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“When you learn, teach. When you get, give.” These are the words that surfaced in my memory as I was traveling back home and trying to sum up my Ugandan journey of the past nine weeks. Lying in an airport hotel bed and thinking back on all of the most memorable moments throughout my internship, I somehow felt that nothing could be expressed that would amount to my recent experience. Recalling the times I spent with my host mom, Norah, and her four-year-old son, Daniel, the adventures I shared with my fellow interns traveling throughout Uganda and Rwanda, and the lessons I learned from the students at the vocational school where I worked, I thought of a story I had heard several days earlier on television. The speaker was sharing a typical feel-good story of a woman who grew up in a developing country, was unable to attend school due to the family’s lack of money, and somehow managed to surpass poverty, abuse from her husband, and discouragement from her village and attain a PhD at an American university. The story was moving, as these types of stories always are, but this time I felt I could truly identify with the barriers that this woman would have had to overcome to attain this opportunity. Just being able to raise enough money to get out of the country is a rare opportunity, let alone getting a high enough education to graduate from secondary school and college. Beyond that, this woman, most likely, would have had to surpass the overriding pressure and force from her husband, family, and community to prioritize bearing children over education. She was not allowed to attend any schooling in her village, and she did her brother’s homework to teach herself the material. I appreciated this story. I had witnessed and heard about the difficulties of village life in Uganda, particularly the difficulties of women, in regards to their extreme poverty, their inability to get adequate nutrition and education, and their oftentimes second placement

behind their husbands. But what stuck out particularly in my mind were the words that this woman shared to sum up her life journey. “When you learn, teach. When you get, give.” I can imagine it would be hard to connect her story with mine, and yet, I fully identified with the meaning behind these words.

During my summer in Uganda, I interned through the Foundation for Sustainable Development (FSD), which is an international organization that partners American interns with community NGOs in developing countries. FSD has many site locations throughout the world; one of which is Masaka, Uganda. Each site location has a support team that places you in a host family and partners you with a host organization. During your stay, you are expected to create a sustainable project at your organization and integrate into the community through your Ugandan family. Anita Sempa was the manager of my particular site team. She partnered me with Masaka Vocational and Rehabilitation Center (MVRC), a vocational school that trains disabled young adults between the ages of 15 and 25 in carpentry, leather-making, knitting, and computers.

When I was first placed at MVRC, I was confused how the mission of this organization tied into my objectives as an Environmental Science major. I had specifically requested working with an organization that specialized in sustainable agriculture or water management. MVRC’s mission was “to bring ability from disability” among disabled adults. Developing a sustainable interaction between Ugandans and their land was not the organization’s top priority, as was expressed by MVRC’s manager. I asked Anita to put me in a more relevant organization, but she insisted that I stay at MVRC. She said that most likely I would surprise myself with what I could accomplish using my available resources. I took her word for it, and have not regretted the decision since then.

The first week I was at MVRC I decided to do a needs-assessment of the MVRC community by sitting in on classes, participating with the students, and listening in on conversations of MVRC staff. The staff itself is quite small given the lack of community resources to support more personnel, and consists of one teacher for each subject, one temporary volunteer as manager, a kitchen cook, and a store keeper. I became familiar with several of the students, as I learned to knit and make leather shoes during my first days at the school. By talking with the students, I learned about the hardships that many of them face. Many of them never got farther than P2 (second grade), and could not read or write. Several of them were deaf, and most of the students came from poor home environments. The school could not afford any wheelchairs, and a few of the students crawled on the ground to get to their classrooms. There was a large language barrier as many of the students only spoke Lugandan, and I only spoke English. I learned a lot these first couple of weeks talking to the students. The students treated me like I was one of them, always smiled and stopped to talk to me, and we had many laughs while getting to know each other.

The staff at first was really hard to work with, as many of them saw me as a temporary addition and did not put in the effort to get to know me. However, after I took the initiative to get to know the teachers and I started throwing my ideas around, two of the teachers, in particular, got involved with my project. Without the help of Otto, my knitting instructor, Dennis, the carpentry instructor, Anita at FSD, and the fellow FSD interns who were working at other organizations, it would have been difficult for me to develop and accomplish the goals and objectives of my project. With this support system, I was able to help MVRC in several ways.

First, I organized group sessions for the students at VI Agroforestry, a training center that specializes in educating farmers about sustainable agriculture, and worked alongside the trainer

to teach students about water-saving garden plots, maximum utilization of local resources, composting, organic pesticides, and grafting. MVRC had a plot of land specifically for an agriculture class, but nothing had been done with the land for several years. I set up these training sessions because it is important that the students learn about organic farming. Nearly all Ugandans live on small plots of land and grow their own food to live on; additionally, 80% of Ugandans rely on subsistence farming for their income. It is essential that the students not only learn about nutritious plants, but it is necessary that they learn how to cultivate them using minimal land and maximal resources.

I divided the 60 students into groups of ten and assigned each of them a plot of land. Each group attended a one day training session at VI, and then applied what they learned to their assigned plot of land. The trainer and I tried to teach each group something that the other groups did not know, and then had each group demonstrate what they had learned to the other students on their plot of land. For example, group A learned how to build kitchen gardens, which are structured garden plots that utilize compost and manure to spread nutritious elements throughout the soil. Group B learned about the process of liquid manure and constructed an in-ground liquid manure tank, which all of the students could utilize. Group C, alternatively, learned about the process of creating compost manure. The students and I demonstrated our garden projects to the teachers, who will continue to teach these concepts to future students. Additionally, a relationship was developed between MVRC and VI, and free trainings will be held for students in subsequent years.

Secondly, I worked with skilled students from the Masaka community to build an in-ground water harvesting tank at MVRC. Water harvesting tanks are meant to gather and store rainwater from either the roofs of buildings or from ground runoff. MVRC had been trying for

several years to attain the funds needed to build several water harvesting tanks. They had built an above ground tank previously, which had been poorly built and was unusable. Besides electricity, water usage is the greatest cost to MVRC which is consistently burdened by its lack of funds. Building a tank means saving money on water usage and teaching the students one practical way to conserve water at a homestead. For example, the skilled students that helped me build the tank live in a village where they helped all of their neighbors build a water harvesting tank to use for drinking water. Hopefully some of the students at MVRC will be able to go home and do the same. I built an in-ground tank versus an above ground tank because it is less expensive, and utilized the slanting roofs of the organization's buildings to collect rainwater. The tank was built in a sustainable manner with quality materials made to last at least six years, and instructions were provided to the MVRC staff and students on how to manage the tank.

Thirdly, I designed a flier and business cards to promote income-generating services at MVRC, including a conference hall, accommodation facilities, and products made by the students. Local organizations, in general, are limited by funding sources and community support. MVRC is not an exception. Although it is funded by the Masaka District local government and the Uganda Society for Disabled Children (USDC), MVRC ends up short of funds for its students every year. Therefore, students are restricted to the same simple meal three times a day, and they are restricted from games and TV due to lack of funding. With the help of fellow interns, I visited several organizations in the community, such as TASO and Kitovu Mobile, which had public clinics where I could hang fliers. The human resource directors were not only welcoming to the flier and business cards in their public clinics, but they took extra fliers to take into the community. This is just one way to promote outreach for MVRC which is limited in staff and has had trouble getting community support for the past ten years.

Finally, I had wanted to develop a transitional program for the students after their year at the school. Unfortunately, the nine weeks were too time-limited to accomplish such a task, and I was limited in seed grant money. However, I did create a survey for students of MVRC from at least two years past based on whether the students were employed, self-employed or unemployed. This survey was used to find out about the transitional process of students when leaving MVRC, about changes that need to be made to the current curriculums, and about the best and worst aspects of MVRC. Master Otto and I surveyed 15 past students that had graduated in varying trades, and I created a report based on the past students' responses. Otto is planning on using the report at the MVRC council meeting to discuss changes that needed to be made, particularly in relation to the curriculum.

Anita was right when she said I would surprise myself with what I could accomplish at MVRC. I ended up being able to apply aspects of my major and my intentional focus into my projects; however, this was only one facet of what I had learned while I was in Uganda. What I appreciated most from the VI trainings and the agriculture class was learning about sustainable agriculture along with the students. I enjoyed being able to watch each group teach the other students about what they had learned, and I enjoyed relating these concepts to Master Otto and the other staff members. I learned that if one hopes to build the capacity of a community, he or she needs to become attuned to the community's needs; and one cannot fully understand the long-term needs of a community without fully assimilating oneself into the community. I also learned that despite the hardships that those in the MVRC community and larger Masaka community endure, even the most marginalized members of these societies have a lot to give. Once I asked my friend Joseph if he would move out of Uganda if he had the opportunity, to

which he replied, “There would be no need. What I love about Uganda is that you can have nothing and still have all the resources you need.”

During my last week in Uganda, the staff threw a going-away dinner for me, and each staff said something about me during my time with them. There were several things that were said during those speeches that I will never forget, one of which was said by Master Otto, who stated “You have friends here. Don’t forget that. And don’t forget what you’ve done here. I don’t want you to ever forget about the marginalized members of society, those with disabilities.” I would like to say I will never forget. The community that I experienced this summer was one that taught me many things about their culture, listened to what I had to teach them about mine, and extended what we had learned together into a sustainable curriculum for future community members. It also was a generous community that had little, and continued to give despite what they had.