

## **School Improvements in Uganda**

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Recipient of AWB International Scholarship**

I chose to pursue an education and career in design because I wanted to affect positive change in people's lives, and I firmly believe that design enables me to do so. It not only affects every aspect of how we live our daily lives, but also provides a great challenge, responsibility and obligation. I have been very lucky to have amazing opportunities to volunteer, further my education, and have had some amazing experiences and adventures. In the spring of 2008 I was part of a group who participated in an international design/build in the village of Katebo in Kampala, Uganda. It was my first trip out of North America and although I had some idea of what to expect, I went with an open mind excited to see what was in store. It was a most amazing experience which I will cherish all my life. We saw extraordinary places, but it was the people whom I met that left the greatest impression on me.

Prior to our departure Hamza Mbabaali, originally from Uganda and living in Winnipeg, gave us cultural orientation. After our return, I learned of his and his wife Fatima's plan for improving conditions at schools in the areas where they grew up and I became very interested in the project. I decided to help.

I planned a second trip to Uganda, with the purpose of gathering the information necessary to inform the design of the additions and upgrades for the schools, and to gain a better understanding of the communities whom they would be serving. The two schools, Kalagala Primary School in Lyantonde, and Kesenene Primary School were very different from one another in terms of needs.

\*Kesenene is not necessarily a proper regional name but was used to describe the area serviced by the school.

### **Kampala**

I arrived in Uganda in May 2009 and was met at the Entebbe Airport by Hamza's brothers, Ibra and Shakib. I stayed with Ibra at his home in Buziga, a suburb in the southeast of Kampala, while I was in the city. Kampala is the largest city in Uganda, and is quite western. The city is filled with high modernist buildings, many dating from the 60s. It is a city of contrasts and home to the very rich, and the poorest of poor: paved streets, dirt roads, towers and slums. It is the nation's government, commercial and transport hub, with buses and taxi vans leaving from the taxi parks in lowlands below the Nakasero Hill to all points around the country and many to beyond its borders.

After a few days in Kampala making final arrangements I was off to my first destination, the town of Lyantonde, approximately 180 kilometers southwest of

Kampala. Ibra and Shakib drove me to their family home where I stayed with their younger brother Kato, his family, and other members of their extended family.

### **Lyantonde & the Kalagala Primary School**

Lyantonde is a developing town, located on a major highway that links Mbarara and Masaka. It is a busy town, with many people and trucks stopping en route to destinations including the nearby Lake Mburu National Park. Due to the high traffic volume it is heavily afflicted by AIDS. It has recently been declared the centre of a newly formed district, and has a new political role (it is unclear what this will entail). The town is growing, with new housing being built on the fringes, the importance of improving educational a facility is clear. The Salama Shield Foundation, a joint venture between McGill University professors and Makerere University, and supported by Rotary Clubs in Canada, also makes it's home in Lyantonde.

Kalagala Primary School is situated north of Lyantonde, down a red dirt road and in a plain at the foot of a large hill. We rode out to the site each morning by boda-boda (motorcycle taxi) through the countryside – a mix of brush, trees and cacti. The school, originally begun in the 1930s was in fairly good condition – only minor repairs are needed to keep the current buildings going. Two buildings containing classroom space were built in 2004-05 by the government, but crowding already an issue. The long bench desks are over-filled, and the classes are so full that those sitting at the front are unable to see the entire lesson on the chalkboard. Most of the staff and students were on summer break when I arrived, but I knew about their passion and enthusiasm for learning firsthand from my visit the previous summer. I learned the importance of the project one day as I looked around the empty classrooms, listening to two teachers discuss the challenges faced by both teachers and students.

Kalagala Primary School has a long-term development plan that seeks to include housing for teachers and boarding students, as well as to expand to include a secondary school. Their plan included a library to be built on the south side of the lane; we proposed that the library be a multipurpose building intended to relieve pressure on classrooms, and with the possibility of including an internet connection. I was there to look at the site for the first stage of expansion; my time was spent measuring the site for the design team. Along with the two teachers, and members of the Parents' association, we measured the building site, the existing buildings, and the entire school grounds. The proposed building, a long linear site running north-south on the west side of the central compound is surrounded by a tree and live fence border, with sisal plants and other shrubs. We met with school officials and discussed the possibility of other sites, as the design team felt that the proposed site was too limiting. It became a very collaborative discussion and many ideas were garnered for the team back in Canada to work with in term of multiple use, desired occupancy and what the structure would mean to the school. It was an

interesting cross-cultural experience working with individuals, who had such great enthusiasm for such a task, but the challenge lay in the communication of measures – those present did not have construction or design experience and so at times we had re-measure and clarify what was important and what was not. It was a rewarding experience and I felt as if I was included in the community.

### **The household of my hosts in Lyantonde**

I stayed in a family compound and had the privilege of meeting Kato's extended family and friends. I never fully understood how many of them are connected, as the concept of "relative" is culturally different. Kato, Hamza, Shakib and Ibra are just four of 30 children, and in the previous generation, there were 35 children (4 surviving), the oldest being of indeterminate age as there is no documentation surrounding her birth. Kato, his wife Ibet and their daughter Sarah were my main hosts and truly made me feel like I was part of the family, I will never forget their hospitality and wonderful cooking.

### **Kesenene**

About 18 to 20 kilometers northeast of Kampala is the rural area that is home to the students of the Kesenene Primary School. The picturesque community is so serene and peaceful, you would never know that the busy capital was just down the highway. To get to the farmhouse where I stayed, we had to leave the dirt road and follow a trail, it was hard to believe that the little car was able to handle the terrain! Kesenene Primary School was a ten-minute walk from the farmhouse, part way up a hill with a view of the city in the distance. The site itself was magnificent, complete with two large mango trees. The school was another story. Although the government had provided a new building containing two classrooms, the rest of the classrooms were in a state of disrepair and essentially unfinished. New roofs, concrete floors, plaster, and repairs to the brick walls and doors are required to bring the classrooms up to par. The completion of the floors and repair of the roofs are essential health issues. The rafters are in poor shape and the tin heaved in the winds. Unfortunately the dirt floors are breeding grounds to 'jiggas', parasites that burrow into the cracks of your feet and lay eggs - something I had the displeasure to experience. Local parents have done well with the resources available to them, and now it is our turn to step up and help finish the job. I collected the same site and building measurements that I gathered at Kalagala, but with a higher level of detail for structural components.

I worked with three teachers; Mrs. Catherine Namutebi, Mrs. Miriam Kiuntu, and later the head teacher Mrs. Mariam Nakamatte, to establish the challenges and problems associated with each classroom. We created a detailed inventory of problems for each classroom, issues ranging from the need for shutters to keep out the dust, new roofs, and the need to finish the walls that were supposed to keep the

children from wandering outside during lessons. We also made a wish list, of things they would like to see done to improve the school further.

Community involvement was wonderful at this school. Even though the kids were on vacation I had contact with them and their families - some almost daily. A day was arranged for me to meet as many of the students and parents as possible. I spoke to them about the purpose of my visit, and about Canada. Everyone in attendance expressed their wishes for the school, including one elderly woman who was raising six orphans, who inquired about my plan for orphans at the school; it was one of the most moving moments of the trip. I told her our purview was for the children's educational facilities, and I didn't know if there was any specific plan for the orphans. Though she seemed satisfied with what I could provide in the way of an answer, I was not. I wish I could have provided the answers I knew she was looking for.

### **The household of my hosts in Kesenene**

Fatima Mbabaali's brother and sister-in-law, Abubakali and Amina Kakembo hosted me while I was in Kesenene. Abubakali, a retired teacher and advisor in the Ministry of Education was a fountain of knowledge on the education system in Uganda. They took me from their home near the Namugongo suburb of Kampala to their farm near the school, where they introduced me to Zula and Capelli, their niece and nephew who they are raising. Their kindness and hospitality is beyond what I could have imagined, not only to these children and others they have raised, but also to me. Their farm plot is adjacent to Abubakali's brother, a doctor, and their 96-year-old father, one of the founders of the Kesenene School. It was wonderful to be fully immersed in this agricultural area where they produce corn, bananas, coffee, cassava, sugar cane and a variety of fruits and vegetables.

The change that our organization can bring about in the education of children in these communities is the most important aspect of design. I believe that design anchors itself in the social justice movement and has the potential to aid far beyond the location in which it exists – as it empowers one community, it has the potential to inspire the empowerment of another. Design gives us the opportunity to use our creativity to affect real changes at home and abroad. Further I believe that all design, regardless of scale or location, can route itself in the movement if it only bases itself within the ideals of social and environmental equity. In this case, the creation of safe, healthy, comfortable learning environments will have a trickle down effect. As the children that are educated at these facilities gain the knowledge imparted to them, they will be empowered to improve their own lives, and the lives of those around them. To be a part of this is an utmost reward.

Thanks to AWB's generous support of the travel scholarship I was also able to participate in a University of Washington Seattle landscape design/build shortly

after my return from Uganda. We travelled to the cities of Tuzla and Bugojno, Bosnia & Herzegovina, building therapeutic gardens for children with disabilities.

Thank you for the support.  
James W. Frank

Note: James Frank completed this project in fall 2012 with AWB volunteer Victor Kolynchuk (MAA MRAIC)