

A Community Approach to the Fight Against AIDS

By Melanie Williams

After searching the Internet for overseas internships, I chose Global Service Corps' International Health program in Tanzania, because of my interest in public health and AIDS research. I had volunteered in two AIDS facilities in the U.S. and witnessed the effects of HIV.

Tanzania is one of several countries lacking a unified plan against HIV, and myths and misinformation are widespread. Arusha, the area that GSC serves, has a shocking 14 percent reported rate of infection because of poverty, lack of education, and poor access to healthcare.

As my departure drew closer, I gathered information on Tanzania and stocked up on materials to prepare me for any ailment or situation I might face. I also packed suitcases full of medicine and related items from funds I had received for the internship before leaving the U.S.

During the first half of the program we taught AIDS awareness and prevention at HIV/AIDS summer day camps for teenagers. Seeing how much the youths learned and how excited they were about sharing this new knowledge with their family members and other students was one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. To think that the information and skills we armed these students with could potentially save their lives or the lives of others was incredibly powerful.

Prevention is the most effective tool in the fight against HIV, but what about the dying and the suffering of those already infected? More than two million people are expected to die from AIDS this year, and most of them are malnourished, under-medicated, and in unremitting pain.

The second part of my internship was completed at an NGO established to offer services to terminally ill patients. Because of the rise in AIDS cases in Tanzania, hospital beds are filled with two or three people at one time. Hospitals can only deal with this overload by discharging the terminally ill patients to be cared for by their relatives at home. However, because of the stigma of HIV, many families will not accept these patients. Many are left to fend for themselves. This means they are left alone to die.

It was quickly evident that many of the patients were unable to take the medications because they lacked food. In Tanzania, most people who die of AIDS actually die of starvation.

Seeing the effects of inadequate nutrition on patients and how this compromised our ability to treat them, I realized I had to do something. If our mission was to improve quality of life and maintain a stable level of health, then it was necessary to provide a regular supply of food.

I began by trying to fundraise in Tanzania, but this was difficult because most of the educated or skilled residents leave Tanzania as soon as they have enough money to do so. Those left are very poor and have no money to help others. However, I found many people eager to donate whatever they could, such as their time or vehicles.

One company offered to donate over-produced food once a week if we provided transportation. I learned the importance of having good walking shoes, and my backpack became precious to me. Many could not believe their eyes when a *mazungu* came to their house carrying sacks of food. Once neighbors realized that a *mazungu* was willing to come all this way to help infected members of their society, they too became involved in our efforts to improve the patients' quality of life.

I completely underestimated the effect of adequate nutrition. Not only did my patients regain hope; many, with a strengthened immune system, were also able to take back their lives, and get out of bed and do something.

Tips for Volunteers

- Do not fall into the trap of thinking that you will not be able to get basic supplies once you are abroad. For example, do not go out and buy some high-tech water bottle with a fancy filter; boiled water is perfectly safe and readily available.
- Even if you are tolerant of others' differences, try to become even more flexible and accommodate yourself to these differences. .
- Setting personal and organizational goals is critically important to being productive in the short period of time you will be overseas. Everyone can make a difference, but if you want to do something with your time abroad, you have to actively pursue your goals. Do not let anyone hold you back or fall into the trap of blaming others for not being able to accomplish what you came to do. .
- Know that things will not always go your way and that you might make mistakes. As long as you learn from these setbacks and adjust your behavior accordingly, you have not failed. .
- Finally, you must learn to balance compassion with reality. Realizing that I could not help everyone was a big step. Be careful not to spread yourself too thin.