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Environmental Education and Research Internship with Friends of Canon Gideon Foundation

Friends of Canon Gideon Foundation is an amazing organization which I have found has many more facets to its operational reach than I originally knew. Friends of Canon Gideon Foundation is the operator of the Hope Institute in a village of the Wakiso District outside of Kampala, Uganda. The Institute targets vulnerable youths (typically orphaned or from situations of severe poverty and between the ages of 17 and 25) and offers them vocational training in several different schools (like carpentry, fashion and design, advocacy, salon, and business) with a holistic approach to try to produce graduates who are spiritually empowered, social justice sensitive, HIV/AIDS knowledgeable, environmentally aware, gainfully skilled, and productively employed.

As a separate venture, the organization has just received national board approval for the founding of a Hope University in Semuto, Uganda with a similar holistic approach, but in a university setting. They will break ground on the building site within the year. We interns were able to attend a professors-in-residence forum where we helped plan the curriculum and incorporate community engagement for the different course majors to be offered after the university is built next year. As part of this university's future plans, we are partnering with Reverend Becca Stevens at Thistle Farms to produce "Hope Tea" as a social entrepreneurship project for university students to practice business, sustainable agriculture, and social justice skills.

FOCAGIFO is also the leader of a global working group on faith and the elimination of stigma, shame, denial, inaction, and mis-action associated with HIV/AIDS, comprised of over 30 member organizations. Finally, FOCAGIFO works with community members, particularly

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religious leaders and has done amazing work in reducing the stigma and shame associated with HIV/AIDS, allowing many religious leaders to proclaim their status fearlessly and do great work in their communities.

As an environmental education and research intern, my responsibilities were divided between community outreach, research, mapping, and blogging about our progress. I performed this community outreach by mobilizing Hope Institute students for community environmental events and developing a peer educator outreach program with the other interns for students at the Hope Institute in partnership with local primary schools. Through this program, the Hope Institute students deliver community health and environmental messages (which we found to be previously absent in the public primary school setting) to the young students there, while also serving as role models. We also held FOCAGIFO's first annual Health Cup tournament where we engaged the students and another local high school in a day of competitive sports, garbage clean up, and health and environmental messages. Our final week here, we planned "Wellness and Awareness Week," focused on engaging the students for at least two hours a day in activities that promoted environmental awareness, advocacy, self confidence, and physical fitness.

I was also tasked with developing community oriented messages about the need for proper garbage disposal, which I did first through environmental lessons at the Hope Institute, but ultimately through the implementation of a composting project, involving students from all schools in the creation of the bin (carpentry students), the lessons about its importance and proper use, and the instructions for its continued success and useful outcomes. We hope that the fertile soil produced from this compost project will result in some financial benefit for the

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institute by selling the soil and using it to plant a vegetable garden in the future. This bin will also be a great teaching tool for soil and agricultural science and proper garbage disposal.

Finally, it will result in less garbage lying around drawing harmful pests and spreading disease.

Another component of my internship was research by conducting a study of water use and management in the community in terms of household water use, strategies for water management, current practices of water management, and challenges related to water shortages. I accomplished this by meeting with several local officials at the subdistrict and district levels to discuss water, sanitation, and health (WASH) committees which are mandated by law to meet at the local level but due to lack of incentive and sensitization in an already financially burdened community, do not exist. I created a survey to distribute locally concerning sensitization to environmental issues, water use and availability, agricultural knowledge, and waste. I found that most people are sensitive to environmental issues and would even support a fine for littering, municipal garbage collection, and participation in water sanitation, and health committees if the proper resources were made available to them and it was not such a financial burden. More information about this research and all of our projects can be found at our blog, hopeinstitutehealthandenvironment.wordpress.com.

I gained so much valuable perspective from this internship. I felt the immense personal gain that comes from spreading new ideas that people are grateful for and plan to continue. I also felt the wonderful satisfaction of working with the students and breaking down barriers and stereotypes that exist about Americans living in a perfect and untouchable universe entirely separate from the students'. Knowing that by the end they understood that we are people just like them and experience challenges and problems too was gratifying as it allowed us to connect with

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them in a personal and unforgettable way. It was also important to feel the struggle of working for an organization with so much hope and so many amazing goals, but constantly feeling limited by a lack of funding and support. Before I left for my internship, I was not sure about my next steps. I was considering physicians assistant school or maybe just job searching until I found something. During my time here I was able to meet some amazing women who have made real contributions to their community and world. I met with a woman named Sara Kaweesa who operates the Ugandan chapter of A Rocha International and has actually patented several environmental technologies including bio-sand water filters which can safely filter up to 100 liters of water a day without external energy input. We were so amazed by these that the interns all decided to chip in and buy two for the Hope Institute. I also had the opportunity to meet Reverend Dr. Becca Stevens, founder of Thistle Farms, who visited for one week to discuss her new social entrepreneurship project with the future Hope University, "Hope Tea." I was so inspired by her work both with the women at Thistle Farms and with the tea farmers, environmentalists, and stakeholders here in Uganda that I really began thinking about my own passions, talents, and skills and realized that social entrepreneurship was the right future path for me to pursue. I have already scheduled a meeting upon my return to talk to Becca about her recommendations for my next step and I have already applied for four jobs since then within that field. Thus, my experiences, impact, interaction with the staff of FOCAGIFO, and interaction with inspiring and amazing women like Sara and Becca have truly altered the course of my life. Though my internship was not without struggle, feelings of uncertainty about my contribution, technological difficulties, and cultural barriers to overcome, I would never change anything about my time here. I know it has been a mutually beneficial internship for me and for

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FOCAGIFO and the Hope Institute. I can't wait to come back and to keep following up with the organization about their progress and what I can do to help them grow.