

Christopher Smith '10

MARIGAT, KENYA

As the airliner picked up speed and lifted from the tarmac at JFK International, my heart raced. I was leaving my home country for the first time *and for what a place.*



Lake Bogoria, just South of Marigat

My destination was a small town in Kenya's Great Rift Valley, one of the most beautiful places on Earth. This was where we would be spending the next six weeks. While we were there we lived in a compound with Franciscan Nuns, two of whom ran a mobile health clinic for the local people and outlying communities.



The school children of the refugee village near Marigat. Teachers were rarely paid, mostly volunteering, though they themselves were refugees with no other means of income.

The area around Marigat is one of the poorest in the country for two reasons. It has the most unfavorable weather, hot all year with minimal rainfall, which makes it difficult to raise crops or keep livestock. Also, it is the central safe haven for refugees of all circumstances, people with minimal means to survive.



In the clinic at Marigat, giving polio vaccinations to the infants. The smiles of both the children and their mothers were the brightest parts of the day.

During our stay in the convent, we volunteered in the health clinic. Our daily duties included working with expecting and new mothers, many of whom were living with HIV/AIDS. We registered and weighed babies, updated immunization records and even administered oral polio vaccinations as well as vitamin A supplements to newborns and infants.



Registering newborns and updating records in the back seat of the Land Cruiser at an out-station in the mountains to the West.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays we worked out of the main clinic in Marigat but on Wednesdays and Fridays we loaded up the Land Cruiser and traveled to isolated communities where the people had no other available health care. Sometimes the out-stations would be reached by twisting and turning roads surrounded by 20 foot tall cacti while other times they were two hours up and into the high mountains. These monthly visits to each location were the closest thing the people ever got to a doctor's appointment.



Behind the convent with some of our boys. Almost all of their clothing is soccer themed or donations from people. Before we left we gave them t-shirts, hats and even some shoes (they played soccer barefoot with 3-inch spines growing out of every plant!)

Our days didn't end with the last patient at the clinic either! No sooner had we gotten back to our house, then a mob of local boys would appear ready to play soccer. Luckily there was a field in the compound and our daily games ranging from 4 on 4 to 20 on 20 were an amazing way to make friends and have fun! In between goals the boys taught us as much Swahili as we could remember and enjoyed giggling as my poor attempts to repeat it back to them. Beyond the children, the rest of the townspeople were amazing in their welcoming of us. The shopkeepers in town knew us by name and went out of their way to greet us and make sure we had everything we needed. The locals were very nice, asking us what we thought of their beautiful land and telling us to make sure we never forgot how wonderful their homeland is.



Ramy and I with the nuns. From left to right: Ramy, Medrin, Veronica, Maggie, Florence, Lily, Jentrix. The last night we stayed with them they threw us a party with Bar-B-Qued lamb, chicken and other delicious foods. Even to the last they were endlessly generous with all they had.

The sisters were the most welcoming group of people I have ever met. From working with them, eating dinner at their table, playing cards and watching television at night they never ceased to enjoy their lives and the work they did for the community. I cannot express in words how moved I was by the six weeks I spent in Marigat, or how grateful I am to Siena for giving me the opportunity to go. The smile you get in return for weighing a child and trying to speak to the mother in her native language is something everyone deserves to experience. It truly warms the soul.