

Benedictine Volunteer Corps

Stories of Nairobi

Matthew Gish

This past spring, I lifted an uneasy finger and then let it fall decisively onto my computer mouse. That nerve-wracking click delivered an email to the Mayo Clinic Alix School of Medicine confirming my deferral of matriculation in favor of a year of service in Kenya with the Benedictine Volunteer Corps (BVC). My decision to delay medical school for a year was difficult to make—and even more so to justify. As I struggled to provide explanations to my loved ones and to my own anxious mind, I found solace in the stories that I would surely bring back home.

A member of the monastic community once told me that many people spend their lives building their résumé, but the wiser ones spend their lives crafting their eulogy. A morbid thought? Perhaps. But in light of Saint Benedict's exhortation to keep death daily before our eyes (RB 4-47), we would do well to ensure that our parting paragraph be rich with good stories. With this in mind, I joined the BVC in Kenya, hoping to return with a lifetime of experiences to share.

In only a few weeks, I have amassed a multitude of stories—some humorous, some humbling, some inspiring, and many embarrassing—thanks to the



Mathare slum, Nairobi

abundant service opportunities in Nairobi. At a small hospital run by the Missionary Benedictine Sisters of Ruaraka, my BVC partner Griffin Scholl and I assist in the laboratory, the injection room, and the child-welfare clinic. We teach science and math to children at St. Benedict's Primary School. We regularly walk deep into the Mathare slum to Saint Benedict's Children Centre (affectionately known as Madodo, in honor of the signature lunch of cooked beans), where we prepare kids for entry into the Kenyan education system for which they currently lack the resources or support. We work with Alfajiri, a rehabilitation center that uses art, dance, karate, and other creative outlets to guide street children toward brighter futures. And because the BVC experience

is more than just work, we've had opportunities to explore the city, feed giraffes, eat street food, run in the forest, attend feasts with monastic communities, and hike many of the tallest peaks in the country. I even have a standing offer to travel to a rural village to slaughter a ram!

Each day in Nairobi brings experiences that I will treasure for the rest of my life. I've found that the most impactful stories come not from my mouth but from the people all around me. I've had to teach myself not to get caught up in my own journey in Kenya and thus fail to listen to the incredible people here. I have learned that simply sitting and listening provides more precious memories than days on Mount Kenya. I listened, for example, to a social worker

named Vincent from Madodo explain the challenges of getting kids from the slum into schools. He was frustrated with apathetic parents and a national education system that is too expensive for many kids to attend even primary school. Yet he perseveres in his work, pointing to eight pictures of young men and women, donned in caps and gowns—each is a college graduate who came to the center years ago. Like a proud parent boasting of the accomplishments of his children, he beams as he explains that the success of a few kids makes the struggle worthwhile.

I have also chatted with a teenager named Rafiki. He recalled how he fled from an abusive father and traveled many miles to the streets of Nairobi, where he soon became addicted to huffing the jet fuel that dulled the pain of his difficult life. He was blacklisted from rehabilitation centers due to his propensity for relapsing. Only after the Alfajiri program offered him the grace and patience required for his rehabilitation was he able to keep himself sober and excel in school. He spoke with a firm sense of peace and gratitude, never expressing anger about the hand that he had been dealt in his young life.

Perhaps the most powerful conversation I've had was expressed in just two words. While walking through Mlango Kubwa, a particularly unruly section of the



The joy that the slum cannot steal.

slum and home for many young street kids, I encountered a boy named Yosef. Tugging my arm, he pointed to a slab of concrete beneath a porous tin roof and whispered *nalala hapo*: that is where I sleep. He spoke no English, and my Swahili skills are a work in progress. But I observed what words could not express. The scars on his young face confirm his past difficulties, while his unwavering smile speaks of hope in a brighter future. Skipping and dancing through the littered dirt roads, he silently reveals: "I have a joy that the slum cannot steal."

During my brief service in Kenya, I have gained a lifetime of experiences and insight. I have learned that the stories I love the most will never be my own. Listening to others has deepened my knowledge and wisdom more than any personal adventure. I'm grateful for my education here and for the Benedictine Volunteer Corps that has taught me to incline the ear of my heart (RB Prol.1) so that I may say: Vincent. Rafiki. Yosef. *Mnasikika*. You are heard.

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