

The Teachings of Tanzania

One student leader utilizes her skills overseas

By Minal Ahson

Because of her major in microbiology and activism in HIV/AIDS awareness, **University of Miami** senior Minal Ahson knows the ins and outs of this fatal disease. She could tell you hoards of statistics, name a plethora of case studies, or list off the various books and journals on the topic. But, so could anyone with access to a biology book or the Internet.

Yet, how many of those people could describe an AIDS-ridden African village in vivid detail? How many could tell you how it feels to hold an HIV-positive infant in your arms? How many could verbalize the unspoken shame that infected Africans harbor during their brief lives?

Well, Ahson learned all of this and more during her summer in Tanzania. She realized that being a student leader goes far beyond learning about a cause. She realized that becoming a true student leader means immersing yourself in that cause and living it on a daily basis. So, read on to discover how Ahson got to Africa, what she did there, and what else she learned during this once-in-a-lifetime trip.

Although I've had many great experiences at UM and in other parts of the United States, something drove me to expand my horizons. Call it motivation, ambition, or just an inner thirst. But I really wanted to see what I was studying and reading about. That's why after my sophomore year at UM, I decided to volunteer in and research the HIV/AIDS situation in Tanzania, East Africa.

My trip was organized through Cross Cultural Solutions, an international grassroots volunteer placement organization. At the airport, members of CCS greeted me and some of the other volunteers—mostly students from around the country. During the ride to our house, I couldn't help but notice how cool the air was and how dark the town was. I could hardly see anything out of the windows because there were no streetlights.

We reached the house, where a traditional Tanzanian meal awaited us even though it was almost midnight! We ate a dish known as "ugali," which is made from corn or flour and is often served with

vegetables, fish stew, or meat. As this late-night meal proved, hospitality is extremely important in the Tanzanian culture. Later, as we were escorted to our rooms, I noticed that it was already very quiet. I was told that most village people rise and sleep with the sun, due to the limited amount of electricity.

We went through orientation the second day, which allowed us to learn about cultural differences and how to conduct ourselves. Little things, such as eye contact and the concept of time, were very different. I was given my placement at the Nkoaranga Secondary School and Orphanage. Soon, I found out that flights

the hospital. We pulled up in front of the nursery school, and about 50 children ran up to the van to greet us, as if we were celebrities! It was amazing how happy they were to see us. They all would yell, "Good morning!" I later learned they picked up the greeting from radio programs and would use it at any time of day.

I met the headmistress of the secondary school, who introduced me to the rest of the teachers. They were so excited to have me there. It was amazing how much respect they gave me. They told me I could teach any subject I wanted. I decided that I wasn't fluent enough in Swahili to teach biology, so I settled on English and math.



Catching Some Z's: A pair of lions doze in a field of wildflowers at the bottom of Ngorongoro crater in Tanzania.

from the U.S. to the region were being cancelled because of security risks. Mama Simba, the country director of CCS, instructed us to give her copies of our passports, just in case. It was a little intimidating to be amid the anti-Americanism that I had only heard and read about. But, I never experienced any racism first-hand during my trip. On the contrary, people were surprised to learn that I'm American, due to my Arabic features. In the predominantly Muslim country, people were happy to hear me say the Islamic greeting of "Peace."

My first day of volunteering was something I'll never forget. My placement was in a compound that contained the orphanage; the secondary, primary, and nursery schools; the vocational school; and

The condition of the children at the orphanage was extremely sad—ragged clothes, no shoes, and diapers that were changed only once or twice a day. Many of the children had diaper rash, and a few others had rickets and other similar developmental problems from their nutrition-lacking diets of rice and beans or noodles and porridge. The children are adorable, but the extremely sweet women that run the orphanage are so loaded down with their everyday chores that they are unable to give the children the attention they crave. Although there was a language barrier, the kids loved to sit in our laps, dance with us, and wear our shoes around. Every day I would leave the orphanage with my hair all messed up because they had never seen

hair like mine and wanted to play with it.

Observing the HIV/AIDS situation in the town of Tengeru was interesting. Everything is very hush-hush. Two nurses from a district hospital visited us and told us about the situation in the area. They didn't have very good statistics, but they were able to tell us that about one in four people had HIV/AIDS in the region. They also estimated about a 50 percent unreported rate—meaning about half the people living in that area could possibly be living with HIV/AIDS and not even know it.

There's a huge stigma associated with HIV in the region. In Tanzania, it has been referred to as "Titanic," "accident," and "kaukwa," which means "stumbling" in Swahili. It's considered shameful to die of AIDS. Even at the orphanage I went to, no one was really sure if the children had HIV/AIDS. Even if it were known, there isn't much that can be done for them, since antiretroviral medications are very expensive there.

As part of the culture, relatives take care of ill family members, so just being a caretaker often may infect them. It was extremely sad to talk to the locals. Everyone knew someone who had died or was dying of AIDS. While I was there, I was able to visit a woman who lived nearby. She had been bedridden for two years and only recently felt well enough to get up. Although I couldn't communicate with her because of the language barrier, I held her hand.

I also visited a hospital where I saw the lack of resources and technology. As I stepped into the dimly lit room, the patient lying on the bed turned his head slightly to acknowledge my presence. The doctor examined the patient's eyes. It was noted that the patient's right pupil was dilated—the same side of the head that the patient had fallen on three weeks earlier. Within minutes, the doctor was able to piece together the patient's history and outward biological signs to determine that he was suffering from bleeding of the brain. CAT scans are a luxury for hospitals there, so doctors must be adept at reading and understanding a patient's every signal. A simple procedure could have easily taken care of a brain bleed in the U.S., but in Africa, where resources are few and money is



Love Is Blind: Ahson holds Zuwadi, a child from the orphanage. Although the girl can hardly see, she got comfort by feeling Ahson's face and hair.

even scarcer, the problem could have led to death. I asked him what normally happened to patients who had the same condition, and he replied, "There's not enough money for their children to eat at home, so there's little chance for them to have the resources they need to be treated properly. So they normally die."

Soon, the students at the school had their last few classes with me before their exams began. One custom that I never got used to was their rising and greeting me with "Good morning, ma'am!" whenever I walked into the room. They really respect their teachers and show even more respect to a short-term teacher like me. I often thought about how different the respect level in America is, where substitute teachers are often played pranks on and disrespected. The students were eager to have conversations with me to improve their English and wanted me to teach them slang. The teacher before me taught them "Peace out," so they often said that to me before I would leave. They also taught me Swahili slang, like "bomba sana," which means cool clothes.

Back at the orphanage, I held Abdullah, a 3-pound, 7-day-old newborn,

developmental disorder, and we were unsure whether it was autism or cerebral palsy. She couldn't see very well and often spent time lying on the ground face-down or banging her head against a wall. She liked me, so she would sit in my lap and feel my face and hair. She would often scratch, so the other children didn't like to play with her. Her story broke my heart. She had a twin, who didn't have any developmental problems and was taken in by another orphanage. But they wouldn't take Zuwadi.

Whatever I put in during my trip, I got back a millionfold. I can't even explain how fortunate and grateful I am to have encountered the people that I did. Traveling across the world to learn about another country and culture definitely enhanced my college experience in a way that I never thought possible. Most importantly, I learned to communicate across cultural and lingual barriers. When working with people from varied backgrounds, this communication helps me to better appreciate the similarities and differences among us.

After learning so much from this amazing country, leaving was such a difficult thing to do. As I said goodbye to my Tanzanian friends, I told Mama Simba of my desire to become a doctor and to advocate for improved resources and health-care rights. All she said was "Karibu tena," which means "welcome again." I certainly hope so.

Minal Ahson is a senior at the University of Miami, with a double major in microbiology and religious studies. She's involved in more than a dozen activities on campus including the President's 100, the American Medical Students Association, Omicron Delta Kappa, and The Miami Hurricane student newspaper. During her sophomore year, she founded VISIONS, an HIV/AIDS awareness and education group. She was named one of Florida Leader's 2004 Student of the Year finalists because of her accomplishments. Contact Ahson at mahson@miami.edu.

Hungry for Help: Children at the orphanage eat nutrition-lacking meals like beans and rice, or porridge and noodles.

