

Tanzania

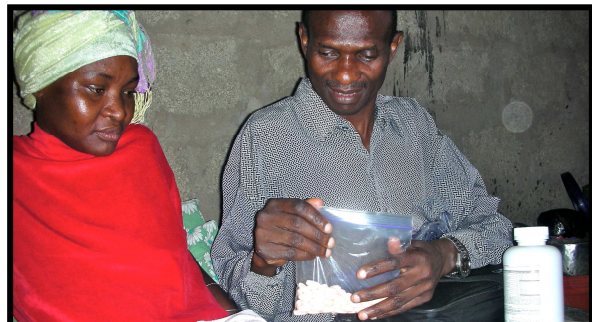
Summer of 2009

by Mariana Vigiola C.

I traveled to Tanzania to volunteer with a healthcare and youth counseling program in Arusha and Dar Es Salaam, through A Broader View Volunteers. For five weeks, I lived with host families at both sites, and then had the opportunity to travel and explore some of the wonders the country has to offer. A Broader View Volunteers (ABV) is an international educational, humanitarian, and peace-building 501(c)(3) non-profit public charity based in Wyncote, PA. Its mission is to “foster cross-cultural understanding and friendship while helping communities in need worldwide – providing them capable, eager international volunteers.” The purpose of my trip was to become immersed in the local culture in order to gain knowledge regarding the health concerns that prevail in East Africa, focusing specifically on HIV/AIDS, and to obtain clinical exposure, while providing assistance and much-needed education in underserved areas with limited access to information.

Arusha: Mt. Meru Hospital & Home-Based Care

Upon arriving in Arusha, I was welcomed by a three-day orientation consisting of visits to several hospitals, clinics and orphanages, as well as city landmarks. Astounded by the wide spectrum of healthcare settings, ranging from small rural clinics to large, sophisticated hospitals, I chose to be placed at Mt. Meru Hospital, a public regional center of approximately 200 beds, in its five main wards: medicine, surgery, obstetrics & gynecology, pediatrics, and tuberculosis. The Casualty department received patients from an extensive geographical area and the HIV clinic served dozens of regular patients.



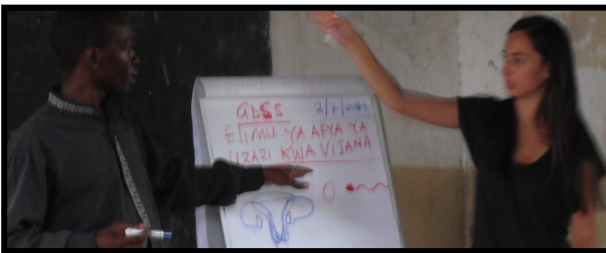
At Mt. Meru, I was introduced to a social worker in charge of paying monthly visits to HIV/AIDS patients in several rural communities bordering the city. Although not healthcare

professionals, these individuals deliver medications and provide basic advice to patients who are unable to or are too sick to frequent clinics. The brief two days spent with him left a lasting impression, allowing me to witness first-hand the extreme extent of poverty and disease that abounds beyond the city limits.

Dar Es Salaam: Youth Counseling & Reproductive Health Education

Although the busy streets of Dar, the unofficial capital city of Tanzania, greeted me with hours of endless traffic jams in overly-crowded, public transit vans, or “dalla-dallas”, this provided me with constant opportunity to meet and appreciate the colorful mix of locals. The strong Islamic culture, much more prominent along the national coastline, is in peaceful balance with its Christian, Hindu, and tribal counterparts, allowing for an unusual melting-pot of vivid folklore.

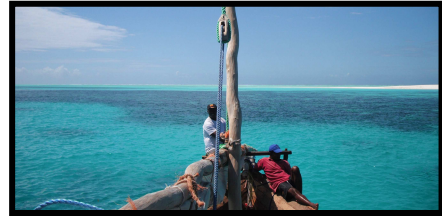
I met with my coordinator, Wandera, who had connections with several youth groups around the city. After discussing topics with some of the participants and their coordinators, we decided that I would teach two-session seminars to three different groups, relating to reproductive health, particularly HIV/AIDS and other STIs, and contraception. I would put together the workshop for the next morning, and he would double as my translator. I was pleasantly surprised to see that, though he was a religious minister with firm Christian ideals, he was also a dedicated advocate for education as a means of prevention of common reproductive health issues.



The workshops had mixed audiences, and were far more interesting, far more involving, and far lengthier than I had expected. They all eventually turned into Q&A sessions, during which I explained an extensive variety of topics, ranging from what antiretrovirals do, to how twin pregnancies come about, to whether adultery causes infertility, and to how to use and where to find contraceptive pills. I was truly shocked at the lack of information, and at the scarcity of resources to access education. Gladly, knowledge taken for granted here, answered life-long questions for thirteen- to sixty-five-year-olds in Dar.

On the Land: Tanzania as a tourist

Mount Kilimanjaro, the Serengeti, Ngorongoro, Zanzibar... some of the most celebrated landmarks of the African continent, and all proudly Tanzanian. Aside from its richly diverse cultural composition, Tanzania offers wild and exotic natural landscapes, as well as myriads of exceptional travel destinations. From the lush surroundings of Lake Victoria, through the wildlife of Serengeti and Masai Mara, the snow peaks of Mt. Kilimanjaro, and the crystal-clear, powdery-sanded Zanzibari coastline, Tanzania attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors every year. It's truly breath-taking.



Disclaimer: In case you decide to go...

A week after arriving in Arusha, I forced myself to re-evaluate my situation. I was lonely, bored after work, in someone else's home, tired of the constant hassling for money by the locals hoping to gain a part of my presumed western fortune and, worst of all, dissatisfied with my volunteer experience at the hospital. It's not easy watching the flawed practice of an underdeveloped healthcare system and having a point of comparison; being deeply bothered by the lack of pain management as part of treatment, and knowing it can't be changed. (Pain is really something else there.) It was medical culture shock, I realized, and my expectations for volunteering exceeded my potential. So I began to see the volunteer work purely as a learning experience, and I soaked it all in, and learned new ways, and became somewhat desensitized to certain others I had trouble accepting initially. *Voluntourism*, if you want to call it. In the end, I gained absolutely amazing clinical exposure, having learned and seen things I'll likely never see again.

In Dar, I had the opportunity to do what I'd been lacking in Arusha. Teaching, I was providing something invaluable, to which they have no access, yet they need desperately. And they made that very clear. Those six short days of workshops were, beyond doubt, the most rewarding of my life. My only regret? Not having spent more time there.

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