

34,560 Hours and Counting

These are the total number of hours that have been contributed by the twenty seven Help the Aged youth interns who have worked on our behalf in four developing countries during the last few years. Following the completion of a training program in Ottawa, each intern works overseas for an average of eight months with the local charitable organizations we are assisting. Tim Wideman who is featured in this newsletter was part of a group of seven interns who recently completed assignments.

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“I Was Scared Stiff”

by Tim Wideman, Help the Aged Youth Intern

Sleepless nights filled with vibrant visions proceeded my departure for Kenya on behalf of Help the Aged last fall. Stories of violent robberies in broad daylight, devastating perennial floods, food crises caused by intermittent droughts, lonely nights of unbearable isolation, soaring death rates and pandemic infectious diseases all filled my head, which seemed to be spinning faster and faster as my departure date quickly approached. Needless to say, I was scared stiff.

One way or another though, I overcame my fear (and eventually my insomnia) and found my way to

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Tim's first project in Kenya consisted of helping to build three mud huts for the elderly. "I donated much of the flesh on my palms as I learned how to use a machete to cut timber". Tim is shown carrying soil towards the site of one of the huts.



“It's easy for me to look beyond the missing fingers and toes”

by Tim Wideman

Cornel (photo at left) has been suffering from leprosy for years now. His right hand has lost all of its digits to the disease, as have both of his feet. Thankfully, his right hand still has a thumb and middle finger intact which help provide him with a crude form of dexterity. In addition, most of his nose and parts of his ears have wasted away leaving his face looking small and withered. As a result, Cornel's thick-framed glasses must be secured to his face with a taut elastic band fastened around the back of his head.

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"It's easy for me ..." (continued from page 1)

Cornel's health has recently deteriorated and as of late, he's been struggling to fill his role as sole caretaker for his orphaned grandson. Presently, he has a bad cough and many of the wounds on his appendages are open and deeply infected. After a brief consultation with Tom, the volunteer manager of our programs, we decide to take Cornel to the Nyabondo Medical Centre, some 60 kilometers away.

On the way back from the hospital following Cornel's appointment, the rain starts to come down hard and the roads go from bad to worse. The mud and water creep halfway up our tires and once again we find ourselves

swerving wildly to stay on the road. Unfortunately, it isn't long before the inevitable occurs and we slide our back end off the road and into the ditch. Our driver revs the engine several times and spins the wheels aimlessly without moving the truck. We're stuck.

Opening the door, I cringe at the rain that immediately soaks my clothing. Taking my first steps onto the road inspires a similar reaction as the mud seems to swallow my sandals and feet up to the ankles. Tom and I dutifully take our positions at the back of the truck and we begin to rock it back and forth. After several attempts the truck seems to leap from the ditch and back onto the road. Sure enough, Tom and I follow as we plummet face first into the muddy abyss that is the ditch. With nothing left to do but smile and laugh at our otherwise miserable situation, we make our way to the nearest puddle to at least wash the mud from our faces and hands before re-entering the cramped quarters of the truck. Thankfully, that seemed to be the worst of our adventure and it wasn't long before we made it back to the main road (which was paved) and not much later celebrated our safe return to Ahero.

Months later, I'm conducting interviews of the sponsored elderly of the Adopt-A-Gran program. Once again, Tom presents me with Cornel Oricho. However, this time our encounter leaves me with a



Cornel receiving much needed treatment for the wounds resulting from his leprosy at the Nyabonda Medical Centre.

much different impression. It's easy for me now to look past the missing fingers and toes to see the broadly smiling face of a man who is joyful for his rejuvenated independence.

With Tom translating, Cornel enthusiastically explains to me how he's now feeling much better and can once again care for himself and his orphaned grandson. I share Cornel's joy and try to add to it by explaining that thanks to the generosity of a Canadian back home, the back of the truck is now covered. From now on, our journeys together will certainly be much drier and more comfortable for all of us. We briefly discuss how he's been doing over the past couple of months and he

finishes by sending me home with a personal message of joy and appreciation to his Canadian sponsor.

34,560 Hours ... (continued from page 1)

Seven new interns have just been recruited which will add 8,960 hours of hard work to our total.

We are very grateful for your support and for the grant received for this program from CIDA. Our November newsletter will feature stories of two youth interns we assigned to Belize and Ghana.



From left to right are: Danielle Lefebvre (Ghana), Darlene Bhavnani (India), Tim Wideman (Kenya), Jennifer Miller (India), Jennie MacIntosh (Belize), Anne Babcock (Ghana) and Ami Somani (Ghana).

"I Was Scared Stiff" (continued from page 1)

the small village of Ahero located off the shores of Lake Victoria in Western Kenya. Much to the delight (and amazement) of friends and family, I also managed to make a triumphant return to Canada seven months later. The miracle for me though was the time spent in-between.

It was here in this unassuming East African village that I was able to witness incredible feats and meet so many amazing people. It was here under the auspices of Help the Aged that I was able to work with the elderly as a Youth Intern and monitor the Adopt-A-Gran sponsorship program. And it was here under the brilliance of the African sun that I was able to learn so much more about life and myself than I could ever have hoped to understand from within the walls of a university classroom.

I was almost immediately put to work following my arrival in Ahero. We had just over one week to build three new tin-roofed mud huts for some of the elderly who had been living in dilapidated homes for some time. So with hardly enough time to unpack and introduce myself we set out for remote areas within the district and started building.

What resulted was an impressive coming-together of otherwise completely unrelated people, all in the name of the needy elderly. Canadian sponsors generously contributed the funds to purchase all building materials and supplies. Compassionate neighbours provided all labour, tools and food for the project. A professor and his class from a local polytechnic college volunteered their time and supplied the much needed technical support to make the roof. **And finally a Mzungu (a less than flattering name given to all people of 'European' descent - including yours truly) from Northern Ontario donated much of the flesh on his palms and most of his humility to ensure everyone remained highly entertained throughout the day as he painfully learned how to use a machete to cut timber.**

Truphena Ayiamba, one of the three appreciative elderly receiving a house that week, summed up it's significance for her in a simple message to all those who helped, "Thank you for my new house, now I can sleep with no worry of leaks." A simple problem that had a straight-forward solution, but in-between



Mary Con Ajwang is blind and sponsored through our Adopt-A-Gran program. Sponsorship funds have enabled her to set up a small kiosk to sell items like soap and matches.



Vitalis Onidala is also blind and is sponsored by a Canadian donor. Vitalis has raised a small flock of poultry and has trained the birds to come to his side at the sound of a whistle.

resulted in a beautiful display of the warmth and power that can be had through the generosity of a giving community.

After my short-lived stint as a contractor, I set out to work on fulfilling my various other job responsibilities within Ahero.

After providing my assistance with several "Old Age" projects, I began interviewing the 130 sponsored elderly grans with hopes that I could provide each of the Canadian sponsors with a personal update. A daunting task at first impression that I had thought would feel very repetitive. However, to my surprise, this wasn't the case at all. As it turned out, each older person that I had the pleasure of meeting had their own unique story and with a little prompting were more than willing to share it with me. Once again, the result was a wealth of history and culture that could never have been found in any library or classroom back home.

For example, Vitalis Onidala (photo above) is a hard working man with impressive talents. After having to leave his car maintenance profession in 1984 due to

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blindness he wasn't sure what to do. With his sponsor's assistance, he was able to struggle on and has now developed his skills as a small time poultry farmer. Starting with only one bird given to him by a well-wisher, he has now raised a small flock and has the birds trained to come to his side at the sound of his whistle. Vitalis is also a man of faith and sang me a song about the shepherd watching over his sheep, which he says helps him sleep at night.

I also had the pleasure of meeting Mary Con Ajwang (photo on previous page) who was born blind, hit by a car in her youth and most recently suffers from chronic respiratory problems. However, with help from her sponsor, she is now able to run a successful small kiosk from her home. As Mary was introducing herself to me, she was interrupted by a fit of coughing as she was quite sick at the time. However this didn't hold Mary down, nor had her life of health challenges dampened her spirit. Indeed even in spite of pneumonia, she broke out in song mid-interview (and later laughter).

Mary is well educated, witty and full of life. She's proud of her independence, but knows she hasn't been alone in acquiring it. Mary uses some of the sponsors' dollars to help finance her income-generating kiosk in which she sells items such as soap, matches, and sugar. **As our conversation draws to a close, Mary leans close to me and reveals with a smile the secret behind her eternal optimism and happiness, "Wherever I go, I find friends".** She finishes the interview by inviting me to her house to show me a picture of her sponsor that has a special place on her wall. Indeed, it seems as though the Ahero Old Age program, Help the Aged Canada and their respective network of caring communities have ensured that many elderly within this country feel the same warmth of friendship that Mary has



One of the huts completed with pride by Tim and his Kenyan friends.

experienced through her otherwise difficult life.

As it turned out, all the horror stories I had heard were invariably true. Petty crime was out of control and during my time there, our compound was broken into on two occasions. Severe flooding was an annual reality and since my return, I've learned that 40,000 have been displaced by this year's floods alone. And in spite of religiously taking my anti-malarial tablets, I couldn't avoid becoming a public health statistic by getting malaria three times and dysentery once.

But in the midst of all the horror stories that I had braced myself for, and in the end experienced first hand, I had an all together different experience. I felt a closeness from a group of strangers that I had never before experienced and in the process became part of a community that lived up to it's vernacular meaning of Love. I don't think I'll ever forget my seven months in Ahero, nor do I think anyone in Ahero will be quick to forget the support they have received from their Canadian friends.

Your Generous Donations ...

will be used to support our health care programs in Haiti, Ghana and the Republic of Congo as well as our cataract removal program in India.

All of your donations will be tripled by matching grants from CIDA and the Alberta Wild Rose Foundation. Over 23,000 poor and destitute people are helped annually thanks to your kindness and caring. If you are interested in sponsoring a destitute elderly person, please contact Brenda Packer at 1-800-648-1111

Thank you!