

A Typical Day in Kenya: Living at an Orphanage, Teaching at a Camp

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Coming home to fifty kids ranging from 5 to 14 might seem like hell on earth, but it's literally my favorite part of the day. Usually Grace, around six years old but as small as a three-year-old, is the first to see me. "Uncle!" she cries as she runs to hug me, followed by "One, two, three, jump!" to which I lift her into the air a few times. The other young kids home early from school choose between hugging or giving me the Maverick-Goose high-five I taught them--and that many do surprisingly well. If I'm lucky I'll get a short break to just relax and read in my room for an hour, but usually it's too hard to say no to the kids: they have a new Swahili song to teach me or a new dance to show me, or they want to practice the Cotton-Eyed Joe line dance I taught them. I bought volleyball posts--two giant fifteen-foot trunks that we sawed down--and Perry bought the volleyball, so sometimes we play with that. After their dinner, usually rice and beans, I might help them with their homework or take out my camera so they can get into a million different poses and push their way into each shot. On the wall of the main room is a bulletin board with all the kids' photos and names, and what they want to be: doctors, pilots, teachers, pastors, engineers.

Most of these kids lost their parents to AIDS or have moms in the slums who can't take care of them. Their clothes--most with Disney or NYC logos--are all donated, as are their school uniforms. Their faces have so many scars and many of their teeth are stained coffee brown. They have so little, yet they're so appreciative of everything. They're full of so much hope and positive energy. They go to bed saying, "Good night, Uncle!" and I feel so lucky for being here. I feel at home.

I wake up every morning to the crowing of roosters and the smell of the indoor "outhouses" down the hall. If I'm motivated I start on a regimen of push-ups and planks, then walk around the grounds for a bit while chickens and goats run underfoot (I once had to cut off the rope from the neck of the baby goat because it had fallen down a hole and it couldn't breathe; putting a knife to an animal's neck is nothing I ever want to do again). I used to bathe every 3 or 4 days, but I couldn't stand it anymore. Bathing with my hands and a bucket is fine (no running water; tanks of rain water provide what's necessary); but doing it with my head right above the so-called "hole in the ground" while dozens of mosquitoes overhead became too much for me. Wipes do the job just as well.

Dinners usually consist of potatoes, cabbage, and a wonderful fried flour called chipati. Chai tea is served with every meal. Pastor Anthony, who runs the orphanage with his wife Ann, talks slowly but is extremely intelligent. He's just about to finish his degree in theology, and while the first few days were a bit awkward, since I've been able to joke with all of them and have a lot of fun. We talk about politics a lot, the main issue right now being the Kenyan MP's trying to give themselves a raise (they already get paid more than U.S. congressmen) and the referendum on the new constitution scheduled for August 4. Based on the election violence three years ago, a lot of people are worried. Pastor Anthony is passionate about what he does, and while some of his views are outdated, overall I really appreciate how he runs the place--he keeps the kids in line

with positive reinforcement, not violence like in some of the other orphanages and schools.

I live in Nakuru, a small town two hours from Nairobi, but Pastor Anthony still wants us home before dark (6:30). All the "compounds" have barbed wire, electric wire, or glass on the walls, but I've never felt unsafe here. I know my race is on my face, along with a thousand assumptions that go along with that, but aside from the occasional "Mzungu!" called out at me, for the most part people have treated me very respectfully and honestly. My own assumptions and fears about Africa were flat-out wrong.

The school I work at is attached to a refugee camp, similar to the one I described in my last email. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of students don't know how to read or write, even in Swahili; a large percentage don't even know how to write their own name. They all carry razor blades around to sharpen their pencils, which are literally worn down to the nub. All the teachers come from the refugee camp too, and most--as we quickly figured out--don't know how to teach, and would prefer to use us volunteers as substitutes, while we're supposed to be there to provide extra support. I travel a lot, and there are definitely times where I have to stop myself from throwing Western values onto other cultures. But then there are also those times when something's just plain wrong: teachers leaving their kids in the classroom to chat it up in the library, giving standardized tests that are full of errors and confusing questions, or treating a kid who's unconscious and having seizures by trying to hold him up and splashing water on his face ("He'll be okay"). Chrystal, a fellow volunteer and teacher from Canada, and I were so disillusioned by these practices (especially teachers trying to get us to do all their work for them) that we were both tempted to leave. But because of our passion for the kids, we decided to stick it out and change the curriculum.

Except for teaching the kids "Head, shoulders, knees and toes" and the "Vampire cough" (many of the students of TB or pneumonia, exacerbated by HIV) and playing with the kids on breaks, for the most part we locked ourselves in the head teacher's office and didn't interact with the students. We pulled data from the assessments, made spreadsheets, organized kids into small groups based on their strengths and weaknesses (e.g. "counting," "vertical subtraction"), wrote lesson plans, and created new, more functional assessments. While I only had enough time to pull small groups on one day, I was still impressed how much I was able to teach them with rocks and color-coded numbers (laminated with packing tape). Chrystal and my main goal is to just get something started, so we can pass that information on to the next set of volunteers. Even though I don't like how the school's run or the politics of it, I still felt empowered; I know I made a difference.

That was the first three weeks in Kenya. On Monday I left for Rwanda on my way to the D.R. Congo, and already I'm terribly homesick for Nakuru and my kids.

On a certain level, though, that's exactly what I was looking for by doing this volunteering: to make a new place my home. It's a great feeling for my restless soul to know that I can make my home anywhere I go.