

# I Found Awe in East Africa

By Tajel Mehta '10

Tajel recently shared her thoughts about a service trip to East Africa with Karen Beman, Director of Alumni Affairs. Tajel is the daughter of Dr. Nawzer Mehta and School Nurse Clare Mehta and a 2014 graduate of the University of San Diego.

I was tired of textbooks. I understand that this is going to be published in a school magazine so let me explain. I loved learning, still do. No joke, I will be one of those retired ladies taking “Introduction to Middle Eastern History” at the local community college fifty-odd years down the road. But half-way through my last semester at the University of San Diego I realized that there I was, poised to receive my B.A. in international relations, and all I really knew about the world came from the ridiculously overpriced books I ordered at the beginning of every semester and the musty supplementary readings I fished out of the dimly lit stacks at the library. An overwhelming consciousness that I had spent the last eighteen consecutive years in a classroom hit me like a ton of bricks. I had been sitting at desks, listening to teachers who cared about my success, in beautiful, warm private schools nearly my entire life. I added up how much money spent so far on my academic career, and after making a mental note to be extra-syrupy sweet with my “I love you guys” on my next Skype date with the parents, I decided two things:

1. After eighteen years at a desk, I was restless and needed to stretch my legs, and
2. I really needed to do something for someone else.

College can be a selfish time, and in a way, it should be. You need to take care of you and figure out who that is in a new context. Aside from schoolwork, your only real responsibility is yourself. I guess I was ready for that to change. I wanted to apply what I had been studying for the past four years to the real world, and I wanted to collaboratively assist people in the process. It was a bit ambitious and definitely naïve, but spoiler alert: I did exactly that. It was the best month of my life.

On August 1, after months of vaccinations, an FBI background check, a visa application, stacks of paperwork, fundraising, and treating all of my clothes with mosquito repellent, I sat by my gate at Sea-Tac with several boarding passes stowed in my passport. All I knew of East Africa was the stories my dad told me of Nairobi, where he was born and raised. To me, it was magic. But it was another world. It was going to be a long journey to Tanzania, and I had never in my life been so unsure of what was going to happen. My self-doubt was amplified ten-fold by my seatmate on the flight from Dulles to Addis Ababa, a beautiful Ethiopian woman with a child resting upon her abdomen. I was smiling at her daughter, who had inquisitive light brown eyes and, I thought, incredible fortitude for a two-year-old on a crowded, turbulent plane, when she asked me where I was headed. I told her my final stop, and she looked at me in mock-horror. “My girl, you are going to Dar es Salaam?” I smiled at my ability to elicit such a response and at how much I enjoyed the

sound of her words. And as she implored me to come to Addis my heart began to pick up pace; it increased exponentially the closer I got to Dar.

As my final flight began its descent into the city I would call home for the next month, my bloodshot, puffy eyes widened. The entire airplane window was filled with a staggering view of a jungle of corrugated iron. It was nothing like what I had drummed up in my mind. It wasn't beautiful. Not at all, in fact, it was ugly. How was I supposed to reconcile my original interpretation of East Africa with the reality that I now faced? This was what I asked myself in the car, as I looked up at ads in Swahili on the side of the road that I understood to be for Coca-Cola and mobile phone networks (because some things are universal). I got my answer almost immediately. To my left, to my right, crossing the road, with buckets on their heads and children on their hips, the women wore the most brilliant colors I had ever seen. If a woman in the States wore these colors, they would not look the same. Without the dreary, ubiquitous gray of the surrounding city, they would not shine so brightly. I've never seen such colors. When people say that a city is beautiful, they usually mean the lovely view, the organized infrastructure, and the architecturally pleasing skyline. I found no such beauty in Dar. Instead, I found it in the people, in the relationships I forged, in the stories I heard, in the discussions I had.

I lived in a house with Tanzanians and other volunteers from around the world. I was the only American and took my fair share of chaff for this (all in good fun though). I met citizens of Denmark, Britain, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Finland, and Canada and got on with them all very well as we were all there for the same reason after all. I soon discovered I was the only volunteer working at the hospital; the rest went off to orphanages in the morning to teach the children English.

My day began with coffee and toast, which I slathered with peanut butter (my prized possession, stowed in my suitcase). There was no end of teasing over the peanut butter. Apparently, Americans are known for our love of the stuff, a stereotype I proudly reinforced with gusto at the table, through sticky, unintelligible mouthfuls. I then bartered with a *bajaji* or *piki-piki* driver for a decent fare to Mweni Hospital. A *bajaji* is like a motorized rickshaw and a *piki-piki* is a motorcycle. The *piki-piki* drivers drove way too fast on treacherous dirt paths, without helmets and even before I saw the aftermath of such means of transportation at the hospital, I decided that I would rather grit my teeth and pay the extra for a *bajaji* then risk the very real possibility of brain damage on a *piki-piki*. Upon arriving at the hospital, I would find Dr. Baracka for grand rounds, observe in theater 1, or work at the HIV clinic. All three of these options were eye-opening.

I saw things I will remember for the rest of my life. I sat with twins after a Caesarean section and soothed them as they were given their vitamin K injections and silver nitrate drops in the eyes. I held a woman's hand and breathed with her as her post-op infection was reopened and cleaned. I felt like fainting as she lay there writhing in

pain and thought about my intolerance for a mere paper cut. I was told over and over when I asked about their lack of anesthesia, their lack of EKG machines, their disregard for proper sterilization, “This is Africa; we do not have the resources.” At the HIV clinic, I learned all of the combinations for the antiretroviral drugs and filled prescriptions for the patients who would walk many kilometers in order to take care of themselves properly.

I saw all of this and more, but the most intense experience I had happened on my first day at the hospital. My participation relied solely on my initiative. On the first day, I marched up to the nurses’ station and asked how I could be of assistance. Initially, the nurses would whisper in Swahili about me and wouldn’t include me in their conversations. So in order to get in their good graces, I decided to focus on the head nurse. If I could get her to like me, the rest would surely follow. So I would ask her intelligent questions about the patients while the doctor examined them. For example, “Sister, he looks as though he has a distended bowel; what is the cause?” She gladly explained that he had BPH, benign prostatic hyperplasia. And on it would go, through our rounds, until finally the other nurses began to anticipate my questions and kindly walked me through the diagnosis and treatment in English. I was feeling quite triumphant at my success with the staff when my eyes fell on our last patient of the day. His bed was in the corner of the men’s ward, which explained why I had yet to see him. Though, if Dr. Baracka hadn’t stopped by his bedside, I might have believed the bed empty. The usual garrulous buzz of the nurses died away, and the smile fell from my face as I listened to the hushed voice of the doctor. Though I didn’t know much Swahili, it being my first week in Tanzania; I didn’t need language to understand what was happening. Before my eyes, lay a man dying of AIDS whom I later found out was my age. His ebony skin was pale and pulled taut against his frame, which I remember thinking made him look as though he was gradually fading into the white tiled wall. Dr. Baracka later explained to me that he had been sharing his antiretroviral drugs with his sister because they are so expensive and now he was going to die because they don’t work unless you take the full dose daily. The look of malaise in his eyes, the cracked lips, and the skin lesions across his face stay with me, and I expect they always will.

I felt more like myself than I ever had before. I was stripped down to my most genuine me. I couldn’t hide behind make-up, nice clothes, or pop culture references. I was me in my most unadulterated sense. All that was left was the human experience in its most raw state, and I found I truly had something to offer. It feels very different to come back to the States and immediately begin my job hunt. I went from feeling so useful to now, basically begging someone to hire me so that I can attempt to be of value to a business. Not to sound jaded, but it is a bit sad. It’s as if I had a purpose, and now I am looking for something that I know ultimately won’t be nearly as fulfilling (I suppose I

shouldn’t put that on the cover letters).

But on a more upbeat note, I learned that I am good at teaching. Or not so much teaching, but collaborating. For instance, I would lead discussions with my adult English class that would then turn into heated debates. I asked them to talk about topics that made them uncomfortable at times, like homosexuality (a giant taboo in that part of the world). I would also go to local schools and give HIV awareness seminars/sex education classes. It was all very hands-on which I’ve decided I really enjoy. So, this certainly won’t be my last trip to Africa. Educating the public, encouraging discussion, and thus erasing stigmas, these are important undertakings. So, as much as I wish to go into global health policy, I need to make sure that I don’t stray too far from the personal act of teaching.

This part was the most joyful of my time in Dar. At three in the afternoon, I would go down to a classroom on the grounds and teach

an adult English class. I happened into the position entirely on accident. One evening I was eating my dinner, some rice and bean dish most likely, when I heard one of the volunteers was leaving and her adult English class was going to be left in a lurch if someone didn’t pick it up. So I ended up taking over for her, not knowing what to expect. After I got back from the hospital, I would get my chalk and books and teach for three to four hours. I met the most amazing people in this class. Among them I had two young Masai, a man who begged me to teach him Spanish (which I did), a proud young man from a tribe in the south who challenged all of my teachings and who I came to adore, and an incredibly

gifted woman (the only woman in the class) who I encouraged to go into politics one day. They were a bunch of characters. I would answer their questions about odd words and phrases and in exchange they would tell me stories about growing up in Africa. I’d give them writing assignments, and they would ask for more. It surprised me, this thirst for knowledge. I love to read and enjoyed certain research in college, but this was something entirely different. They were passionate. So I began to ask them questions like, “If you had a seat in parliament, what would you do?” And, “What kind of tribal politics have permeated Tanzanian government, are they antiquated or important?” I asked them questions about unemployment, gender politics, and military policy. They went above and beyond answering my questions. We talked for hours. It was awesome. And I mean that in the most accurate sense of the word. I was in awe.

I intend to get my masters in global health and I know that I have to keep traveling. I want to have a job that takes me all over the world and not just the glamorous places. I want to keep meeting people who awe me. When I am that old retired lady, taking “Introduction to Middle Eastern History,” I want to have been to the pyramids, I want to know the smell of the spiced olives in Tel Aviv and the falafel in Beirut, and I want to know the colors of the clothes in Istanbul.



Tajel with her adult English class in Tanzania