A WHOLE DIFFERENT WORLD: A UGANDAN EXPERIENCE
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In 2006, a buddy of mine, John Koerner, and his son started a foundation based in Charlotte, Vermont called 52 Kids Foundation. Their mission is to teach Ugandan children to live positively without aid by focusing on education, empowerment, and employment. The Foundation has completed numerous projects for the Kamuli district of Uganda – from installing a well in a village and completing household infrastructure improvements to providing continuous educational support, building a dormitory, and helping to establish two successful businesses in Kamuli.

About a third of the 52 children live in outlying villages three or more miles away. The dormitory provides them with a place to sleep and meals. Compared to what they have in their home village, the dormitory – a bed and three square meals – is the equivalent to a Ritz Carlton in the U.S. The foundation also set-up an Internet Café complete with back-up solar power so that the students can be exposed to computers and develop a connection to the rest of the world. Interestingly enough, a Vermont school class has exchanged classroom lessons and experiences using “Skype” with a number of the 52 kids at their Café!

It took two days to arrive at our destination – driving to Boston, flying to Amsterdam and then to Entebbe, Uganda, overnighting in Kampala, and continuing the trip in our van along mostly one-and-a-half lane rough dirt roads with other vehicles, motorcycles, bikes, people, cows, goats, and chicken all trying to share the road in both directions. Back home, the car horn would have been in constant use but in Uganda, it’s just a way of life to have not more than a few feet between mortality and life. I have to admit I closed my eyes more than once! On the way to the village, we intercepted a courier and gave him 400 toothbrushes and tubes of toothpaste gathered from Chittenden County dentists for distribution to a remote Ugandan village.
We finally arrived in Kamuli, population of about 11,000. Our project for this trip included helping the locals renovate St. Theresa’s, the local school attended by most of the 52 kids. The renovation work included fortifying the building foundation with bricks, dirt, and mortar as well as replacing the windows and repairing the roof. A construction job – now I was on my home turf! However, all the work is done by hand with no power tools in sight and, as I soon discovered, not really required. There is a “methodical” Ugandan pace that I quickly needed to adapt to and I therefore adjusted my estimated productivity factors as we worked side-by-side with local masons, glazers, and roofers.

It was so satisfying to see what we accomplished in a week working with the native craftsmen and the local means they employ to get the job done. When the cut glass arrived to replace the 36 windows comprising of 12 panes of glass each, along with the local glazing compound and some caulking tubes, I noticed they forgot to bring the caulking gun. Silly me…the glazer, took the end of a wooden shovel handle, inserted it into the end of the caulking tube, and pushed the tube down, allowing the caulk to flow out the end and onto his finger as he placed it in the appropriate spots on the window frame. Not necessarily within our AIA specs but clearly functional.

Each work day started at 8:30 a.m. We would pause exactly at 11:00 a.m. each morning for a cup of hot porridge delivered by some of the 52 kids who were helping us during their vacation week. They arrived again at 2:00 p.m. for our lunch break where we enjoyed a full meal comprised of rice, potatoes, beans, boiled greens, gravy, occasionally beef or chicken, mangoes, avocados, pineapple, and some kind of pasty corn mush that I quickly learned to mix with the gravy, rice, and beans. Being used to my normal yogurt and bagel for lunch, this was a veritable feast – and we dined on pretty much the same fair for the daily dinner! There were times, I admit, that I longed for a bowl of butter crunch ice cream but the concept of dessert is completely foreign to the
locals. We did not completely rough it though. The guest house – our home for the stay – had running water. Rain water was collected from the roof, pumped to a reservoir, and gravity-fed to our sinks and flush toilet which was, near as I could tell, pretty much the only such installation in the village. And even though there was no hot water, a cool sponge bath at night after a hot day’s work was more than tolerable. Plus a cold local beer that would rival Magic Hat made for a very satisfying daily happy hour with Team USA back at the guest house.

It was so rewarding to learn that many of the 52 kids are now fluent in English, succeeding in school, and will hopefully have an opportunity to gain employment in the future. One of the first graduates of the program now wants to go to nursing school! After having supported the foundation for a number of years, seeing firsthand the difference it can make was thrilling and one that will be with me forever.

At a small village where a few of the students were born, the locals wanted to celebrate the new centrally-located well provided by the 52 Kids Foundation. The well water is hand-pumped and hauled by hand or bike in five gallon plastic containers. It was not unusual to see bikes being walked, or even sometimes ridden, lashed and balanced with five containers of water – that’s 200 pounds! I once saw 7 containers being transported at once. And after seeing what they used to have as the water source – an open water hole in a remote field with nearby grazing cattle – I could see the basis for the happy gathering.

Our afternoon celebration began by building a stove for one of the families out of two types of dirt – one sandy material with, near as I could tell, 10% passing the #200 sieve and the other dirt found underneath an ant hill (prime excreted material) – mixed with fine grass and water. From the mixture we made hundreds of hand-sized mud balls, let them dry in the sun for an hour, and then formed a human chain line to pass the balls into the thatched hut where a new mud stove would be
formed – all while singing-chanting a native song and bringing good spirit to our project. Josephine, the resident stove expert, supervised the project. She used a palm-like tree with a hollow stem cut to the right proportions to act as the flue and form. The mud balls were placed as a base and around the tree with a firebox, a draft chamber, and two openings sized just right for cooking. Our food, on the other hand, was cooked outside in three open stone fireplaces since the mud stove will take 30 days to cure – I’m not quite sure of the compressible strength after seven days.

That afternoon I noticed a group of boys playing a barefoot pick-up game of soccer on a patch of dirt, surrounded by tuffs of grass and rocks. The goal posts were large rocks and the ball was almost spherical, made of rubber, and about the size of a softball. I couldn’t resist...no, not playing for I stopped decades ago...but hitching a ride on Big Blue (the open-air truck) that was heading back to Kamuli to pick up more children for the celebration. There I found a shop and purchased an official soccer ball and delivered it to the children. The game continued until dusk with heightened glee. As the evening wore on, a native band played wooden instruments and danced to traditional songs. And yes, Team USA all got up and joined in the rhythm when more than gently urged – we didn’t want to let the hosts down! I wasn’t allowed to complain about my bad knee and beg out although, on a positive note, I can now use this as my once-a-year regrettable dance requirement!

I could go on and on. I kept a journal and I’m glad I did. It was an amazing, eye-opening experience that neither words nor even pictures can fully capture. Only the full senses – hearing, smelling, seeing, tasting, feeling – can truly begin to paint a complete picture of our full and expansive world. Even though I was in an unfamiliar third-world country, I somehow felt completely safe and secure in the village.

The spirit of the people, living in conditions that simply pale to our norms, was truly remarkable.
Disease, especially HIV and malaria, is prevalent. Large families, many times with more than 10 children, are a problem. One of the 52 kids has 34 brothers and sisters – all from the same father who had three wives. Growing and harvesting food to feed the family while hoping for some left to sell at the market; making and selling charcoal; fetching the daily water – these are their necessities for survival.

Yet they joyfully welcomed us, some understanding our purpose but many not. I loved seeing the smiles on the native children, especially once I took their picture and turned around the screen so they could see themselves. And I really enjoyed meeting most of the 52 kids, learning where they came from, understanding a bit of what their life has been, and knowing the opportunity they have before them.

For myself, I am glad to have made a difference in some small way. But in the end, I received more than I gave – and that was the best gift of all.