

FRIENDS of KUNYA



Save Lives: Help Bring
Clean Water To This
African Village

Mama na Dada Blog

May – June 2007

The following blog was compiled from a series of email updates sent to family and friends during the time my husband and I spent in Kunya, Kenya, working as village volunteers.

We arrived at Mama na Dada (MnD) on the shores of Lake Victoria on May 4th, 2007, and were happy to find a nice hut and friendly people where we were to live for the next seven weeks. The huts are clean and comfortable, lacking running water, but as of the week we left, they have electricity! Jackie, the grounds manager, cooks the meals, and they are nutritious, though monotonous. Bottled water is provided, and washing water is brought in by donkey cart. Dogs, cats, chickens, and calves share the compound and make you feel welcome. The weather is warm, but we went in the rainy season and the evening usually brought a cool breeze and sprinkles if we were lucky.

Mama na Dada is physically and figuratively the center of the little beach community of Kunya. Their goals are to find impediments to girls going to school and women being able to provide for their families. Their community health workers bring in the sick for treatment, visit them each week, and provide mosquito nets if needed. The at-risk children are brought to the nursery school, where they get 2 millet and maize gruel or a grain/vegetable meals each day. There is also an HIV support group, a woman's savings group (like micro credit but different), a demonstration garden, a goat project, a tailoring class, an art class, and the Girl Child group. They fund scholarships each year so that girls can go to high school (families here can't afford the \$300/yr fees). Not all of the kids here even go to primary school. It's free but the \$4 uniform is too much.

I had come expecting to work in women's micro-finance but found the need was much higher in helping with AIDS issues. I decided to work with young girls in AIDS education and personal development. They have a surprising lack of knowledge about what AIDS is and how they might get it. These kids are in THE highest risk group in the world (around Lake Victoria, a third of adults are HIV+, teenagers are 51% of new cases, and girls are an even greater fraction), and they know much less my kids do about it. Many of the girls have sex very young and don't know why that may be a problem. Yet one out of every 3 of them will contract HIV/AIDS and die. We did assemblies telling them the facts, trying to show them that sex at their ages (babies at 10 and 11 - fishermen offering the girls pennies to oblige) is not a good life strategy! There are also cultural traditions that exacerbate the problem. Many local traditions – plowing, planting, etc. – require a sexual prelude. With the many wives, assignations outside of marriage, planting practices, widow

inheritance, and frequent rape (50% of girls report this is their first experience), the opportunities for HIV infection are high. Add to that no understanding of what HIV is or how one would get it, and the problem gets worse. Nothing is taught in the school or at home, yet the girls harbor many misconceptions.

The school asked us (Daniel Rateng', the MnD AIDS expert and terrific presenter, and me) to give classes on HIV/AIDS both at the primary and high schools - one to the girls and one to the boys. I also set up a girls series that we gave each Saturday at MnD on topics the girls were interested in - self-respect, personal hygiene, health, AIDS, etc. The questions they asked are touching. "How do I survive my life? What is HIV? Is it true that goat's milk cures AIDS? Is it safe not to have sex when you are very young - will you still be able to have children if you wait until you are married? How can you survive without a boyfriend? How can we be safe from boys and save our lives? What would happen if we finished school before we got married? If you share a razor with an HIV+ friend, can you get infected? What is self-respect? Am I allowed to say no if a boy wants to be with me? I am an orphan and have no one to help me. Can you help me with my life?" on and on. They seemed pleased with our help and we hope that a few will have a longer life because of the information we gave them.

There were days that could be frustrating - the little things. One day, I was trying to work with the Girl Child Group and help them plan for their futures. The girls are SOOOO shy and timid, it's hard. But every little child in the area was beating on our windows, trying to come in, blowing whistles, and laughing. We had a lot of trouble getting anything done and the mothers were out in the yard braiding each other's hair. Next class I asked one of the mothers, who were not watching these children or making them mind, to come and sit at our door and fend off the kids.

My husband, Dick, choose to work on the Memory Box project and I assisted him. It was a wonderful way to get to know the folks in the rural area and to visit their homes, as well as to provide a service they valued highly. Dick traipsed out through the maize fields, across streams, and through the mud to reach the mud huts of rural folks with AIDS. He then taped an interview with them (he had a translator), asking detailed questions about their childhood, family, schooling, courtship and marriage, favorite recipes or songs, as well as what advice they would have for their families. We typed a translation of this interview in English into our laptop, added the digital photographs we took, and on a later visit to Kisumu printed the result and bound it into a little book. This we placed into metal boxes made for us from beer or Coke advertising signs, along with the tape recordings (in Luo or Swahili). The box seemed to be one of the few possessions these people had - certainly their most valuable one. Such a simple item and it meant so much to them. It left a record of a life that would otherwise have gone unrecorded. Few had ever had a photo taken, and if left unrecorded, their histories would be unknown to the children they leave behind. We thought the process would mainly be of service to the children (many orphaned) but it turns out that many of the persons themselves feel greatly relieved. They are relieved not only that their family histories and lives have been recorded, but also that the process itself validates them as valuable, worth the trouble, and of importance to someone. They seemed to feel that with no physical record left behind, their lives didn't matter, but this record assures them that they will not be forgotten.

The stories we heard in these interviews were fascinating, some quite inspiring and some hard to bear. They certainly justified our desire to come and help the women. The women in Kunya have few rights, and the men can have many wives. We heard primarily of very young marriages (not formally – they just start living together), frequently because it was suggested that the man needed a wife and the woman was available. Sometime in the next few years, the man is expected to send a bride price to the father of the woman—usually one to five cows. If a woman is widowed, she is automatically "inherited" by a brother of her husband or any other male in the family. Her husband's possessions (nothing is hers) are frequently grabbed up by the in-laws, and her new husband does not even have to provide for her. The new husband seems to have sexual privileges but few responsibilities. Women and children are left in poverty. But there were also stories of great love and enduring family closeness, of sacrifice for each other, and joy in the family. And we met many loving and gentle men. But a community's strength is directly correlated to the strength and health of its women and children. And this is the target for all work at MnD.

Most of these people have little money and few possessions, live in mud huts, have AIDS and TB, malaria, or other diseases, may not have enough to eat, and yet they are so grateful for all they do have and for their family and friends. They were positive in outlook and very giving. We westerners have a lot to learn from them. Even in their small mud homes, sometimes with little to eat, some of them seem 'richer' than many of us in our society. Dick and I are the ones who are lucky to have been enriched from our association there. They should come give us seminars on being happy with whatever you have been dealt.

We also worked a little with the children in the nursery school 25 feet from our window. These children all have difficult home lives, many are orphans and half are HIV+. We fed and bathed them every day and washed their clothes on Fridays. They had little or no care or food at their homes and some were left on their own to care for babies from the time they were four years old. This school is taught by Rosemary, a local volunteer, (yes, full time and has done it for years!), and it frees up the young girls to go to school. I only worked there sporadically, when I couldn't work on our other projects.

One example of the difficulty of keeping these little children safe happened while we were there. One little boy (HIV-) bit another (HIV+) on the nose, and it bled profusely. By the time the other volunteer from Australia got to them, the HIV+ child was bleeding into the communal pail of water where the other children were washing their hands (with all their open sores and cuts). She looked into the mouth of the child who had done the biting and, of course, it was bloody. She doesn't know if he had open sores or bleeding gums of his own, which would be an avenue for the other's blood to enter his system. Now he will have to be taken in 3 months for an HIV test. She broke down and cried at lunch. She said that nothing she can do keeps these children safe. I was at the hut of an HIV+ couple by the lake and watched the mom dig a thorn out of the bottom of her foot with a big old safety pin, then use it to clean her daughter's fingernails.

We named the three bats that lived in the peak of our thatched ceiling: Batman, Robin and Jeffery. They flew around us at night, ready to go out the gap at the top of the wall but confused by our kerosene light. We had to turn it way down so they would go out.

Then we heard them return in the night. "Jeffery's home," Dick would say. The local dog, Jimmy, slept under our open window, and a toad kept trying to hop in the door. We shooed him out to just to have him hop into Dick's shoe!

Funny story - When I did the laundry in a bucket outside, the calves that graze around our hut liked to come up and drink the soapy water. They got foamy mouths with the soap, and I had to keep shooing them away. Then, after I had hung up the wash, they came and sucked on the wet clothes! I gave them water, but they preferred the laundry! Then I had to wash the green chew marks off the clothes. Sometimes they pulled the line down!

There are monkeys in the trees down on the lake as well as hippos and crocs. We have only seen the monkeys, though the gardens sometimes bear the damage of hippos in search of a salad.

A trip to town - It took us five hours to make the 50 miles one day. First, at 9 am we walked about two kilometers in the hot sun carrying our bags, trying to find the bicycle taxi boda-bodas that never came. Then I sat in the shade with the bags while Dick walked the rest of the way into the village and came back with two boda-bodas. Crowds of kids kept gathering to stare at the strange mzungu (westerner). One little boy had on a rag of a girl's Barbie nightie, a shredded sweatshirt, and a hole in the back showing his bare backside! Probably 30 adults in rags herding cows down the road, came over to my shady spot and shook my hand. The kids tried their English. Mainly, they know "I am fine." What ever you say, the response is "I am fine."

When Dick came, one of the boda-bodas had passed me by, heading to pick me up in Kunya instead of following Dick to where he had left me. So I took the one remaining and Dick found another later and followed me. We were then at the mud and stick matatu (van) stop and waited over an hour for a 14-passenger van (assemblage of rusted parts, loosely held together with wire!). Twenty people crushed into the van and the conductor hung outside the open door. We couldn't move! Then they stopped and let four more on and they squished in beside me. One took the skin off my toe stepping on it, and the lady leaning on my knee left it wet (don't ask with what, I don't want to know). The stereo blared happy NOISY African music as we lurched down the bumpy road. Then they suddenly stopped, and four men jumped out, kicked off their shoes, and ran like lightning through a cow field to hide behind the hill. They had seen the cops coming and knew they were overloaded. The cops questioned us but with a small bribe paid, they let us go (even though there were still 20 on the 14-passenger van). The men got back in a few hundred yards further down the road. Our heads hit the ceiling, knees wedged too tightly to move; we finally we arrived in Kisumu at 2 pm. You see why we didn't do it more often!!

We had a cholera outbreak while we were there and tried to educate the locals about washing hands and vegetables, not to drink the lake water unless they boil it, and not buying prepared food from the village. We also had a rabid dog from the neighbors who killed a cat in front of the kids at our daycare one week. One child went and picked up the cat! And threw it in the latrine! (That smelled good!) Kids come to school frequently with malaria, as did the teacher one week. We had had all our shots and took our Malarone (for

malaria) every day. Aside from the occasional tummy problem and a cold or two, neither of us got sick at all, and we felt safe. We had bottled water and well-cooked food (and we washed our hands a lot!)

A historic death took place in our compound while we were there. Achieng' Oneko was the father-in-law of the MnD Executive Director, Joyce Oneko. But he was famous all over Kenya and is chronicled in an interview by a former MnD volunteer on this website. He was not only the national figure but a true grandfather to the whole Kunya community. People came for days crying and standing in our driveway. We were near the house when he died and heard the initial wail. Dick wrote the following:

Ramogi Achieng' Oneko

We had the sad honor to see the passing of an era in the history of Kenya, with the death on Saturday, June 9, of Ramogi Achieng' Oneko. He was the last surviving of the six Kenyan freedom fighters imprisoned by the British in the 1950s. He was also the beloved mzee (elderly wise man) of his community. His home was next to where we are staying.

Saturday was to have been a day of celebration, with a harambee (fund raising festival) for the local secondary school, which is named for Mr Oneko. (Imagine being so revered that you have a public school named for you while you are still alive.) Shortly before time for the harambee to begin, we heard screaming and wailing from mzee's house. People dropped what they were doing and ran there, and the screams grew louder. Mzee had suddenly collapsed and died, apparently of a heart attack. He had not been ill, though he had high blood pressure, and some say that he had tired more easily than usual in the last few weeks. He was in his late eighties.

For hours after his death, hundreds of men, women, and children continued to stream to his home, some of them walking for miles to get there. A few old ones could hardly walk, but they seemed determined to get to the house, to express their respect and their grief. Women screamed and wailed. Men shouted chants every minute or so as they walked toward and around the house. Saturday is a school day here, and children came in their uniforms; many of them were crying. The public outpouring of grief was moving to see.

Even late at night, hours after the death, we heard wails and chants from houses all around. We're told that those might continue for days or even weeks, as neighbors lament their loss.

We had met mzee only briefly. Joanruth had had a short conversation with him, during which he thanked her for coming to Kunya and for what we are doing here. Dick had only said hello and shaken hands with him.

He was a man who exuded dignity. He must have been granite-hard inside, but he was also kindly, generous, and gracious. He stood straight and erect, proud in a healthy, legitimate way---a true gentleman.

He had been a member of the Parliament of Kenya, and he had been a cabinet minister in the first government after independence. He might have been more truly a freedom

fighter than the others, for he continued his fight even after independence. He consistently pushed for greater democracy and for broader distribution of government powers. Even the government of Kenya detained him for several years in the 1970s for his opposition to the increasingly repressive regime of Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya and once mzee's ally and fellow freedom fighter. Mzee is probably the only person ever held by both the colonial British and independent Kenyan governments for advocating freedom.

Mzee differed from other politicians in another important way. Some African politicians have become enormously wealthy; for example, Daniel arap Moi, the second president of Kenya, is reputed to be the wealthiest person in Africa. Mzee, however, lived simply on his ancestral land, in a house without electricity or running water. He drove a 20-year-old Subaru station wagon. He was plainly an uncorrupted man.

We hardly knew mzee, and yet we miss him. We wish we had been able to talk with him at greater length, to learn more of his story firsthand. We are, however, thankful that we could be in his presence, if only briefly, for then our own eyes saw true greatness.

The funeral of Mzee Oneko was a unique experience. It began the day before with a procession of the body the 50 miles from Kisumu to his home here. It was joined en route by school children, mourning adults, and cattle. His eldest son (an international management consultant) greeted the casket with a spear and shield and danced rhythmically for a long time to the accompaniment of drums and horns. Then the traditional admitting of the cattle into the dead man's home was done, to chase evil spirits from the home. This family is one of London-based bankers, a wife who is a lawyer, and all are inspirational people. But the traditions of the community are extremely important, and the community would have expected no less.

The government, inspired by a short deadline set by the family, showed an unusual degree of alacrity in staging the family compound for an official state event. In the day or two before, roads were regraded, electricity installed, signs and tents erected, mobile clinics, toilets, etc. brought in, and soldiers began patrolling the compound. In the midst of this, the family and community were digging a grave, cutting brush, cooking over fires outside for the hundred-odd relatives, and pitching tents for them to sleep in.

The burial day was filled with activity, and our normally silent sky burst forth with helicopters and reporters. We sat with the large family as hundreds of people began to arrive along with various tribal chiefs, Anglican bishops, cabinet ministers, and women in wonderfully colorful outfits. Then past Kenyan President Daniel arap Moi arrived, followed by current President Mwai Kibaki. The outdoor service began with choirs and invocations, but was interrupted by the unexpected, screeching arrival of a leading candidate for next year's presidential election, Raila Odinga. Three new SUVs dug tracks in the lawn, escorted by a hundred or more shouting, cheering young men. The police whistles and guards notwithstanding, the entourage in business suits leapt out of their cars right in front of the casket and started shaking hands and clearing seats in the standing-room-only family section for Odinga. He had chosen a tribal chieftain's outfit for the day, complete with the zebra tail fly switch. His late and dramatic arrival was apparently intended to snub the President and show that he was the true Strong Man. Many hundreds in the 3,000-person

crowd seemed truly wild with joy at his show of strength. The President sat impassively and tolerated the disruption. The family decided they had to accede to Raila's demand to speak, even though not on the program, lest the paid agitators in the crowd start throwing rocks. Five hours later, the long service was finished, the great man buried, and the helicopters gone. Peace returned to the community of scattered mud huts, grazing cattle, and singing birds. I'm not sure Mzee would have enjoyed the commotion of the weekend event, but I know he is happy to be at one with the traditional flow of the community.

We were goat owners for two days our last week. We bought one in order to host a thank-you dinner. Guess who was dinner? We couldn't watch while the man we hired to dispatch him worked. (His price was the head, a leg, and the innards.) Well, there is no grocery store here in the bush. You either grow it or kill it. Oh well, the dinner was appreciated by all. They don't get meat that often. We left the next morning with a sense that we were leaving a home. We miss everyone already and know we will go back. A part of our hearts is still in Kunya.

Joanruth Baumann
Friday Harbor, Washington