

Erika Smith, '08
Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania

This past summer I had the opportunity to spend six weeks volunteering in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Dar es Salaam is the largest city and until recently was the capital of Tanzania. As the first Siena/AMC student to spend their summer of service in Tanzania, I was apprehensive about what I would find, but excited for the opportunity to expand the program into another country.



This is Ignious and I in the playroom at the Children's Home. All of the children at the orphanage craved attention and Ignious latched on to me. When I first met Ignious, he liked to play with my glasses and from there, moved on the playing with my hair. By the end of the summer, he just liked to play with my nose!

During my time in Dar es Salaam, I worked at the Mother Teresa's Children's Home, run by the Missionaries of Charity. Upon arriving in Dar I found out that I was not staying with the Sisters but by myself in a local hotel in a neighboring area. While my accommodations were very comfortable, this living situation proved difficult because there was nobody to introduce me to the Tanzanian culture. I was living in the culture but only learning about it through my observations and mistakes.



This is my room at the New Bondeni Hotel. It is located in Magomeni, a neighborhood outside of the Dar es Salaam city center. As you can see, my room was very comfortable and I had a balcony with views of the Indian Ocean. On a practical note, since my room was on the fifth floor, it was free of the mosquitoes the plagues the streets.

A typical day in Dar started at 8am, when a taxi arrived to pick me up and take me to the Children's Home. Since the streets surrounding the Children's Home were not safe, the Sisters did not want me to walk or take the dalla-dalla, the local transportation.



This is the view of Magomeni from my balcony. You can see the city center in the distance. To the right is Morogoro Road, the main road leading west out of Dar es Salaam.

I spent mornings at the Children's Home with sixteen children between the ages of one and two. When I arrived, breakfast – coconut biscuits and warm milk - would just be beginning. After breakfast came bath time and each child was then dressed and ready for the day. This process was conducted assembly-line style and bothered me due to the complete lack of individual attention for each child. Next was play-time. During this time, I was the main attraction for the kids, who were all starved for attention. I quickly came to the conclusion that it is impossible to hold only one Tanzanian toddler of your lap. Just like children in the United States, as soon as the toddlers saw someone getting more attention, they all wanted it, too. While the children did have a few toys, most of play-time was spent running about the room and hitting other children. This was paradoxical. As a punishment for hitting, the workers would hit the children with sticks, and since this is what the children knew, they would just copy it, further getting them in trouble. One of the most heartbreaking things for me during the summer was not that there were not enough toys to go around but that the kids did not know how to play with the toys that they did have. There was simply nobody to teach them that a doll has more play potential than just something to hit somebody with.



This is Yoneida. She was one of the smallest children in the age group and was consequently always getting run over by the bigger kids!



Sister Bhronita and the kids. The Children's Home was staffed by young women, many of whom had grown up there. When the Sisters came to see the children, it was a big event and all the kids would crowd around them.



This is Jenny. Unlike most of the children, she had the ability to simply sit and entertain herself. Shoes were, as you can see, fair game to be used as toys!

When play time was over, it was time for lunch. Lunch everyday consisted of a bowl of what I was told was mashed beans and rice, and juice. Unlike breakfast, the kids did not eat by themselves but were fed. However, even this was not an individualized event, but another assembly-line in which three children were fed by a single worker. The children were not taught to feed themselves, and if they tried, they were told no. After lunch was potty-training time, an aspect of life that completely stupefied me. Each child was placed on a plastic potty and expected to sit there for thirty minutes. How this process resulted in toilet-training continues to amaze and mystify me.



The kids all lined up for their juice.



After they came home from school, the older kids would come and play with the younger ones. The younger ones loved it! To the left is Judy and to the right, Hailey.

Naptime translated into lunchtime for the workers. After lunch, I had the option of returning to the two year olds for more play-time or working with the infants. The infant room was an unusual experience. When they were not in their cribs, the children were placed on large mattresses and given a few toys to play with. During my time working in the orphanage a newborn was brought in straight from the hospital – to hold this child when she was only five days old was provoking. In all likelihood, there would never be someone to love and care for her development and she would grow up simply as another child among many.



This is the infant room. The youngest ones were placed on the bed to the right, the middle ones to the left, and the oldest on the center bed. They learned to walk by holding onto the beds and parading around the room.

My day ended at 4pm, when the taxi returned to pick me up and take me back to my hotel. Tanzania is unique amongst African countries in that its leaders have realized that in order to be able to grow in the modern world, they must simultaneously work to meet the basic needs of citizens and develop the country technologically. The contrast can be striking: in the midst of dirt and garbage arises an internet café, with advertisements for mobile phones plastered to its side. In addition, the Tanzanian government is also concerned with conserving the resources that it does have. For example, the electricity in residential areas is turned off between 7am – 7pm (when most people are at work) and used to power the businesses in the city center, which then go without electricity from 7pm-7am.



From my hotel room, two kids playing ball in the street. In the background, you can see the white booth where you could buy minutes for your mobile phone.

One of the things that struck me most while working at the Children's Home was that these children truly had nothing. The children I worked with on a daily basis had absolutely nothing to call their own. Every night they slept in a different bed, and the clothes that they wore one day would be worn by somebody else the next. They did not have a chair that they could always sit in during meals or a toy that they could call their favorite. This also made me see how foolish our donations and aid can be. Arts and crafts supplies mean nothing when there is nobody to teach you to hold a crayon and old party dresses do not make practical playclothes. And toys with batteries are useless and only cause frustration. While helping and giving aid to developing countries is important, during my time in Tanzania, I learned that it is more important to meet these counties where they are and not where we want them to be.



Dixon, the smallest child of the group. During my time in Tanzania, I watched him grow from being shy and not wanting to play with the other children to being just as active as they were. Here, he has snuck between a worker and the changing table, which was one of his favorite things to do.