

2017 AFSA Best Essay Winner - Claudia Amadeo-Luyt

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An American Thanksgiving Abroad

On a festive Thursday night in Nairobi, at the U.S. Ambassador's residence, I celebrated Thanksgiving and took the first bite of my pumpkin pie as a Kenyan gentleman sat next to me. I remember this evening vividly, as it would define my future passions in global health. After introducing himself, he recounted his life story. His name was Kennedy Odede, and he had grown up in Kibera, the largest urban informal settlement in Africa, just a few miles down the road from the Ambassador's residence. As an informal settlement, there were no adequate medical facilities, schools, clean water, or real sanitation. Kennedy told me how he had decided to forego a life of gangs and violence and take advantage of an aid organization's offer of an education. With this in hand, Kennedy had returned to Kibera to help the most vulnerable of his community - girls. He constructed a movement, Shining Hope for Communities (SHOFCO), as well as a school, the Kibera School for Girls (KSG). Meeting Kennedy was my most memorable Foreign Service experience, as it led me to Kibera and a future in global health.

I became a KSG teaching assistant, where I helped teachers both produce and implement their weekly academic calendars for the students, taught the youngest girls reading skills, developed creative projects for the students (the cards they made me are among my most prized possessions), managed and distributed school supplies, and translated Swahili for foreign visitors. Most significantly, I learned as much as I taught. I quickly grasped the dire healthcare situation Kibera residents faced. I saw the challenging home conditions of the girls, including physical violence, disease, poor sanitation, and malnutrition.

When I departed Kenya for New York, my most recent home, I successfully lobbied my new school's (the United Nations International School (UNIS)) administration to support me in founding a SHOFCO high school club. The SHOFCO UNIS Chapter is the first-ever SHOFCO high school organization. I connect UNIS students with Kibera students online, to inspire my New York peers to better understand the conditions in which much of the world's population lives and to instill a passion in them to help. This connection also raises awareness among KSG students of the opportunities beyond their settlement. To complement my leadership at UNIS, I intern weekly at SHOFCO's New York office to help create fundraising strategies in order to expand both SHOFCO's programs in Kibera and its network in the United States. By helping manage Kennedy's tour for his recent book, *Find Me Unafraid*, I further raised awareness about the needs of the girls in Kibera as well as of SHOFCO's work. SHOFCO exposed me to the urgent health challenges that Kibera residents, along with the millions of residents of other informal settlements globally, face daily. My efforts with SHOFCO, both in Kenya and in New York, changed my life as they charted my course towards a career in advocacy and global health. I am thankful for that Thanksgiving dinner in Nairobi.