

**Summer Internship Report 2017**

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**The Carter Center  
Kampala, Uganda**

**Provide an overview of the organization/research project and a summary of your responsibilities, tasks, and/or projects.**

The Carter Center (TCC) is basically one large Non Governmental Organization that has offices around the world. The organization's head office exists in Atlanta, and was founded as its name suggests by former President Jimmy Carter. In Kampala, Uganda's capital city, TCC specializes in control/elimination of the two vector born diseases Trachoma and Onchocerciasis, or "river blindness" as it is commonly referred to. Essentially, the entire operation can be viewed as one giant ongoing interdisciplinary research project that entails lab work, public education, treatment distribution, habitat destruction for the parasite, etc. It is important to note that all of TCC's work occurs in conjunction with Uganda's Ministry of Health, which is crucial to the organization's success. When TCC first began their work in Uganda during the 1990s, both of these diseases were present throughout the entire country, and were the number one cause of blindness in the country/continent. Now, the distribution of these diseases has been drastically reduced to just certain regions in the country. As an intern, I worked directly under the river blindness division of TCC, meaning all work I completed and everyone I reported to had nothing to do with the Trachoma sect of TCC, so I am really not able to speak on behalf of the Trachoma division and their procedures. For river blindness, the disease exists only in Northern Uganda. River blindness is spread through the black fly, whose bite transmits a parasite to humans which has the potential to cause blindness if a large amount of these parasites are accumulated. There is a simple treatment: a pill known as Ivermectin, which prevents the parasite from reproducing inside its host. The complicated part, however, is ensuring that all citizens in the infected areas receive this oral supplement on an annual basis. I mentioned earlier that TCC partners with the Ministry of Health, and that this part of the operation is necessary. This is because the country is divided into districts, which are then divided into 6 sub-counties, which are each divided into parishes, which are then divided into communities, and then lastly- the villages. Each one

of these levels has a health official who is informed about TCC's river blindness elimination mission and does their part accordingly to carry out this mission. This is the most important part of TCC's operation because it allows TCC to operate primarily in Kampala and communicate with various district representatives about updates, procedures, etc, instead of having to spend all of their time in the field. They do, however, make many trips to Northern Uganda to check in and make sure various Ministry of Health representatives are doing things the correct way, and sometimes perform other tasks.

My responsibilities were pretty simple - lots and lots of data entry. The Ivermectin tablets are very expensive, so each one that is handed out is documented on paper. The place, name of recipient, date, and location are all recorded, and it was largely my job to transcribe these paper records into TCC's electronic records. It is a tedious task, but the implications are huge. As all this information is entered into their system, their software can calculate annual elimination progress, which will then be published in journals and presented globally to different public health audiences. We did, however, attend two trips to the field up north, which lasted a total of 3 weeks. The first was to collect blood samples from different children to determine if the area could be considered "cured" of river blindness. For days, I poked the fingers of screaming children to collect their blood. It was quite an unforgettable experience. The second trip was also to a northern part of the country, and the purpose of this trip was to clarify confusing data. In theory, TCC's strategy of using representatives from all levels of each district is excellent, but if a member on the district or sub-county level does not take TCC's instructions seriously, it inevitably causes the representatives on the community and village level do a poor job of keeping record of treatment distribution. This was the case for this second trip I made, where we physically had to hunt down these records called registers, and computed the data ourselves while trying to clarify any discrepancies in the registers.

**During your internship, what did you accomplish or how did you make a difference? In what ways did you grow in your professional and technical skills?**

Because this project is such a large one on literally a countrywide scale, it is hard to say exactly what my work accomplished. I entered lots of data into TCC's computer system and their software can calculate annual elimination, which will then be published in journals and presented globally to different public health audiences. I definitely grew in my understanding of Microsoft Excel. As boring as it can be, I am thankful for these new skills as I know of their importance to many jobs. More importantly, I think I grew the most in my people skills. Ugandans have quirks and accents that are very different than Americans. Learning how to understand and go along with both is a skill that I am very happy to have developed.

**Describe a problem that you helped to solve at your internship. What skills or knowledge from your education at Sewanee helped you address the problem?**

To be honest, we never helped solve any problems. The entire operation in itself is one giant "problem" that all of TCC's time and effort is spent trying to "solve" but they never specifically gave me my own problem to figure out. TCC is a very self-sufficient operation in that they do not rely on outside help (besides funding), but they are extremely welcoming to visitors such as myself, and they have plenty of work for visitors to do. By no means though is this work groundbreaking, if that makes any sense.

### **In what way were your teamwork skills strengthened?**

I would say the main skill I strengthened while working with TCC was my awareness of my environment. People at TCC do not always work at the pace Americans are used to, and there are good reasons for this. As an intern, I found it a bit of a challenge at first to learn how to step back and work at the pace of others, especially having just graduated from Sewanee, where for so long the environment can be so competitive and hard to manage. Learning this was definitely necessary and I believe the alternative would have resulted in some unwanted tension between myself and other Carter Center employees.

### **How did your internship affect your career plans?**

Working with TCC helped reassure my plans to pursue medicine. While most of the work we did was far removed from the actual practice of medicine, I really enjoyed seeing countrywide health represented by various numbers on a computer screen and understanding what all the numbers meant. I also enjoyed learning about the complications TCC experiences, which are largely educational, as I believe many of the health complications Americans experience are sourced from the same lack of education.

### **In what ways did your internship cause you to encounter people of different backgrounds from your own? What steps did you take to communicate effectively with such persons? What did you learn from such persons' perspectives?**

In every way possible, this internship caused me to encounter different backgrounds. I had never traveled alone, or visited the continent of Africa, so a summer in Uganda without any true supervision was an incredible experience for me. There are no westerners employed in the Uganda division of The Carter Center, so my Sewanee colleague, Rebecca, and I stood out from the first day up until the last. This was not a bad thing at all, in fact all TCC's employees were very receptive to our arrival and treated us as guests to their country.

In terms of communicating, I found that the most effective approach was to listen more than speak. This is much easier said than done. Ugandans have a unique British African accent, and coming from a small town in Georgia, I found it fairly difficult to understand their accent upon my arrival. It is rude to ask others to constantly repeat themselves, so I really had to make an effort to listen, which goes back to the "all ears" statement I previously made. One thing I picked up on is Ugandans often use much enthusiasm in their speech, so at times when I lost track of what was being said, I could pay attention to their level of enthusiasm and conduct my body language and or response accordingly and generally this allowed me to remain in tune with the conversation until I was able to get back on track with what was said.

By and large, Ugandans are extremely positive people, which was a perspective I was not familiar with coming from the states where people allow small inconveniences to affect their mood. This alone was probably the main perspective/difference I will remember from the experience. Uganda as a nation is extremely religious and most people I met were more devout Christians than anyone I know back home, so it was interesting observing how this characteristic relates to the positivity I observed. It seemed that all good things that occurred, spontaneous or not, were attributed to God, and not one's own actions. Likewise, people seemed to not stress about adversity because of their confidence that God would take it off their hands. It is also normal for everyone to share their personal stories about how God fixed this, or provided that, etc, while in the workplace. This was one of the most interesting differences of the summer for myself, as I had never met people with such strong beliefs.

**Words of thanks to your internship funding donors:**

To all of those who afforded me this opportunity, I would like to send out a Uganda-sized thank you. I find it quite amusing that even after graduating from Sewanee, I still find myself very much apart of the University, some 7000 miles from home. In fact, I cannot imagine a better way to mentally process graduation and the previous four years of my life than with this internship, so I am very grateful for that. I hope that in the future I will be able to give back to the same institution that has allowed me to grow so much through experiences like my internship this summer. Thank you all.