

Ben DiNovo, '11

MARIGAT, KENYA



(Left) Two male ostriches running. They are truly beautiful creatures! I had never seen one before.

People who know me well will readily agree that my love for traveling is no secret. I suppose that I love to learn about the architecture, music, food, language, belief system—in short, the unique culture of each place that I am able to visit. In June and July of 2010, I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to embrace a truly beautiful culture when I lived in Kenya for a period of about six weeks. Along with my classmate Jessica McCoy, I arrived in the capital city of Nairobi feeling very anxious and unsure of what to expect my life in Africa to be like for the next month and a half. Fortunately, our nerves were quickly calmed as we immediately sensed the genuine kindness of everybody that we encountered.

After staying one night in a B&B, we spent the majority of the next day journeying through the most beautiful landscape that I have ever seen. When we finally arrived in the small town of Marigat, we met the Franciscan Sisters that we would be working with and living with for the entire duration of our time in Kenya. We instantly could tell that these women had a true zest for life and would be such a joy to get to know.



(Left) Beautiful Landscape on the way from Nairobi to Marigat.



(Right) The Marigat Catholic Mission's clinic.

The next day, we took a brief tour of the compound which was comprised of the convent, the church, the home of the parish priest, an elementary school, some houses for a few of the workers, as well as the clinic in which we worked. Overall, the facilities on the compound were quite limited, but everyone was truly appreciative for what she or he had. That was perhaps one of the most striking features about the community—everybody truly focused more on counting their blessings rather than dwelling on the negatives. I quickly encountered some of the most generous people that I have ever met. Jessica and I were even more in awe with their open hearts, especially since they had just met us and really did not have much to give. What was important to them, and to us, was that they genuinely wanted to share, and we were so moved, humbled, and inspired by their benevolence.

It was not long before we met many of the local children. We were able to bring a few soccer balls and a pump for them, so we quickly made a lot of friends! When we weren't playing some pretty intense matches, we spent a lot of time getting to know the children. They loved to hear about our lives in the United States, as well as tell us about their local customs and their dreams. Often times during our get-togethers they would dance for us and try to teach us some traditional songs and prayers that they enjoyed. They were very proficient in their English skills, so Jessica and I actually became the students and learned a lot about the Kiswahili language...and I mean a lot! They were very persistent in correcting our pronunciation and testing our knowledge of everyday vocabulary words. Since they were always so very eager to learn, Jessica and I taught them some geography about the United States, as well as some French and Italian phrases that we each knew. It amazed us how interested they were in everything that we had to say, and we were even more shocked by their excellent memories and diligent work ethics. Talk about studious children...we really had a blast with them!



(Left) Giving the Kids some toys.



(Right) Playing some soccer after work.

Our primary “purpose” was to work in the clinic. On Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays, we routinely performed basic, general care duties right there on the compound. The patients who came to the clinic were mostly pregnant or expecting mothers who would walk from many miles away in ninety-degree



(Above) Me keeping records.

weather with their children strapped to their backs...Jessica and I were very impressed! Included among our tasks was weighing babies, taking blood pressures, administering oral medications, and documenting a lot of medical records; sometimes we were able to do injections, but we recognized that the mothers tended to feel more comfortable with the nurses at the clinic giving the shots to their babies. A few times we were able to help the staff in deciding which medications to order, filling out the order forms, and updating their

record forms. Also, we assisted Sister Veronica in the support and awareness group that she created for people in the area with HIV/AIDS, since unfortunately the immediate community contains high numbers of individuals who have been devastated by its complications.



(Left) A small nearby village.



(Right) The winding, mountain roads.



(Left) The "superman" vehicle.



(Right) A mobile clinic waiting room.

Because there were so many small villages of people who lived high up in remote regions of the surrounding mountains, Wednesdays and Fridays were designated as the days for the "mobile clinic." We would pack all of our gear into

the 4X4 vehicle, which the clinic so providentially possessed, and made the arduous trip through the incredibly clogged roads at the blazing average speed of 7mph! Since these people were unable to receive any other sort of healthcare at all, it was very important that the clinic could provide its services (even if they were only monthly visitations). While working at these make-shift clinics, we were able to help the staff in treating and caring for some bacterial infections, eyesight complications, worm infestations, as well as all of the other routine duties that we did back on the compound. We learned some of the tribal languages and were amused by the assumption that was generally made by the people about us—that we personally knew President Obama!



(Left) Playing with some children that we met out at a mobile clinic station. Many could not afford the medicine for their worms so Sister Veronica was sometimes able to donate it to them.

(Right) A typical classroom. The children love to learn and they often run up and down the mountains to school and back home without shoes just to get an education.



(Left) A fruit market in one of the bigger cities in Kenya. This city, the city of Nakuru, was two hours away from Marigat by van.

(Right) A city street in Nairobi, the capital of Kenya.

Everyday living in Kenya was truly an amazing experience. We loved driving through town and having to wait for goats, cows, camels, and wild dogs to cross the road—the people have a great respect for the many animals that inhabit the same region! Some days, when we did not have a lot of work to do, we were able to go with the Sisters to quickly see the wonderful natural hot springs, as well as the flamingos, ostriches, zebras, monkeys, and antelopes that

resided in the surrounding area. It seemed as if the people were more in touch with all of nature, and we really enjoyed that beautiful part about their culture. While it was a little different to have to be conscious about the mosquitoes, the giant fleshy spiders, and the occasional scorpion, we did our best to make a game out of it and to embrace it as being part of *our* new lifestyle. It honestly did take a few days before we fully became adapted to the diet of goat-meat, cowpea seeds, bitter spinach, and the occasional liver or intestines, but that just made us appreciate the nights when we had potatoes and fish a lot more! The Sisters really did do their best to make us always feel comfortable at dinner and we enjoyed preparing some pizza and pasta dishes for them as well. We always had a lot of fun sharing our meals together and often laughed until we cried.



*(Left) Doing my laundry with soapy water and a rock
(Right) My bed. It was important to always use the net to prevent Malaria.*



(Top Left) Jessica and I with some of our new friends from the Mara region!

(TopMiddle) Jessica and I in our traditional Kenyan garb courtesy of the Sisters!

(Top Right) Starting to make a pizza. We made the Sisters pizza and they loved it!

(Bottom Left) From Left to Right: Me, Jen, Aslyn, Sister Veronica, Sophiha, Ann, Peter, Jessica.

(Bottom Right) "Renewing Africa with Francis of Assisi" We tried to adopt this attitude.

I will never forget the time that I spent living in Marigat, Kenya. I truly believe that it has been one of those large defining moments in my life and it will definitely stick with me forever. In fact, when my time there was coming to a close, I did not know how to feel. Of course I was excited to return home to my family, friends, and lifestyle that I had grown so accustomed to for over twenty years, but I was not quite ready to leave. It was so refreshing to be around people who were genuinely kind and appreciative, and I was hoping that at least some of their compassion was rubbing off on me. Despite the eagerness I felt to eat chicken and meat, drink plenty of water and take hot showers, not have to worry about where I was stepping or insects harming me in my sleep, be able to shop without having to haggle for everything, etc., I had learned to embrace that as a way of *my* life and I enjoyed my time with my new friends and family. During my last two weeks working in the clinic, I felt as if the patients no longer completely saw me as a foreigner who had come to merely observe them, but rather as somebody who has tried to assimilate to their culture, to be understanding and compassionate, and who is actually somewhat knowledgeable and aware of their personal situation. I pray that this is actually true, and that the people I have worked with and cared for while I was in Kenya have received me as such—as somebody to be included in the way that their health care system operates, and just in their lives in general. I knew going into this experience that the people I met would definitely be the ones to teach me and give me a lot, but I honestly had no idea how much that was actually going to be and I just hope that I was able to at least give them something back. I also hope that I will be able to bring my experience with me wherever I go, especially as somebody aspiring to be a physician. I am very fortunate for being able to partake in such an awesome (in the truest sense of the word) experience, and for that I will always be grateful.



(Left) "For it is in giving that we receive"

