

Dara's experiences in Nyaka
July 2007

It is nearly impossible to describe all of what I experienced in Africa, but I am going to try.¹ For me, living and teaching at the Nyaka School was at different moments challenging, frustrating, satisfying, and enlightening. There was even a somewhat unexpected element of FUN, and on those days I went to sleep (dressed head to toe to fend off the fleas) feeling happy to get up the next morning and repeat exactly what I had done that day.

I arrived in Kampala on June 25, totally unprepared for the utter chaos of the city, which was teeming with cars and boda-bodas (motorbikes) giving off thick exhaust, as well as throngs of people and the occasional goats. It was an immense culture shock, and before I knew it I was in the neat little home of Sempa, an employee of Nyaka, in the crowded suburbs of the city. To get to his house we drove down one of the worst dirt "roads" I have ever seen, passed a cow lounging in someone's yard, and avoided hitting about a thousand children. At some point we turned left into a banana plantation, and came upon his plot of land. He and his wife accepted me warmly and I played with his three children and gave them each a book.

The next morning I decided to get on the bus to Kambuga, which is the village that the Nyaka School is located in, instead of staying in Kampala another day. Seriously, I think I would have suffocated from the pollution. We drove to the bus station, which was of course frenzied and overwhelming, and found the last bus to Kambuga. I had to sit somewhere in the middle, and I asked the guy I was sitting next to if we could switch so I could sit next to the window. I think during those 8, yes 8, hours I was basically shell-shocked from the experience, not knowing what to expect minute to minute. I didn't drink or eat anything on purpose the night before or in the morning so I wouldn't have to go to the bathroom. During the entire uncomfortable ride I thought to myself, well, it could be worse (I could be nauseas...have diarrhea...malaria etc.). I wrapped a scarf around my head to block out the wind and stared out the window, fascinated, basically until we arrived in Kambuga. It wasn't until later that I learned that all the individual mud and tin structures along the roads are actually shops.

Finally, the bus stopped in Kambuga, and by some miracle my two bags disembarked with me. The Nyaka van was there to pick me up, along with Ruth, one of the teachers who lived at the guesthouse with me, and Faida, her aunt. I took out a box of mango juice and finally drank it so I wouldn't faint. Then we drove up to the school over crazy dirt roads. I came to know that driving in the school van anywhere feels like driving through an earthquake. At the guesthouse they showed me my room, which was simple with a lovely view, and I put my stuff down. The guesthouse is a big, concrete structure, built by the school for, obviously, guests. It is probably the nicest house in the entire district, and it definitely serves its purposes. The house is safe at night, because there are bars on all the windows and heavy locks on all the doors. It has 4 bedrooms and a shower area and a

¹ This is long...feel free to skip around!

living room area. There is running cold water, so showering was a complicated matter. It was so cold that first I would wash my hair under the tap, and then run under the shower head for three seconds, and then turn off the water, soap up, and then turn on the water again for another ten seconds to wash off. Ruth or Matias, another very nice man who worked at the school, would have heated up water in a basin for me to wash, but that always seemed complicated and time consuming. I only asked them to do that when it was too cold and rainy to imagine taking a cold shower. Anyway, on the first day I met Innessa and Jared, the Canadian volunteers who were there in the beginning of my trip. I probably asked them a thousand questions in the week we were there together, and they were very patient and nice. That night we ate dinner, and I was exhausted so I went to bed early.

The next day, which was a Wednesday, I went around to all the classrooms and sat in on some of their lessons and met the teachers. Nyaka is a primary school, so the levels run from P1-P6. (P means primary). Next year they will have P7. The classrooms were very simple, with plain benches, a big chalk blackboard and no electricity. I had a lot of fun just observing. That day I also met the headmaster and introduced myself to the kids when they were all together for assembly in the morning. He made me do that twice for some reason.

Ok, now I understand that this can be an endless narrative, and I won't put everyone through the details of every single day. I will skip to the most interesting and fulfilling part of the trip, which was of course the teaching. That made the experience entirely worth it. The fleas, the month-long stomach problems, the slim diet, and all the other annoying little conditions were all forgotten during the hours I was working with the kids. The best thing was that I taught in many areas. I taught basic reading and writing to some of the kids who needed extra help. I basically adopted a little girl in P3 named Immaculate to teach her the ABC. In the beginning of my trip we went to the funeral of her little sister, and it was incredibly sad. I promised myself that I was going to help her as much as I could, and I think I did. I also taught full English classes for all the upper levels at least a few times, which was tiring, but fun.

The absolute BEST teaching I did was teaching poetry, which was the reason I went to Nyaka in the first place. And, just like here at the university, I facilitated poetry groups. I took two groups of the older kids, and met with them twice a week. We would talk, and they would write, and then read their poems aloud to the group. I taught them how poetry differs from prose, how to write poems, what they can write poems about. Every time we met I would give them topics, like dreams they had, or the moment they were happiest, or death. It was absolutely fascinating, and over the month I collected maybe 100-150 of their poems. I called the two groups my "poetry people," and my P5 group especially became very cohesive. I loved every minute of it. In the end a few were writing on their own, just coming up to me during the day and handing me what they wrote.

As a bonus, it turned out that the teachers themselves also wanted lessons on poetry. So I also had the privilege of teaching the teachers and the headmaster everyday during the kids' games time, which was from about 3:30-4:30. I basically gave a mini, basic poetry

analysis class. I used some poetry that I had brought with me, and when I was lacking I called Roi, and he would read me work over the phone. In the village of Kambuga there was a shop with a photocopy machine that worked on a loud generator, so I would go and photocopy the poems for all the teachers. (I could make photocopies but I couldn't buy toilet paper, go figure). Of course I didn't teach the kids about simile, metaphor, symbol, rhyme scheme, alliteration, etc. It would have been too confusing, and they were much too young, but I introduced the teachers to all of those terms. By our last class they were all much more comfortable reading and talking about the poems I would give them. And their responses to the work were so interesting. In the beginning I was surprised that they all came to the class, but they did, every day, and they all said they gained a lot.

So, even though it was a short four weeks, I feel like I did exactly what I was meant to do at the school. To take this project even further, I am going to try and publish a collection of the kids' work. When I was in Kampala during the last two days, I met with a lovely and very well-known Ugandan poet named Susan Kiguli. It was funny how I met her... basically before I left I did research on Ugandan poetry, and I found her work online. I thought it was quite lovely, but for the life of me I couldn't find any contact information. I did find out however, that she is a lecturer at Makerere University, which is the best university in Uganda, and it is in Kampala. On my second to last day, Sempa took me on a tour of Makerere, and I simply asked where the Department of Literature was, and when we arrived I got Susan's contact info from the secretary. I just called her up that night, told her I was from Tel Aviv University, that I enjoyed her work, that I was doing a special project and can we meet? So we met the next day at her office at Makerere. She was absolutely brilliant and kind, and we talked for a long time, sharing many of the same interests. She thought the poetry I had collected from the kids was wonderful, and she agreed to help me in whatever way she can with the project. It was a real pleasure to meet her.

And of course to make my experience in Kampala even better the second time around, I wasn't afraid to ride on the back of a boda-boda and I could actually buy FOOD! Thus I had no problem traveling through the city, and I was no longer craving certain things, like cheese. A word about the food: basically, given the combination of my pickiness, the availability of food at the school, and the food staples of the country, my diet consisted of rice, boiled pasta, white potatoes, beans, bananas, mango, pineapple and avocado. That was about the extent of it. One problem was that I don't eat meat or eggs; another was that I couldn't drink their powdered milk, because it killed my stomach, and another was that I couldn't eat anything that had been cooked in cooking oil, for the same reason. The staples of the Uganda's diet are Matoke, which is a paste made from unripe bananas, as well as a kind of flour and water mixture that I don't know the name of. Basically, a few things that have little to no nutritional value. I drank a lot of hot water, and every now and then I would buy bread and Coke in Kambuga.

A last word also about the staff of Nyaka. I think particularly because I was there alone, I became quite close with several of the teachers and staff. Matias, the general worker and music guy, basically established himself as my bodyguard, and went far beyond the call of duty, chasing local boys away, not using cooking oil when he prepared the meals,

giving me new bed sheets, and even fixing my flip-flops when they broke. I had lots of great conversations with him and many of the teachers, and I immensely enjoyed going with them to Church every Saturday. They all attend the Seventh-Day Adventist Church down the road from the school, so I would put on a skirt I bought at the market, and sit and listen to their lovely gospel singing. It was in Ruchiga, the local language, but it was very spiritual to listen to all the same. The Church members welcomed me, and twice I even learned a gospel song with the teachers and sang it during the service, in front of everyone! Of course they all stared at me, but afterwards we got a big AMENA! which made it all worth it.

There are certainly a million more experiences I could share, but they are the kind that must unravel themselves in time. Many people said this trip would change my life, and of course it did, in the way that new experiences change you. But the best thing for me about this experience was that it was an amazing and unique *extension* of what I already do and love. Poetry, teaching and travel...who could ask for more?