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Personal Statement

When you enter a country like Kenya, hoping to offer your service for just a short amount of time, you become very aware of your limitations. You begin to ask yourself questions like, what can I really do in the face of so much need? Do I really have anything to offer? Is this a practice in futility? These are not pessimistic questions. They help us evaluate our service. Certify that what we are offering is what is actually needed, not just what we imagine is needed.

I brought with me to Kenya a combination of technical and human resources. I brought my experience as a high school teacher and my education in conflict resolution. I also brought two lap top computers, two audio recorders, and a variety of other technical devices to support the *Digital Storytelling Project*. As I watched the students learn how to use these devices, as I helped them do interviews, instructed them on how to take a good picture, I knew that I was providing them with concrete skills they would hold on to long after I had left. But more than this, with the help of the Jessica Jennifer Cohen Foundation, I had provided them with a medium for self expression and self advocacy.

So many of the tensions I encountered in Kenya were not tribal but rather generational. There was such a lack of trust between the youth and the elders. Elders felt that the youth did not respect them and could not be trusted. The youth felt that the elders did not have their best interest in mind and did not believe in them. But it was becoming more and more clear that the country could not effectively move forward until these two groups pooled their wisdom and innovation, their perseverance and their vigor. I thought a lot about this while I was in Kenya and upon my return home. What I realized by reflecting on the generosity of JJCF was that it itself is a model for how one generation can effectively support the next.

The last day I spent in Nairobi was at a peace and reconciliation concert. DSP students filmed, did interviews, and took pictures documenting the day. As participants sang, danced, and rapped, one theme was repeated again and again: “Kibera ni moja.” Kibera is one. This event has come to symbolize all I believe about youth in general. If you clear a place for them to stand, give them space to move, honor their unique perspectives, and get out of their way, they will participate in their society in positive and enriching ways. They will outpace their elders in their eagerness and innovation. They will more quickly invite outsiders into the movement. Many of the adults in Kenya, including politicians, look at youth as the problem. But this day in Kibera it was clear that *they* were the community organizers, *they* were the peacebuilders, *they* were the civil society. They were not members of 42 tribes, but of one.

The Jessica Jennifer Cohen foundation allowed me to support a youth movement for peace that is emerging out of the poorest slums of Nairobi. This support was both literal and symbolic. The equipment provided was a medium through which youth in Kenya can be heard. But I am more grateful for the JJCF message: that a young person can quietly work to change the world for the better if they are just given a little support. Thank you for your contribution to this tremendous experience. None of us can know how far the investment will go.