IUB Students Organize AIDS Educational Outreach Programs in Kenya

This summer, political science and biology senior Philip Roessler, a co-founder of the student organization Outreach Kenya Development Volunteers (OKDV), will return to Kenya for the third time. He will head an all-volunteer team of 11 other Indiana University Bloomington graduate and undergraduate students to continue presenting educational outreach programs to help combat HIV/AIDS in Western Province, Kenya, where the prevalence of the disease is one of the highest in that country. They will work together with a Kenyan nongovernmental organization, Inter-Community Development Involvement (ICODEI), directed by Rev. Reuben Lubanga of the Episcopal Church of Africa, in the town of Kabula, Bungoma District.

Earlier this spring, Roessler, a top student in IUB’s Honors College and IU STARS program, was honored by being named to USA Today’s All-USA College Academic First Team, one of 20 students—out of a field of 682 nominated by their institutions—recognized nationwide by the newspaper for exemplary intellectual achievement and, in particular, “leadership in activities on and off campus.” Bungoma is indeed a long way “off campus.”

OKDV was founded in the spring of 1999 by two IUB students, one a junior, the other a sophomore, who were so moved by what they saw and read about HIV/AIDS devastation in Kenya that they became resolved to do something about it. In the summer of 1998, IUB biochemistry student Hank Selke had volunteered in Kenya in an HIV/AIDS education program for a non-profit organization. There he met and was inspired by Lubanga, who in 1996 founded ICDEI, a grass-roots community organization dedicated to HIV/AIDS awareness as well as other pressing health, poverty, environmental, and illiteracy issues in his district. Back at IUB that fall, Selke formed the idea of building a volunteer organization that could collaborate with Lubanga. Then he met Roessler, who had independently been reading about Kenya’s AIDS epidemic and decided that he too, had to do something, “no matter how small.”

The two explored a number of possibilities, attempting to form an independent nonprofit organization with tax-exempt status, trying to affiliate with established organizations such as the World Health Organization, the Center for Disease Control (CDC), Operation Crossroads Africa, and others, all to little avail. They then decided to form a student volunteer organization on the IUB campus and spent a good deal of time seeking faculty, administrative, and external support and funding. Among initial support received was a laptop computer from IUB Chancellor Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, grants from the Indiana University Student Association, the STARS programs, and the Honors College, and book donations from the Indiana Memorial Union bookstore, as well as individual donations. Chancellor Gros Louis found OKDV’s agenda and work “extraordinary and impressive, . . . Anyone who speaks to the leaders of this organization could not help but be positively

Haba na haba kujaza kibaba.
Little by little the measure will be filled.
—Swahili proverb
moved by what it is they are attempting to do.”

During the summer of 1999, the first year of OKDV’s existence, Roessler went to Kenya, accompanied by a hometown friend, Justin Elfrey. They worked with IKODEI to provide HIV/AIDS awareness programs, reaching thousands of people in the rural areas surrounding Kabula. In 2000, Selke (who graduated in May 1999), Roessler, and three other IUB volunteers went. Because OKDV had been able to raise enough money to lease an old Land Rover, they were able to distribute HIV/AIDS materials to 12,000 more people in Western Province beyond Bungoma District. They went equipped with HIV/AIDS posters, pamphlets, videos, films, and binders and books donated from the American Red Cross, the CDC, Glaxo Wellcome pharmaceuticals, and other institutions. These materials supplemented discussions and question-and-answer periods that followed video and film presentations and skit performances by ICODEI community members. They spoke at schools, community centers, women’s groups, and churches, often in the open air and in poor rural areas seldom reached by the government.

This summer, the volunteers will concentrate on additional educational outreach projects, the primary one being the completion of a community library and HIV/AIDS resource center, the very first library in Kabula. More than 1,000 books were donated to OKDV from the Union bookstore and University Libraries and have already been shipped and received in Kenya. Other projects include working with women’s groups to discuss ways to reduce the “feminization of poverty” and the vulnerability of women to HIV/AIDS and its consequences by promoting greater economic independence and microenterprise development.

Both OKDV and ICODEI are keenly aware that the communities affected by AIDS struggle with the consequences of poverty, orphanages, family disruption, and social dysfunction. In addition to promoting HIV/AIDS awareness and health, they are already to look at the larger implications affecting the community’s education, environment, and economic viability. A particularly difficult aspect of trying to break “the silence and stigmatism that surrounds HIV/AIDS” in Africa is overcoming a community’s cultural beliefs, stereotypic notions, and sexual behavior relative to the disease; these can lead to real dilemmas for volunteers who must weigh conflicting cultural values, remain sensitive to those they are trying to help, and bring about change in very traditional societies.

Last October, OKDV raised private funds to bring Rev. Lubanga to IUB to meet with faculty and administrators, raise funds for the Kenya project, thank the volunteer students, and greet the parents of Selke, who both work at IU. His father William Selke is a professor of criminal justice and his mother Beth Selke works at the School of Education. Lubanga also came to discuss the feasibility of expanding the School of Education’s Cultural Immersion Project to Kenya, specifically to the Western Province. The award-winning project, directed by Laura Stachowski working jointly with a national educational consortium, sends student teachers abroad to traditional English-speaking countries for eight weeks of student teaching and community development. The project had recently expanded into India, so that an Anglophone

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IU Southeast Raises Scholarships for Study Abroad

For the second year in a row, Indiana University Southeast’s International Programs Committee awarded overseas study scholarships to a few select students on money that was raised through IUS’s yearly International Festival.

“This was just the second year we have done it,” said Deborah Finkel, director of International Programs at IUS. “We use the profits from the international festival that we have every year to fund the scholarship, and last year we made enough to give two scholarships worth $300 each. This year, however, we made $1,000 so that we gave away four $250 scholarships.” In speaking of the committee’s criteria, she said, “The scholarships are merit-based, although the committee also considers financial need and how well a trip would fit within the student’s academic program.” The scholarships are open to any major, not just foreign language majors.

This years winners were Yvette Wilson, a Spanish major, and Suzann Richey, a business major; who are both going to study in Salamanca, Spain. The other two were Ginger Daggatt, a French major going to Paris, France, and Elizabeth Boesche, a biology major going to Belize.

Finkel says that studying overseas is beneficial in many ways. “I think you learn a lot more than you would expect. You learn about another culture but you also get a lot of insight about your own (American) culture. Our students come back just amazed at how much they have discovered about themselves, how much confidence they have developed, and how much they have learned to rely on their own skills and abilities.”

The committee is currently working on getting an endowment so that it won’t have to rely on the International Festival for funding. Finkel’s ultimate dream is to raise sufficient funds for the university to be able to award $2,500 in overseas scholarships every year.

—Jason Hancock
adapted from IUS’s The Horizon (Week of April 9, 2001)

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African country was a likely future possibility. In fact, in January 2002, the project will send its first teacher to Bungoma District; many more education students have expressed interest in a Kenya assignment.

Indiana University, says Roessler, now has “a significant presence in Western Kenya,” with the OKDV/ICODEI partnership, the teacher training program, and IUPUI School of Medicine’s long-standing student/faculty exchange with Moi University School of Medicine in nearby Eldoret. Roessler himself is going on to graduate studies in international relations and conflict resolution as related to Africa, and also plans to continue his study of Swahili and Arabic. Speaking of his work and that of the OKDV volunteers, he states simply, “community development in Kenya is where we have decided to invest our humanity.”

—RMN

For more information on OKDV: www.indiana.edu/~okdv

Rev. Reuben Lubanga with Beth and William Selke at IUB.