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JJCF Personal Statement

From One Journey to Another

My personal statement is a briefing of both the many tasks I achieved and the many challenges I was able to overcome during my six-month fellowship working with the Kakenya Center for Excellence (KCE). KCE is an all Maasai girl's primary boarding school whose mission is to eradicate the harmful cultural practice of female genital cutting and early-marriage in the West Transmara District of South West Kenya. I was dispatched by The Advocacy Project to work as a Peace Fellow for six months, from February 7 to August 16, 2012.

During my first two months in Kenya, I learned more than I had ever imagined was possible in such a short time. I was humbled by my inability to plug into the world's orb of technology whenever the thought occurred. I was enamored by the graciousness of people and the extremely difficult living conditions they embraced to then overcome. And through first hand experiences, the collection of numerous testimonies, and primary research, I began to explore the numerous complexities associated with gender roles within this small African village.

I was both upset, and impressed by the roles of women in typical Maasai culture. Right away, I identified that Maasai women worked from dawn until dusk and were often expected to rear many children on their own. Being a Maasai woman meant waking up at 5am, before the rooster crows, to prepare tea for the entire family; it meant that life was about providing for the family and being subservient to men. I found these cultural expectations of women to be deeply ingrained in Maasai society and taught to girls very early on. Although, I naturally felt upset by this, I also felt a profound respect for Maasai women. Many of the women that I lived with were single mothers, they provided for their children of all ages, and the children of others. They worked in the fields, milked cows, owned small businesses, and helped their children with their schoolwork. Education was extremely valued by the women of Enoosaen.

But then there were also the difficulties of being a young woman in this culture, those that I couldn't relate to and hadn't had any prior exposure before this fellowship. The rite of passage into womanhood, as a Maasai woman, is circumcision or *the cut*. Although deemed illegal in 2010, it is a prevalent cultural custom still widely practiced today. The more time I spent in Kenya, the more I understood how much it would take for this custom to be eradicated. Culture had to change, traditions had to be 'compromised', older generations of women had to understand that the practice was abuse, and young girls had to find the strength to say "no to FGM!"

It was through my activities with the KCE that I helped to support these efforts for social change but by using education as a tool for girl's empowerment. I organized the annual Health and Leadership camp (HL), a weeklong seminar dedicated to empowering

hundreds of girls, ages 11-17. Dozens of workshops on FGC prevention, HIV/AIDs, hygiene, rape prevention, child rights and many more related topics, were conducted. I also organized spelling bees, created academic curricula, and facilitated workshops on the theme of identity and Maasai culture. I taught computer classes to girls who had never used a computer before. Each task had its own unique challenges and quirks but working through them initiated wonderful partnerships with teachers, staff at KCE, with my host family, and with myself.

Of the multiple duties and tasks I pursued during my fellowship, the most rewarding was in my final months, when I was able to use videography to interview members of the KCE community.

These videos were for the purpose of conducting two promotional videos for KCE and its host, the Kakenya's Dream Organization (KDO). Through interviews, I learned the history and customs behind FGC. I also interviewed over twenty-four beneficiaries of the KCE and KDO and learned first hand of the impact of their work.

Lastly, I was asked to document the lives of four girls who were either orphaned or abandoned by their parents. I was fortunate enough to be invited into their homes during a weeklong school vacation so as to break social barriers. Each of the girls lived with their grandmothers who often housed five or more other children from many family members. Two of the girls were extremely shy. Their timidity gave me very little chance to accurately capture their personalities but pushed me to reevaluate my strategies as a documentary filmmaker. I was determined to improve my interviewing techniques.

I interviewed two girls that were rescued by KDO after they were saved from a forced early-marriage. Both of these girls had survived violence in the homes of their former husbands but were now enrolled full-time in school. These interviews emphasized the impact of the work KDO does and what it looks like in real time. Thanks to the support of the children and women within my host family, as well as the energetic vibrancy of the girls at KCE, I felt that I had made rewarding and long lasting relationships. I learned more in those six months than I would have in any textbook. I also learned much about myself and my ability to adapt and overcome the challenges associated with being an obvious outsider.

Towards the end of my fellowship, some of the girls, especially the orphans were very gracious and confided some of their personal life stories to me. I felt very proud of this because overcoming social barriers was one of the biggest challenges in successfully achieving my work. Upon my departure, I grieved leaving behind this second family who had nurtured me. But I also knew that this trip's ending was really just the beginning of both, my personal journey, as well as the journey of those women and girls in Enoosaen who are bravely fighting to end centuries of harmful cultural practices against women.