

Class of 1978 Foundation Summer Report  
Sojung Yi '12

Bere. Age: 8, Height: 128 cm, Weight: 36 kg, aunt, "P." In meticulous handwriting, a list of 26 students is handed to me. Each child's full name, physical measurements, surviving family members, and HIV/AIDS status fill the worn paper, slightly fading yellow along its edges. With one letter, the child's history is recorded: "P" for positive and "N" for negative. As I skim through the rows and columns of information, I remember the words that the principal said as he handed me this document, "some here are not with us anymore, but the ones who are, oh, they eat!"

I am on a follow-up trip to Matuma Primary School about 55km outside of Polokwane, in the northern Limpopo province of South Africa. Thrust into this unidentified position as teacher, counselor, and sometimes even foreign expert, I learned within my first couple days of working that HIV/AIDS is a pressing, controversial subject that permeates life throughout South Africa. It is an accepted way of life, not socially acceptable or permissible, but more in a resigned manner.



*Bere is the one sitting on my lap. I had been assigned to teach a class to the HIV/AIDS orphans at Matuma Primary School on this afternoon.*

With one of the highest rates of HIV/AIDS in the world, South Africa appears to face an overwhelming task of providing treatment and aid to address this major public health quandary. However, these numbers and data are not the simple measurement of the disease's prevalence, but rather a reflection of complex, social issues entrenched within society. These issues range from high rates of teenage pregnancies to substance abuse and food insecurity. Through my summer internship with Nkanyiso, I began to understand how treatment is not always about immediate care but just as importantly about recognizing the various social, economic and political factors that shape the experience of HIV/AIDS in South Africa.



*Teaching children how to plant seedlings and be responsible for taking care of them.*

Nkanyiso is a relatively young NGO started by a group of South Africans who wanted to address the HIV/AIDS issue from a new perspective. Their main goal is to promote food security by training schools and communities how to create and maintain gardens that can produce nutritious food for children. Instead of distributing meal packages that may be insufficient or outdated, Nkanyiso encourages communities to develop gardens as a reliable, sustainable method of securing food. These gardens are first created in schools, acting as an incentive for children to go to school and then attend classes on a full stomach. Several studies have shown the negative effects of hunger or poor nutrition on a child's learning abilities, so this school food program not only solves a practical issue of feeding hungry children but also encourages students to stay in school, learn effectively, and succeed.

In addition, in these impoverished communities where families already cannot provide food or medication for the children, those infected with HIV/AIDS are doubly harmed. People with HIV/AIDS burn around 10% more calories while resting than those uninfected, leading to severe weight loss and growth failure. These metabolic effects can be countered with proper food intake, and Nkanyiso's garden model strives to empower these communities with the necessary resources to do so. In communities where antiretroviral drug treatments are available, but food insecurity is problematic, the food that the gardens provide are still crucial. Drugs, taken on an empty stomach, can cause violent illness; and having a steady source of nutrient-rich vegetables is essential to the antiretroviral treatment process. A good nutritional status strengthens the immunity system and reduces vulnerability to other diseases and infections. Children like Bere, whose toothy grin and wild laughter remain impressed in my memory, can live longer, healthier lives with their ARVs and the nourishment provided from his school.



*Serving breakfast to the children at a primary school outside Johannesburg. Often schools provide breakfast at 9am and then another lunch at around 1pm. This meal consisted of corn meal and a broth of beans and vegetables grown in the school's garden.*



*Mulching with two mothers at a school garden. The mulching process involves layering the soil with newspapers to suppress weed growth, retain moisture, and provide a protective layer.*

Maintained by students and community members (particularly mothers), the school gardens flourish, and eventually, their seedlings are exported out to the community to start gardens in individual homes. Nkanyiso not only provides the initial seedlings to start the gardens but also an educational component that trains the mothers and students how to maintain the gardens, specifically using permaculture, and also teaches the importance of healthy, nutritious eating habits. Permaculture takes advantage of local ecology and water/soil content, while using natural compost and recycling methods to replenish the gardens. Through these lessons taught by Nkanyiso, the community learns of secure, sustainable food production and the benefits of nutritious food.

However, Nkanyiso's teaching curriculum reaches beyond nutrition. Just as nutrition plays an important role in HIV/AIDS treatment, it is a key factor in prevention. As mentioned before, with nutritious food, children can attend school and receive an education. Nkanyiso also provides after-school programs where students learn about a broad range of topics, including self-esteem, leadership traits, avoiding peer pressure (especially in response to drugs, alcohol, and unprotected sex), and self-management skills. Most of my responsibilities at the NGO revolved around researching, preparing, and implementing the curriculum for these programs.



*"Stay in school:" asking about students' dreams, and talking about the importance of staying in school and getting an education.*



While I spent some time helping in the gardens and teaching about permaculture methods, I especially enjoyed being able to spend time in the classroom and interacting with the students and teachers. By the end of the internship, I had also developed a doll-parenting guide for Nkanyiso to use in their lessons about teenage pregnancies. One of the shocking reasons for the high teenage pregnancy rates especially in some of the urban schools is that the government provides a monthly stipend for single, unemployed mothers in order to ease the economic pressures of raising a child. However, this sum may act as an incentive to become pregnant, but the girl may use the money for other personal purposes. By having the students constantly buy clothes, food, vaccinations, medicine, diapers, etc. for the baby while attempting to work (they did push-ups to earn a wage that could then be used to buy the other supplies), this program specifically emphasizes the financial burdens of having a child. In conjunction with the classes on building self-image and fostering leadership skills, this doll-parenting curriculum had a positive response in class, and will hopefully continue to have some practical impact.



*During one of the doll-parenting lessons. There are expensive computer-based doll simulation kits for sale, but improvising on the resources available, I used donated dolls, stuffed animals, and building blocks or leaves to simulate babies and currency.*

Learning about various social determinants of HIV/AIDS in class reminds me of the immense complexities of addressing issues of global health and community development, but spending a summer in South Africa confirmed these various factors and illuminated unexpected ones, while also “personalizing” HIV/AIDS through the individual stories I encountered. Nkanyiso’s sustainable, organic model of promoting food security in South African communities serves to strengthen the health of its people and fight against HIV/AIDS. I am very grateful to the Class of 1978 Foundation for allowing me to have this opportunity to work in South Africa this summer.



*A Very Big Thank You!*