street vendors working in the central business district. Once the construction was completed all traders would be relocated by the city council. Those transferred to the new market would benefit from an immediate improvement in quality of life; thousands of others would be pushed to the outskirts of the city, a move that while allowing the formal businesses to grow as part of Kisumu’s new urban development plan, would diminish severely the livelihoods of the excluded vendors.

Directly across from me in the circle sat the man who held the key to this complex situation, and who had great power over the destiny of the traders at the meeting. Tony Kwatche, chairman of Kisumu Informal Trader Economic Support (KITES), the local urban alliance affiliated to the national union, KENASVIT, was tall and broad, with a grave expression.

A month before the dramatic Kisumu meeting, when I was filming Samuel in Nairobi, I was shown the struggles of union members and led to understand why they crucially needed “a voice” that would address urban authorities. Samuel had gone out to the streets with me and asked the vendors what their needs were. He was there to represent them; their hopes and aspirations became his. Samuel was there to help bring change, and saw himself as a tool for implementing that change.

Tony seemed to be a different kind of leader and was dealing with a very different situation. In Kisumu, the government had already recognized the informal sector and was building them a market. Here the traders had a voice. Only, it seemed to me, this voice was Tony’s.

More than once Tony would point to his fellow street vendors and say: “I am a source of inspiration to them,” or “I am like a mother and father to them,” smiling proudly, beaming at his union members. At first I was put off by his paternalistic attitude, and found it arrogant, even disturbing. After a while I began to get used to it, taking a less judgmental and more observational stance.

Watching Tony interacting with the street vendors revealed an intriguing attribute of his leadership. His desire to lead did not stem solely from a passion to make a difference; it seemed to arise from a love of leadership for the sake of leadership.

This became evident during the filming process. Where on the first day out in Kisumu, he portrayed my internship to the street vendors as filming a documentary about the national union, by the second day I was making a documentary about KITES, and by the third day Tony was telling the street vendors that I was making a film about him.

Until I arrived in Kisumu, I was passionately filming stories about lack of facilities and poor work sites, and then documenting educational training sessions, grassroots community work and union rallies that KENASVIT leaders provided. I had been documenting the story the union wanted to voice to the world. It was a simple story, with a clear beginning, middle and end, about good guys and their government antagonists. But filming in Kisumu, and meeting Tony, provided my first glimpse of the complex realities created by union leadership. I followed him as he argued with street vendors about the new market, filmed him reviewing the work done at the construction site, and documented him at his own work site, where he sold bags in the central part of the city.

There were two concepts he would use, both with me and with the street vendors. The first was “one voice” – a phrase used repeatedly by KENASVIT members I had met in Nairobi and in Nakuru. Hearing this phrase in his voice, I sensed the irony that indeed Kisumu was speaking with one voice, but the voice seemed to be Tony’s. The second concept was one I had not heard before. Tony spoke of dreaming, and voiced his dream to make KITES and KENASVIT the strongest union in Kenya.

If the other KENASVIT leaders were innovators creating plans and designs, Tony was a leader working from a dream. It dawned on me that his personal motivations and his love of leadership...
If the other KENASVIT leaders were innovators creating plans and designs, Tony was a leader working from a dream. It dawned on me that his personal motivations and his love of leadership could be or could later become a serious shortcoming in the work he was engaged in. But at the same time they could be precisely the force that enabled him to reach for a dream on such a large scale.

I invited myself to sleep over at Tony’s home so I could document a full “day in the life.” It was an effort to push my own limits and, by crossing the threshold of his home, to penetrate Tony’s mind and represent his dream to the fullest extent.

We were sitting at the table in our pajamas having a late night meal, preparing and planning for the following day’s busy filming.

“You know, Abie,” he confided, “my dream for KENASVIT, my beloved national alliance, is to see into it, and work into it, to make one of the biggest unions for the people of the informal economy in our beloved Kenyan country… That is my dream….”

Suddenly Tony’s pajama shirt came into sharp focus. It was imprinted with two immediately recognizable faces.

“I’m sorry – I just have to bring the camera. I just noticed something.”

“What have you noticed?”

“Your shirt!”

“My shirt?”

“Oh yes!”

“This is my hero.”

“I can see! I can see!” I got up, brought over the camera and focused it on his chest.

“This T-shirt. You can see here Martin Luther King, Jr. and Barack Obama. The readings, here, you can see it?”

Tony stood up and stretched his shirt so that the words printed under the faces were in the camera’s focus.

“He had a dream” he read, and explained, “that is Martin Luther King – and ‘now his dream came true.’ So, in the United States, Martin Luther dreamed that one day the people of America will recognize and appreciate and maybe even vote for an African-American like him, or from any other minority.” He continued proudly “And so, when Barack Obama was voted as the 44th President of the United States of America that dream became true. And to someone like me, Barack Obama is our son and Kisumu is his home city.” He smiled. “So it signifies the bonding of our dreams….”

The determination of the leaders in Nairobi and Nakuru to advocate for the traders and be their voice inspired me to find my cinematic voice and at the same time to question my role behind the camera. But it was Tony’s personal dream that made me reflect on my own dreams as a filmmaker. As my relationship with Tony developed, I gradually became aware that I too was working from a dream, and like Tony, I wasn’t only trying to make a difference, I was also hoping to leave a personal imprint. I was discovering my own dreams by filming theirs.
Early November.
Three Months Since Kenya
Media Lab, Brandeis University

“...Am I conveying the point to the audience? So – in this case the audience is – a camera.”

The difficult, even painful part about editing film is also the most gratifying part. I relive moments, minutes, even hours captured by the camera, viewing them again and again and again until I have rethought them and can distill from them a story.

“...it signifies the bonding of our dreams...”
Editing is about making decisions: what to cut out, and what to leave in. I have to decide what the story will be. I determine who the audience will think is telling the story, and how the story will be heard.

“...I am so eager to be an international journalist...”
Since leaving Kenya and returning to Brandeis, I have been going through two separate processes. I have been editing the footage from Kenya to create the promotional videos for KENASVIT: Samuel, Tony and Charles each tells his own story in a manner that I hope will interest viewers and potential donors. Viewers are not meant to feel my presence in any of the films or hear my voice speaking.

“...We need to speak with one voice...”
It is their voices that speak. But alongside this process of editing, I have been writing this Sorensen essay. Here, I relive in detail the experiences from behind the scenes, and my voice – and with it the artifice of film, and the complexities of creating a sense of reality and truth – are foregrounded.

“... We must have one voice!...”
My experience in Kenya was transformative. Viewing the footage now, as I edit the KENASVIT clips and write the Sorensen essays, is a very different experience than filming and recording in Kenya. I weigh the enormous potential and limitations of the camera with me behind it. Editing through their recorded voices and images, I realize how much I have yet to learn about achieving the delicate balance required to tell other people’s stories, necessarily touched but uncontaminated by my own.

Notes


2. Interview with Professor Winnie Mitullah, Institute of Development Studies, University of Nairobi, July 29, 2013

3. Ibid.
Being privileged is easy. Not being aware of that privilege is even easier. Being able to take advantage of all that one has been given, excelling through opportunities provided by others, and focusing on one’s small place within the world, totally unaware of one’s luxuries, is quite dangerous, if you ask me.

For quite some time, I have considered myself to be aware of my privilege in the United States. I realize that because of my socioeconomic status, gender, and the color of my skin, I can seize opportunities that some people, even within my own country, will most likely not be presented with in their lives. I realize that my voice is heard when I want it to be, and that when I don’t, I always have a place of refuge. I realize that I will likely be able to pay off my college loans. That I will probably never be treated unacceptably by others based on my appearance. That I will be able to live comfortably, and make my own choices throughout life.

When I wrote that journal entry, I had only been in Uganda one month, just four weeks of the 12 that I was to spend there. My daily life in Kázo, a community 10 kilometers northwest of Kampala, Uganda’s capital, was not categorized by the same privilege that I experience in the United States, but it was still marked by an extremely prominent and a quite inescapable one. Not only was my host family much better off than most families in the area, but my whiteness gave me unprecedented advantages (and disadvantages) that were unfamiliar to me as an American. Thinking back, though, I was quite exposed to those privileges in America. However, I am not forced to face them on a daily basis here, whereas in Kázo, everywhere I turned I was constantly reminded that my life there was very privileged. I began to consider that the realities of my life and experiences are remarkably different from the realities of many of the people I would meet and grow to love in Kázo.

That differing reality was largely reflected in the socioeconomic status of the general population of Kázo. With the per capita income falling under US$170 according to the World Bank Poverty Analysis in 2011, over half of Uganda’s population fall below the poverty line.¹ According to UNICEF, 38% live on less than US$1.25 per day and therefore fall below the international poverty line.² While the poverty that I saw was severe, in reality, most of those who live in extreme poverty in Uganda (92%) do not live in rural areas like Kázo, but instead, in the countryside.³ Uganda’s immense poverty reflects itself in the main causes of sickness and death throughout the country: AIDS, malaria, pneumonia, diarrhea, and malnutrition, resulting in an extremely low life expectancy of 54 years at birth, according to UNICEF.⁴ While the
Ugandan government is attempting to improve these conditions by bringing in more currency by liberalizing the economy, there continues to be a very low public expenditure. This creates a problem in terms of public education and public health, which were shortcomings that appeared very prominently during my time in Kazo.

The descriptions that follow chart my summer’s journey through my interactions with three very important people. Reflecting on these interactions shows what I have come to understand about privilege and the importance of recognizing it.

Morning in Kazo
Every morning, I wake up just about a half hour to an hour before my alarm, which comes from my old iPod touch, when we have power and I am able to charge it to last through the night. I stretch out and slide off my light sheet, pull the corner of my mosquito net out from under my mattress, and slip out of bed as quietly as I can, although I do not have to worry about my mattress creaking like I do in my dorm at Brandeis. My bedframe here is solid wood, with a thick, foam pad over the top, sitting on a sturdy, concrete floor. It is refreshingly cool to rest my feet on after a warm night, and it wakes me up just enough before having to pull out the skeleton key from the lock on my door, twist it ever so slightly, and hope that I won’t wake up any of the boys in the room next to mine. It is just six o’clock, and they won’t get up to prepare for school until six-thirty at the earliest, if not seven o’clock.

I finally make it out my bedroom door, through the sitting room, and out to the front door. This is where my problem arises. I stand in my long, hand-dyed dress in front of our large, heavy, metal front door. The door keeps others out in the night, but also becomes an obstacle when I am in a hurry to use the latrine outside of our compound while everyone else is still asleep. I try wiggling the huge bolts that hold it shut, attempting to keep quiet. I finally manage to get the door open, although the sound of the bolts moving out of place is unmistakable. The door swings open, and I am bombarded on the other side by our three large dogs: Black, Police, and the other whose name I never managed to learn. I push past them and run quickly over to the cement stalls, relieve myself, and come out only to find Mack, my youngest brother, waiting at the door smiling, knowing that it was me who woke him up and not someone trying to break into the house.

Mack quickly changes into his school uniform: powder blue shorts, a white button-down short-sleeve shirt, black shoes, and red socks. He leaves for school. He is in Primary 5 in a big, bubblegum pink building at the foot of Kazo Hill, just a 10-minute walk from our home. I get dressed, and before long, the sun is up. Ronald, my oldest brother, has woken up by this time, and brings me black tea and a roll wrapped in newspaper from the shop outside of our compound as I get ready to leave for school. I gulp down my malaria pill with my tea. I brush my teeth (by this time I’ve begun brushing with water from the spigot outside, rather than boiled water) and shout a Siba bulungi! – Have a good day! – to my family, and walk through the dusty streets and green matoke fields to the other side of Kazo, all the way to Lugoba Road and Uganda Youth and Women’s Effort Fighting AIDS (UYWEFA) Education Centre, where I teach English, music and art.

By the time I reach the Education Centre I have already eaten two or three sombusa, a small fried snack filled with onions, cowpeas, and on a good day, carrots. If I am lucky, Mama Gerald, who sells these morning treats, has slipped some fried sweet potato into my bag. I have also already said how was the night, hello and good morning to almost all of Kazo, shouting Wasuze otya?, Oly otyah nyabo?, and Siba bulungi! to anyone who would listen. I walk through neighboring compounds, squeeze the hands of young kids in passing, and turn a corner, face up the hill, and find myself gazing at the Centre. Once I’ve arrived, most kids are already in their classrooms, but there are always a few stragglers running in circles with the neighborhood girls, Sheri and Shanittah, who are both too young for school. The kids who are left outside circle around me, grab onto my legs, and finally, after giving in to hugs and tickling, I usher the remaining students inside to their classrooms. And so our day begins.

Jajja
My head is almost sticking out of the window on my first drive through Kampala; I am in the back seat of a well cared-for old car, quite a luxury in Kazo. But I don’t know that yet. I haven’t yet been to Kazo – it is my first ride, and Allie and Ronald have just picked me up from the airport at Entebbe, almost a two-hour ride from Kampala. I pull myself back to a normal sitting position in the seat, and turn to my right and look at Allie.

She is a 29 year old woman from Iowa, and has been in Kazo for three months so far, temporarily working as the main administrator of UYWEFA Education Centre, my internship site for the next 12 weeks, while UYWEFA continues with a job search for a Ugandan administrator. The students call her “Headmistress Allie.” She is the only other American, as well as the only other mzungu – white person – living in Kazo. Since she has been here for quite a while already, she has been helping me prepare for several weeks, answering my many questions via email.
I have also been in touch with UYWEFA’s main director, Ronald. He is a Ugandan man who founded and continues to oversee all of UYWEFA’s programs. He and Allie work together very closely, but Ronald also works as a butcher in Kazo and is going to school. I will come to learn that while many Ugandans are involved in the non-profit sector, most of their involvement is on the side of another profession, and generally a more profitable one.

“I forgot to ask you...what is my host family like?” I ask Allie, ungluing my eyes from the urban areas that we are passing through.

Allie begins describing – very vaguely, I may add – an older woman named Passy. She is mostly described as “busy.”

This makes me a bit nervous, because I want to be close with my host family. I let it go, though, not letting myself have any specific expectations.

We arrive in Kazo, pulling through the uneven dirt streets. The car bounces up and down, and I hit my head on the metal roof. We pass the kisawa – playground – where I see several groups of men playing futbol. Turning down a small side road, we find ourselves in the midst of the market, pass through what feels like a tunnel of matooke trees, which look like green bananas. I almost equate them to plantains before tasting them; matooke is less sweet, and also serves as the staple food in Uganda, often eaten with a sauce or beans.

Passing the matooke, we arrive on an even smaller street, and eventually pull up to a large concrete wall. We exit the car, but our driver has parked in a big hole and we are surrounded by mud. Ronald carries my suitcase, Allie takes my duffle, so I am left with my backpack and purse. We walk to the left of the concrete wall, pass a series of single rooms that serve as homes for several families, and turn right through the middle of them, leading us to a large, open concrete courtyard. We have finally arrived at the compound that will be my home for the next three months.

It is beautiful, and it stands out among the other homes in the neighborhood surrounding us. I assume that this means my host family is a bit better off than others in the area. On the far side of the compound, there are two rooms attached to each other, with a huge chicken coop on the far side. Around the corner are the latrines and an open space with more matooke trees. I also spot two avocado trees and two other unidentifiable trees, that I am later introduced to as jackfruit. Across from the chicken coop is a large house: cement, with two large water collecting towers on two of the corners. I walk up the steps, enter the front door, and see my host family. There are three boys who seem to be around my age sitting on one side of the table, across from a woman whom Ronald introduces as Mama Betty, but whom I hear these boys call Jajja.

Mama Betty, also known as Passy, also known as Jajja – grandmother – is my host mother. Everyone I speak to calls her a different name, and at first, I am confused about what I should call her. I begin by calling her Mama Betty, but since this literally means “Mother of Betty,” it feels too formal, so I quickly alternate to Mama or Jajja, both of which fit. Her warmth makes it feel comfortable for me to call her both mother and grandmother, and she does not seem to have a preference.

I look at her with wonder. She looks up at me briefly, but is very focused on the task at hand: decorating a half-globe cake to look like a futbol. She is piping little black lines of icing into circles, around the white ones that are already there. The cake sits on an aluminum foil-covered cardboard circle, and her grandson Mack stands next to her holding a photo of what the cake is supposed to look like. After finishing the last line, she puts the icing down and stands up.

“Hannah! Welcome.” She extends her arms and hugs me.

We go over to the sitting room with Ronald and Allie. The exhaustion that I am experiencing is evident in my inability to pay attention. We make plans for the rest of the day: I am to take a shower, then go over to the Education Centre. We make small talk. Jajja tells me about how she bakes cakes to sell for weddings, birthdays, and other parties. I look around, but don’t see an oven. Then I see that outside, there are two huge sheets of metal set up carefully over two charcoal stoves, creating a giant, makeshift oven. I am immediately impressed.

As I settle in and the weeks pass, I see that every few weekends, Jajja goes through this same process of mixing for one night, baking the next morning, letting the cakes sit for one day, and decorating on the last night. During my three months, I see several futbol cakes, as well as truck cakes, guitar cakes, and dozens and dozens of miniature, fancier-looking white cakes with ribbons tied around the sides and sweet messages across the top.

At times, girls will come to the house and buy these cakes from her. Other times, she will bring baskets full of cakes to the grocery store and sell them. She is an incredible entrepreneur. Not only does she bake and sell, but she also has a shop in town by the kisawa where she sells used clothing, as well as jewelry and what she calls African “free dresses” (meaning they don’t have a pattern or shape, really). She also rents out large tents and chairs for weddings and funerals. She sells the water that she collects in the rain-gathering
towers next to our house. She sells chickens, and also raises pigs to sell.

Despite the fact that Jajja lost her husband quite a while ago, she has been able to work and provide a wonderful life for herself and her family.

Ronald, Mack, Pius (three of her grandsons), Jajja and I all live at Jajja’s house. A boy called Guida also lives there for my first month and a half, afterwards leaving for school. The rest of her grandchildren attend boarding school fairly close by also, so most weekends at least one will come home. Some weekends all of them come home, and there will be 11 of us: three more girls, three younger boys, four boys around my age, and me. It is the norm for children in Uganda to move in with their grandparents or other relatives who live close to the city, because this is the best opportunity for children to get a good education. While there are schools in villages, I am told by my host brothers that their quality often doesn’t compare to schools near the city.

After meeting everybody I get a tour of the house, because all of the grandchildren have gathered this week (not because it is the weekend, but because they are on a holiday from school). It is four rooms, modest by American standards: Jajja’s room, my room, the boys’ room, and the living room/dining room/kitchenette, which is a big open space.

I feel at home amongst Jajja and the boys. She makes me comfortable by asking questions about my life in the United States. Every evening, I sit with her and we talk, while she watches soap operas and I knit. The boys are entranced by the television.

While in our compound, I am constantly reminded about our relative privilege compared to other residents of Kazo. We watch television, we have a refrigerator, and we often have electricity. Every evening, we set our big, beautiful table with a tablecloth and placemats, have our own water, and a tap inside from which we can bathe with privacy. I have my own room, a big bed, and the safety of an enclosed compound. No matter where in the world I am, I know that these circumstances mean that I am lucky. I aspire to provide for myself and my family all that Jajja is able to provide for the boys and me, and her children and other grandchildren before us. Her success is substantial and it inspires me. Jajja’s limitless work ethic, even in her old age, seems greater than that of the common role models I see in the U.S.

One night, as we sit in the living room, I with my knitting, and Jajja decorating her cakes while watching a soap opera, she looks at me with a weary smile.

“Jajja, you look so tired. Won’t you go to sleep? Or at least rest for a while?” I ask.

“Hannah… Look at all of these nice things we have. I can’t rest. I have to finish. Or else we won’t have anything.”

Margaret

I arrive a few minutes late to school, just in time for Monday morning assembly. The children go through their routine of singing the Ugandan national anthem, and then the Buganda anthem, honoring the tribe native to the Kampala area. Most of our students at the Centre belong to the Buganda tribe. I notice three new faces: Margaret and her older brother and sister, Michael and Michelle. I learn from Ronald that the three were here last term but are coming so late this term because their mother has been unable to pay their school fees. Ronald doesn’t have it in his heart to turn them away.

He tells me about their family. Mama Margaret (this is how a child’s parent is referred to, using Mama for mother and Tata for father) is very sweet and has good intentions but, because she is uneducated, she is unable to get work in Kazo. Instead, she stays at home and cares for her eight children, all of whose Christian names begin with the letter “M.” (This makes me smile.) The little money that they have comes from her husband, the father of all eight kids, when he comes around. Ronald tells me that he is not very present in their lives, but he also has numerous other wives, and has seven additional children at our Education Centre alone. He claims to have many others, who are not yet of school age.

I try to digest what Ronald tells me, but the words don’t sit well. Studying anthropology at Brandeis has prevented me from being quick to judge polygamy and other lifestyles that differ from my own, but I can’t help but frown upon this man’s numerous relationships and even more numerous children, most of whom he cannot provide for. Forget school fees – most of the time, he doesn’t supply Mama Margaret with enough money for food. As an outsider, though, I question my right to feel the way I do. But sitting to watch while...
children are looked at as trinkets on a shelf to brag about, instead of humans that need care and attention, strikes me. Weeks pass, and Margaret teaches me so much in a very short amount of time about the reality of many children in Kazo. It makes me sad to realize the difference between her reality and that of many privileged girls her age, just because of the conditions that she was born into. The fact that an extensive education is almost impossible for her to obtain, other than the benefits she is receiving from UYWEFA, makes me think about lost potential. Especially when I realize the extent to which many children in the United States fail to appreciate the benefits that they receive. It also makes what Margaret does get from UYWEFA mean so much more.

One morning, when Ronald is creating student profiles in the office at UYWEFA, he asks me to bring Margaret from her class. He asks her name, where she lives, and her favorite class. The questions have been created to give potential donors a background on each child. He reaches a question that troubles me.

“What would you like to do in the future, Margaret?”

“I would like to be a doctor, Mr. Ronald,” she answers.

Ronald holds eye contact with me, and we silently share the disappointing sentiment that obtaining this goal is almost impossible for Margaret.

Many students at UYWEFA face situations similar to this one. In fact, this is what inspired Ronald to start the Education Centre in the first place.

Uganda Youth and Women’s Effort Fighting AIDS (UYWEFA) was founded in 2007 as a small, grassroots non-profit aimed at de-stigmatizing HIV/AIDS in Kazo and in the greater Nasana Town Council (a regional group of NGOs). It began with HIV-positive women in the community reaching out to local schools and giving talks about living with HIV. Then, in 2009, it turned into a small nursery school for orphans and vulnerable children affected by HIV. After a large fundraising and expansion project in 2011 UYWEFA raised enough money to expand the Centre to include two of the three Nursery levels offered in Uganda (Baby Class and Top Class, omitting Middle Class), as well as Primary Levels One, Two, and Three. It is the aim of the Centre to expand one level every year, until it offers up to the highest Primary level, Level Seven. UYWEFA has developed to offer its students, now numbering 130, opportunities that their families could never have imagined before.

The best part: UYWEFA was founded by and is run by Ugandans within this community.

The Education Centre also hosts children who are not affected by HIV, like Margaret. This is part of an attempt to de-stigmatize the virus within the Kazo community. The Centre has made it so that it is impossible to tell which kids are positive in that group of 130 lined up in rows at morning assembly, all wearing the same bright orange uniforms fashioned by a tailor down the street.

Among the dozens of smiling faces in those bright orange uniforms the one that brightens my days the most is Margaret. She is one of our youngest students, and is in Top Class (the second level of nursery at UYWEFA) with Teacher Catherine, despite the fact that her petite four year old self doesn’t look a day older that two. Her short legs move more slowly than the other students’, but Michael and Michelle are patient with her and never leave her behind while walking to and from school. All three siblings are shy, but, despite her initial hesitation, Margaret and I become great friends. I so look forward to her little round face and enormous, contagious smile peeking around the office door to check if I am there, waiting for her.

This happens almost every morning at precisely 10:30, when the students have break time for a mere 30 minutes of their nine-hour school day. She waddles over to me, where I’m squeezed at the office’s only desk beside the only other American in Kazo, Allie. There is a plate full of sombusa and mandazi, sweet little balls of fried dough, that Allie and I share from the woman who sells snacks at a canteen outside the school. Margaret beams at me.

“Good morning, Margaret!” I say.
“Good morning, Teacher Hannah. How are you?” she responds, in her monotone voice.

“I’m fine. How are you, Margaret?”

“I’m fine,” she says, continuing in her monotone. This is the norm, until I can get her giggling.

“How is mom?”

“Mom is alright.”

“How is Baby Maddy?”

“Baby Maddy is alright.”

“Jangu – come over,” I say.

She comes over and pushes herself up onto my lap, and she finally giggles, truly at ease. I tickle her a little bit and she bursts into uncontrollable laughter, and she sticks her tongue out of her mouth ever so slightly, and still cannot stop laughing. When she finally slows down, she just smiles up at me, and we chat (however limited our conversations may be) for the remaining few minutes of break time.

This is how our mornings go for about the first half of my stay in Kazo. But one July morning, my first day back at school after I have returned from a week in Zanzibar during midterm week, Margaret does not come to sit with me in the office.

This is an excerpt from an article about the experiences of a teacher in an African school. The teacher, Teacher Hannah, describes her interactions with students, particularly Margaret, and the challenges she faced during her time in the school. The article touches on the issue of child abuse and the responsibility of teachers to address it. The author reflects on the cultural context of the school and the standards expected of the teachers.

But one July morning, my first day back at school after I have returned from a week in Zanzibar during midterm week, Margaret does not come to sit with me in the office.
Margaret, Michael and Michelle are just like any children that I see running down the streets of my neighborhood in Connecticut, and it doesn’t seem fair that while they long to be able to afford a good education, most children that I know at home would jump at the chance of a day off from school.

Until the day that she grows old enough to get married and start having children of her own.

Because of the financial restraints on Margaret’s family it is not likely that all of her siblings will complete primary school, let alone secondary school or university. I recall when Margaret told me that her dream was to become a doctor. That bittersweet moment brought me pride in her ability to hold high aspirations for herself. It also brought me anger that she was born into a life that would not allow her to fulfill her dreams. It brought me frustration, it brought me sadness, but it brought me hope. Most of all, it gave me the blessing of never letting go of the opportunities that I hold in the palms of my hands, and never taking for granted the blessings I have been given. While I do not believe that it is my fault for having those blessings, nor feel it my purpose to treat those less fortunate as charity cases, it is my job to appreciate what I have and level the playing field on a larger scale, even if it is just a little bit, like here in Kazo. Margaret, Michael and Michelle are just like any children that I see running down the streets of my neighborhood in Connecticut, and it doesn’t seem fair that while they long to be able to afford a good education, most children that I know at home would jump at the chance of a day off from school.

Teacher Fatima
On only my second or third day in Kazo Allie has scheduled a teacher meeting at UYWefa. I arrive at the Centre an hour early, which is very naive on my part. The other teachers, with the exception of one, trickle in maybe an hour after the scheduled meeting time.

The exception does not come into the office to talk, or to introduce herself. Rather, she stands outside, around the corner of the school, alone and silent. She is wearing a light pink blouse and skirt, which complement her medium-tone brown skin and pulled back hair. She looks so professional, especially next to me in my flowing, colorful clothing intended to keep me covered but cool under the boiling summer sun.

I intend to become close with her. I think, she is the perfect friend for me. From the way that she keeps to herself, it seems like she is new, so I hope that if we become friends, we will have each other to talk with at break times, and to eat lunch with. But for some reason, I am too shy to introduce myself.

The other teachers eventually arrive, and as each woman comes in, she seems more unenthused than the last. With the exception of our head teacher, Hope, everyone seems a bit disappointed that her holiday break was cut short for a meeting she does not want to attend.

As the meeting begins, it is obvious that my instinct about the teacher in pink was correct. She is also new, and is also too shy to introduce herself to anybody. She sits in the corner with her son, Arnold, who is almost two years old. Ronald introduces her as Fatima. Allie walks in holding a big tray of food that her host mother has cooked for us: curried potatoes and tomatoes with several slices of avocado each. She distributes one to each teacher. When this new teacher receives hers, she divides it in two, giving Arnold almost as much as she takes for herself.

Throughout our several planning days as a group she remains quiet and keeps to herself. I identify with her, because while I am attempting to put myself out there in my first few days, and while I feel very connected to my students already, I feel detached from the other teachers. While she is Ugandan like most of the
other teachers, it is clear that she is also a bit detached from them. I hope that the outsider status I share with Fatima will bring us together.

One day during that first week Fatima wears a beautiful matching shirt and skirt made out of African wax print. Its vivid red hue with yellow, green and white accents draws my eye. I ask her if she had it made. She says yes, and offers to bring me to the tailor who made it for her. I excitedly accept, eager to go. Little do I know it will take us almost two months to actually make it there.

This serves as a conversation-starter. “When are we going to the tailor?” I ask, day after day.

Some days she says, “This weekend,” or, “I’m busy, how about next week?” We continue to make tentative plans, but never set a day in stone.

One day, I sit down with her as the school prefects are serving lunch.

“When are we going to the tailor?” I ask. “Let’s go this weekend. On Friday after the teacher’s meeting.” She answers.

She comes and sits next to me on the concrete step outside of the Centre, overlooking the kitchen area, a semi-permanent structure, in the yard.

“What is your favorite food?” I ask her.

“Posho,” she answers.

“What do you eat?”

“Posho,” she answers.

“Do you eat posho in the U.S.?” she asks me.

“No,” I laugh again, “they have it there, but it’s called something else. Most people don’t eat it.”

“What do you eat?”

“Lots of things.” I pause, unable to identify a staple food in the U.S. “We eat rice, like here, and also pasta and a lot of meat. But most of our food is much different.”

“What is your family like?” she asks.

I pause. Family structure, and family life, is much different at home than in Kazo.

“I have a little brother, named Jerome,” I tell her, “he is 10 years old.”

Fatima pauses, and takes a minute to really look at me.

“Does everyone space out their children like your mom did?”

“No. Some people do, but most don’t.”

Then Fatima smiles. “I want to use family planning like your mother did. Maybe I will have another baby but not for 10 years.”

I am hesitant to tell her that my parents divorced and my mother remarried, which is why my brother and I are so far apart in age. That is not how life is in Uganda. Most people don’t divorce. Most people have several children in a short time period, or even many over a long time period. While I am not sure how much truth this holds, my supervisors at UYWEFA often account for the many large families that we sponsor by explaining that since life expectancy is lower than it is in the United States it makes more sense to have more children, even if the economic resources to care for those children aren’t available.

The prefects bring over our lunch, and Fatima and I part, she going to her classroom and me going to the office, each of us taking our bowls with us to our separate spaces.

The following weekend we finally go to the tailor. After our teacher’s meeting ends at five o’clock Fatima is waiting for me outside school with another teacher, Rose, whom Fatima has been spending more and more time with lately. The three of us begin walking behind the school and through the neighboring compounds on our way to Kazo Central, our town center. They laugh at me because of the crazy number of students and other neighborhood children skipping behind me, saying, “Teacher Hannah! Teacher Hannah!”

My mzungu identity, my whiteness, follows me everywhere I go. Walking down the streets, playing at the kisawe, and buying food at the market. It doesn’t wear off, despite my long stay in Kazo.
food at the market. It doesn’t wear off, despite my long stay in Kazo. For most Ugandans in Kazo, my whiteness is not only what sets me apart from them, but it is the entirety of my identity. Coming to terms with the inability to control my own identity is difficult for me. I tend to breathe a sigh of relief whenever I’m at home at the compound, or at the Education Centre, where I am far away from numerous children chasing me saying “Mzungu! Mzungu!” and instead they say “Teacher Hannah! Teacher Hannah!” through their smiles. I have even gotten to the point where one large group of children, far from the Centre, know my name and call me Hannah instead of mzungu. Rose and Fatima actually seem impressed with this small lesson I’ve taught the children.

We reach Kazo Central and part ways with Rose. By this time the children have gone home, because most of them are not allowed to venture that far out of their neighborhood. Fatima tells me we have to stop at her house first to get Arnold.

We turn down a path off the main road, and end up in a big, open area with some cows grazing. To my left is the original UYWEFA building, from when it was just a small counseling center. I see the original paint has faded, but handprints of all of the employees still remain next to the front door of the building. I’ve never been here before, but I have seen photos.

“You live here?” I ask Fatima.

“Yes,” she smiles, “the old UYWEFA.”

I can’t help but smile as well at this coincidence. The old building has transformed from a home, to UYWEFA’s office, and back to a home quite nicely. As I examine the handprints and identify them as belonging to my friends, she goes inside, brings out a very aggravated Arnold, and leads the way as we head to the tailor. We pass the kisawa and head to the market. Walking through, Fatima spots one of our student’s jajjas, Jajja Tracy. Fatima kneels before her, giving her an appropriate Luganda greeting. I have never met Jajja Tracy before, so I wander the fruits and vegetables with Arnold, waiting. Fatima returns and tells me whom she was greeting, and I immediately feel bad for not joining her. I want to be able to show my respect, just as she has. Nevertheless, we continue, and eventually make it to the tailor. I choose my favorite fabric and style, with Fatima’s help, of course. I am content. I feel as though I have made friends with another teacher.

While I did have a friendly working relationship with the other teachers, there was always something separating us from each other. I did not realize what it was until the last teacher meeting that I was a part of, just three days before my scheduled departure from UYWEFA.

During the meeting, Ronald unexpectedly broke into a rant about what a tragedy it was that I was leaving. He expressed that many students, if not each student, would cry over my departure. I was overwhelmed. He delved deeper and said that if any other teacher were to leave that day without saying goodbye, no student would cry. No student would even blink an eye. But my leaving would break their hearts. I wasn’t sure if it was I or they who felt more resentful about this constantly being put down by Ronald, while I was often placed up on a pedestal.

As much as I valued each of the teachers at UYWEFA, I knew Ronald was speaking the truth about the children’s feelings. Of course I was flattered by the adoration of the students, but I was also embarrassed. I wasn’t sure if the annoyed looks on the other teachers’ faces were due to what Ronald was saying, or if they were just exasperated that the meeting had gone overtime. Nevertheless, I questioned myself. I never considered myself better than any of them. What qualifications did I have that made others see me as so much more desirable as a teacher than the six other trained professionals at the Centre?

I wanted to say that the difference was my passion, my charisma, my urge to spend every possible moment encouraging and supporting my students. While this may have been part of Ronald’s reasoning, I knew deep down that it wasn’t the driving force. In truth, I assumed Ronald thought that I was a better teacher for the Centre because I was appealing: because I was a loving American. I helped to give the Centre a good image. Because I spoke English, wore pretty clothes, took photos of the children, and taught them how to sing American songs. The teachers, whom I considered my colleagues and, at times, my friends, saw me in the light that I really deserved – not necessarily a bad light, just a truthful light. They knew that while my education may have been more extensive than theirs, they were better trained for the circumstances in which we were working. They were more accustomed to the system, and were more qualified for it.

While this gap may have been created by my being American, it did not stop me from attempting to break it down and become closer with my fellow teachers. This is why developing a relationship with Fatima was so important to me. As many times as I tried to strike up a conversation and connect with them, our differences continued to emerge, which is why, ultimately, attempting to forge a substantial relationship with Fatima did not make much of a difference in relation to my place at the Centre and my standing amongst the other teachers.

As much as I tried to befriend these coworkers, to gain their respect, it did not
stop Fatima from laughing every time I completed a typical task for a Buganda woman: washing the dishes after lunch, using the latrine, or sweeping our yard. It did not stop Rose from giving me sullen glances when her friends visited the Centre and stopped to talk with me as well. All the others at UYWEFA and in Kazo seemed to welcome me in. But while I was invited out, and taken to the market by my fellow teachers, I was still an outsider to them.

Even after 12 weeks, sitting among them, squeezed into tiny, student-sized desks at our meeting, restless after a long week of teaching, I was different. This was not something that I wanted. But it was not something that I could change.

Evenings in Kazo

Three days per week I stay after hours at the Centre, helping make candles with HIV-positive women involved in UYWEFA’s candlemaking program intended for women’s empowerment within the community. I help break up blocks of wax, after which we can melt it down, dye it, pour it into molds, let the candles cool, and package them. I mostly help with the packaging. I cut out sheets of plastic, and melt the edges together around the packaging. I have pages and pages of her handwritten words in the back of my journal. When it is time for me to go home she walks through the back paths of Lugoba with me, through compounds and winding dirt roads, to a small tree at the edge of a property, right next to a charcoal stand, the marker of what is Kazo Central. It is here that we part, for it is the farthest that Namukasa is allowed to go.

“Sula bulungi, Hannah!” she calls after me.

“Sula bulungi, Namukasa – goodnight!” I call back.

By the time I make it home it is dark, and Jajja comments that I shouldn’t be passing through Kazo Central at night. But I know enough people along the way that I feel safe. At times, friends from UYWEFA even walk me all the way home to my compound.

I come in to the house, exhausted from a long day at school, to find Jajja frosting some of the miniature cakes she is making. She has been saving, and this week she bought a small oven with a stovetop for inside the house. I have never seen one before in Uganda. But it is almost identical to the one that my American host family had when I lived in South Africa for a semester, almost two years earlier. Since she has bought the oven she has been baking and baking – almost every night – making dozens and dozens of cakes.

“Sula bulungi, Hannah!” she sighs.

I put my bag down in my room, and then run outside to use the latrine before it gets too dark, where Black, Police, and the nameless puppy greet me. After coming back inside I go into my room, change back into my long dress from that morning, and sit with Jajja at the dining room table. I pull out my black book, and begin writing.

“*It’s as if I’m dreaming. What is my reality, anyway? I wrote earlier that a hard aspect of being in Kazo was realizing that for my friends and loved ones there, that is their reality. [Mine is so different.] But, it doesn’t have to be that way. Everything is a choice. [Their reality can change, and so can mine.]*

— Journal Entry, August 6, 2013

Notes


