

## INTRODUCTION

When I first received an invitation to take part in an immersion experience in Africa I never thought it would result in the creation of an art program for AIDS orphans in the Kibera Slum of Nairobi. Even more than chronicling the journey of creating and delivering an art program, this story is about the incredible power of reciprocity and engagement.

Who knew that my life-long love of art and my art practice and educational background would end up serving a set of the poorest young people in Kenya's largest slum? If I never believed that providence existed before, I do now. As I write this, I find myself as shocked (and delighted!) by the events that have transpired as I was when I was first asked to participate. I want to share the story that got me to this place, this moment.

In my senior year of high school, while composing a senior thesis on apartheid, my mind suddenly, and for the first time, shifted its perspective from local to global. It dawned on me that there are things happening in the world of which I am totally unaware. As I wrote this paper and really began to comprehend this issue of apartheid, a seed of hope was planted that one day I would do relief work that would result in making a difference in what I saw as a challenging, flawed and horrible existence for so many. I thought that this would be work I would pursue in my retirement. My naïve, 18-year old self did not in any way know what it would look like to do relief work in Africa. We've all seen Sally Struthers urging us to give money to the malnourished children in Africa, but I really had no idea what that meant. I went on to college, started my life and never put more thought into it.

Fast forward nearly 20 years to 2006: Now a senior administrator at Georgetown University, I was asked by Phil Boroughs, SJ and Kathleen Maas Weigert, Ph.D. to take part in a Kenya Immersion Program sponsored by their respective divisions within, and with the support of, the University. I had to stop and ask myself "how did they know that I would like to work in Africa?" It was unbelievable. I had to consider that my recent appointment at Georgetown may have been in even greater alignment with my future goals than I could imagine. I excitedly accepted their invitation and started to gear up for a trip to Kenya that would change my life forever.

Arriving in Nairobi in June of 2007 for a two-week sojourn through the good and bad of Kenya really changed my lens. I met some of the most beautiful, loving and smart people that I could have imagined. They were the people we met in the slums. The first day after our arrival we visited St. Joseph the Worker Parish in the Kengami slum. I mention this specifically because it was the first defining moment relating to why I had been asked to come on this trip. As we were returning to the vans after walking through the parish and its surrounding community in Kengami, a few of us veered off to the left when everyone else was walking to the right. I was distracted by a beautiful toddler in a green sweater who looked at me with a beautiful, hopeful, tired and worn out all-in-one expression. At that moment I realized, if there is only one reason for me to be on this trip to Kenya, it would be to somehow help these beautiful children. I was overwhelmed by the emotion I felt as I looked at this child. Even at this point, I still didn't really

comprehend what this all meant to me. Against the guidance we had been given, I pulled out my camera and took pictures of this beautiful toddler, and then I went and rejoined the group.

Throughout that trip we experienced many harsh realities. We saw the place where homeless young boys who had been sniffing glue to alleviate their hunger and calm their minds were given refuge; we saw anguished refugees without identity, community or sense of belonging; the Nyumbani orphanage (the first orphanage for children with AIDS); and we saw the Kibera Slum.

You can imagine that this was an overwhelming experience. Yet the recurring theme was one of hope—there were so many individuals engaged in making a difference. When we first entered Kibera, I realized that I had never seen anything like this. The abject poverty, squalor, children walking barefoot through raw sewage, and smells overwhelmed me. Awkwardly, what struck me most was the hope and beauty that I saw in these Kenyans. As we moved through this community, the thought that these people were displays on a tour made me nauseous; as we moved through Kibera, I had to change that immediately for myself. I started to engage each person by saying *hello* and *how are you*. The response was lovely. In a sing song voice, you would hear them say *Hello, how are you, I am fine*. Now I felt better. We were in their territory and I felt we should engage and let them know that we were there to understand their issues. That was not accomplished in reality, only in my mind as I continued to engage each and every person we met. By the time we arrived at the St. Aloysius of Gonzaga Secondary School, I was mentally spent.

When I walked into the school with its corrugated roof and dirt floors and saw these young people so intensely engaged in learning and so hungry for it, I was shocked. They wanted to be there. They wanted their education and they knew that education was the gateway to possibility. In reviewing their curriculum, I could not find any indication that they created visual arts. When I inquired about it, I was told that the government sets the curriculum and art is not part of it. I was also told that if I wanted to create a program, they would be open to it. Little did I know that within the same hour that I had that conversation so did Margaret. During our group debrief that evening, Margaret and I discovered that we both had made the same inquiry, both heard the same response and both had art backgrounds. We regarded each other with confusion and excitement as we declared that we believed we could create a meaningful program that we could deliver in a truncated amount of time. We just didn't know how.

After a year of planning and fundraising, we delivered the first Art Immersion program to the smart, beautiful and important students of St. Al's in August 2008 and this is where this story begins. This book was created from the daily blog entries of the three years we delivered this program to date. I wrote, Margaret reviewed and, now, we are delighted to share it with you.

There are two things that I hope you will take away from this story: You never know what will make a difference in someone's life; and, one person at a time can absolutely make a difference. Throughout our first trip to Kenya, these were the themes that kept resurfacing as the many

people we encountered made a difference in the lives of so many. An important life lesson I learned on that trip was that you never know how you might make a difference in someone's life, and what that might look like, until you show up and figure it out. I never imagined that I would be delivering art education to AIDS orphans in the Kibera slum. On that same point, I never thought I would be publishing a book about the program.

As I sit here writing this introduction, Margaret and I just returned from our third year of delivering this art immersion program in Nairobi. What an amazing experience! Never underestimate your ability to make a difference. Because, chances are, you probably already have made a difference in someone's life, one person at a time, and you may not even know it.

With gratitude,

Charles

*July 25, 2010*