

## Final Report for ETW Fellowship

During the summer of 2009 I spent four weeks living and working in an environment drastically different than any I had previously experienced. Having never ventured outside the bounds of the United States, the temporary transplantation to a small village in southern Uganda generated an abundance of internal and external stimuli. The rewards and challenges of pursuing my field project, as well as the irreplaceable knowledge gained, together made the experience a very successful and enriching one. I benefited from engaging in participant observation and completing an ethnographic research study in Makondo, the primary village in which I worked. I gained self-understanding, a broadened worldview, and increased knowledge and appreciation of Ugandan culture.

My greater self-understanding, and consequently a broadened worldview, came from observation, conversation, everyday experience and reflection. I saw, tasted, heard, and engaged in many things that were never part of my previous routine. Through these new experiences came different ways in which to view myself. Even the simplest of interactions forced me to reconsider the most basic everyday actions. The typical “hellos,” “goodbyes,” eye contact, posture, and the way of saying thank you more were in some ways different. Although I read about these differences before traveling, once in Uganda I could *feel* the changes. In other words, the cultural differences became, albeit fragmented and only for a short time, a part of me. What is more, personally experiencing these feelings expedited my understanding of who I am. This process is continual, but an important piece lies in a simple fact: different does not mean wrong. Through living these differences, and not solely discussing them, I became better able to critically evaluate the reasons why I do the things I do, what I want to change, and to evaluate what makes me, me.

Most importantly, I gained a greater understanding of the plight faced by too many Ugandans. This knowledge came primarily from my field study and observations. The project consisted of interviews with nine individual students and four entire secondary school classes at St. Denis Secondary School in Makondo. By asking broad, open-ended questions, I gratefully listened to the students as they shared their stories with me. The discussions were often unnerving, and here came the irony of my trip: the most rewarding aspect was also the most challenging. The meaningful relationships formed between the students and me will last forever, but I felt profound pain when I listened to their struggles, witnessed severely broken families, and observed abysmal living conditions. No amount of preparation would have sufficed.

Each and every student with whom I spoke granted me insights into a lifestyle that I struggled to grasp. Nonetheless, two interactions were particularly striking. The first was my time with Lutaaya Joseph. Lutaaya was a Senior 4 student at the time. Over the course of my time in Makondo he and I became very close. During breaks we spoke about the United States, Uganda, racism, HIV/AIDS, life experiences and future potential, among other things. Before our scheduled time to have the interview, I asked Lutaaya if he was an orphan and, since he said he was, I asked him if he would be willing to discuss the matter. He obliged.

During the interview I quickly learned that Lutaaya was a “single orphan,” or someone who had lost one parent. He did not have his mom. I had read about the implications of orphanhood, but hearing about them first hand added an extra, powerful dimension to my understanding. I will never forget one of Lutaaya’s responses.

“Lutaaya, what is the most difficult thing about not having your mom?” I asked.

“The most difficult thing is not having the love of a mother.”

I still cannot forget that moment. After completing pre-interview research, my expectations included mentions of school fees, the lack of basic resources, and a trajectory of limited opportunities. It seems so simple, but “the love of a mother” never occurred to me as a logical response. Sociological discussions of Africa do not normally consist of those topics; they should.

The other most distinctive interview came on my last day at St. Denis. When I first met him in July, Mukaaya Ronald was a seventeen-year-old Senior 1 student, or the equivalent of a high school freshman. One of the oldest in his year, Mukaaya was also a “double orphan,” or someone who had neither parent. He voluntarily spoke with me about how orphanhood impacted his life, and in so doing he changed mine.

Our conversation commenced with a discussion about Mukaaya’s family. He had been living alone since his parents passed away about five years before, struggled to obtain school fees, and did manual labor for an average of about *14 cents a day*. Mukaaya also said his home was inadequate, that medical care, no matter how “necessary,” would be bypassed, and that he simply lacked “too many things.” The conversation was gut wrenching. I fought back tears and tried my best to speak normally. As in the case with Lutaaya, I supposedly “knew” about these predicaments. Applying a face, a friend’s face, to the problem made it real. I was naïve and too comfortable with my life, a life in which I took much for granted. Facing this realization was painful. Nonetheless, Mukaaya indirectly taught me how to face adversity. In him I saw an unfathomable amount of courage, faith, and enthusiasm for the promise of the future.

My interactions with Lutaaya and Mukaaya were only two aspects of an enriching time in east Africa. I formed many relationships, saw the infrastructures of NGOs in action, learned to cope with the profusion of bugs, and gained a greater understanding of the term “affliction.” Yet,

as clearly as anything else, my experiences emphasized how much more I still do not know. My goal is to comprehend and appreciate more. I am excited to do this in the future.