

First JJCF report

It has been two months since I arrived to stay in the rural villages of Matunda, Kenya. My project duration will be six months; thus, I am already a third of the way through my time here! The first month was a whirlwind of adjustment, introductions, and settling into local routine. I have been working with a local NGO, LWAAP—Lugaari Women Against AIDS and Poverty—whose missions focus on assisting those affected by HIV/Aids and poverty through awareness, education, and empowerment. A number of visits to homes of local families with disabled or orphaned dependents and to local schools with special units allowed the volunteers to get a handle on common issues the village and LWAAP encounter.

It was determined through such visits that there was a great need for disability awareness and education. Many families, even those with disabled dependents, were unaware of how to treat or educate such children. There was even a case of a family assuming that their daughter's schizophrenia was an act; instead of taking her for treatment, they sought to beat her back to her senses. Consequently, within our first month in Matunda, we organized a disability awareness seminar to which we invited the parents, guardians, and teachers of children with mental illnesses or developmental conditions. The seminar was an attempt at educating people about the types of mental illnesses and developmental conditions that exist, how important it is to seek medical treatment in certain cases, and also to introduce to them some methods in which to help students better learn in school. Families were encouraged to come to LWAAP later if they were interested but financially incapable of seeking medical treatment for their child.

Many more people attended than was expected, and the seminar has created a stir in the village regarding children with disabilities. Alternative methods of communication with those incapable of verbal speech have found their ways into some homes and schools. Throughout the following months, we hope to follow up with some of the schools and guardians attendant at the seminar for informal visits and further seminars as needed.

I have also started working as a teacher at a local secondary school called Friends Secondary School Binyenya. As a Molecular and Cellular Biology major with experience tutoring and coaching high school level kids, teaching seemed a good way to become more involved in the lives of the local people here, especially the teenagers. I currently teach Biology. However, the following term starting in January, I will be teaching Biology, Chemistry, and Physics. Teaching at the secondary school will allow me the opportunity to talk to some of the teenagers living in the village either informally or more formally through discussion forums about issues such as unplanned pregnancies, the contraction of STIs, HIV/Aids, and unprotected sex, in an attempt to encourage and instill the importance in especially young women to finish one's education and focusing on that future before getting married or having kids.

During the December holidays however, we are focusing on HIV-affected orphaned and vulnerable children in the spirit of World's AIDS Day. A seminar for guardians of orphaned or vulnerable children and other interested individuals will be held regarding how to care for such children physically and psychologically. The focus will be on creating an awareness of the issue of orphans in the community, trying to instill a

feeling of communal responsibility for the care of such children, and education on how to go about with that care. There will also be a Christmas gift-giving celebration that LWAAP is organizing where particularly vulnerable and orphaned children come to receive Christmas gifts in the form of clothes, books, and foodstuffs. We are currently in the planning stages of organizing said events.