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Katie Edwards, Assistant Professor of Psychology, COLA travels to South Africa and Kenya

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UNH Global

Katie Edwards

Assistant Professor of Psychology, COLA—South Africa and Kenya

I had the privilege of traveling to Johannesburg and Durban, South Africa and Nairobi, Kenya for several weeks in January and February to learn more about the innovative sexual violence prevention work happening across the African continent. Not only were my travels intellectually stimulating and professionally rewarding, they were also personally transformative.

During the first part of my trip, I visited Dr. Rachel Jewkes, the Director of the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) in Pretoria (South Africa) and Consortium Director of What Works to Prevent Violence, Globale Programme. Dr. Jewkes is an internationally renowned researcher in the field of gender transformative prevention initiatives. I have read most of her 150+ journal publications and the opportunity to meet her in person was a real honor. We

discussed similarities and differences in violence prevention in South Africa (and the African continent more broadly) and the U.S., the importance of cultural adaptation of violence prevention initiatives, and the importance of nuanced approaches to helping boys and men through evidence-informed programming reconstruct their masculinity and explore multiple ways of being a man (other than hegemonic masculinities that are so closely linked with perpetrating gender and power based violence). We also discussed the controversies in the field regarding empowerment-based



Katie Edwards (l.) at Nairobi National Park with Eva, now one of the leaders in Ujamaa Africa

self-defense as a risk reduction tool for sexual violence among girls and women, and our agreement that it is indeed not victim blaming (as data suggest) to offer women and girls proven strategies to thwart a sexual assault especially when we have yet to eradicate sexual violence from our world. No Means No Worldwide, which I will be in Nairobi next week to observe (and is the whole reason I am here on this journey!), is part of the What Works to Prevent Violence Consortium that Dr. Jewkes directs. I left our visit with new insights, including an idea for enhancing an evaluation project that we are about to launch at UNH!

Next, I went for a quick trip to Durban (South Africa) where I visited with Dr. Mags Beksinska, Deputy Executive Director of the the MatCH (Maternal, Adolescent and Child Health Systems) Research Unit affiliated with the University of the Witwatersrand. Dr. Beksinska and her team conduct a number of research studies focused on improving sexual and reproductive health outcomes for women and girls. Dr. Beksinska's team is also leading an evaluation of a modified Stepping Stones curriculum, which is a gender transformative HIV/STI and violence prevention program used in over 40 countries. Given the intersection of partner and sexual violence with other negative health behaviors (e.g., risky sexual practices) and overlapping etiological pathways, it is important to think about prevention initiatives that can concurrently target multiple health behaviors, something that I am trying to do more of in my own work in the U.S.

After visiting with renowned researchers in South Africa, I headed to Nairobi, Kenya where I had the opportunity to visit with Ujumaa-Africa, an NGO that seeks to prevent violence against women and children. I had the privilege of accompanying observing violence prevention programming— No Means No Kenya (NMNK) and Your Moment of Truth (YMT)—in primary and secondary schools in various slums in Nairobi. Not only did I feel personally impacted by the programming, but I could quickly see that both of the programs were truly state-of-the art and aligned with all of the best practices in prevention sciences (e.g., highly trained and engaging instructors, varied teaching methods, culturally relevant). I was also struck by the high levels of student engagement in the classes that I observed—my speculation is that this is a combination highly effective instructors, topics of great personal relevance to the youth, and the hope that the skills learned in this program will help youth be not only safe, but thrive and succeed.

I also had the chance to speak with a number of instructors about their experiences teaching the curricula to youth. What stood out to me most from these meetings is the extent to which the instructors have been personally impacted by their experiences as instructors and their perceived



Your Moment of Truth (YMT) class being taught by a colleague, Peter Gawo

impact on the youth with whom they have worked. The instructors, who all grew up in the slums in which they currently teach, told me, for example, that being an instructor has helped them to be a better father and husband, gain assertiveness and confidence, and to feel like they finally had a purpose in life. The instructors also shared a number of examples of the ways in which they felt like they had an impact on youth, such as being the first person

a young survivor told about a sexual assault victimization experience to providing basic information about what the first menstrual cycle would be like to a young girl who did not have anyone at home to talk to her this about.

Across all of these experiences in Nairobi, I heard girls sharing stories of how they put their skills to use to thwart an attempted rape, boys speaking about redefining masculinity (the new Kenyan man) that encompasses compassion and vulnerability and love, and instructors discussing the impact of their work, including the personal transformations that it has engendered. I also heard stories of hardship, loss, and trauma—losing loved ones to HIV/AIDS and other preventable illnesses, not having enough money for food or clean water, experiencing ongoing rape perpetrated by a father or step-father, trafficking drugs in order to feel a sense of belongingness and/or make money to purchase goods for basic life necessities, and historic and systemic discrimination based on class, gender, and tribal background.

Yet, despite this, the people I met, and especially the children, found joy in the simplest of things, such as playing contently alone with a stick in the mud or splashing with other children in a contaminated river for hours on end. The people I met were also incredibly resourceful and creative. I was also struck by the eagerness and determination with which youth were engaged in the classes that I observed, and the goals and hopes that youth had for their futures. I imagine that this hope is in part due not only to the NMNK and YMT classes, but the instructors of the NMNK and YMT classes too. Recall that the classes are all taught by adults, primarily young adults, who grew up in the slums in which they are teaching. These are all individuals who even in the face of extreme hardships, losses, and/or traumas, have overcome and epitomize the resilience and compassion of the human

spirit. They have devoted their lives to mentoring, guiding, teaching, and serving youth in their communities, and the passion, personal connection, and sheer excellence they bring to their work is palpable. The conversations that I had with the instructors and time I spent observing them in the classroom were by far the most impactful and meaningful part of my entire journey. I am so very grateful to these individuals, for their impact that they had on me and the impact that they are having on the thousands of youth they reach.

Reflecting on my travels, I am struck, not so much about how much and what I learned about gender- and power-based violence, but more so about the personal and emotional impact this process has had on me. Over the past few weeks, I have been more mindful and present in my day to day experiences than I have been for some time. I found joy in simple things, like a drink of cold, clean water; a warm shower to clean away the sweat and dust of the day; the silence and rest I was able to find at night, even in the endless noise of Nairobi; the way the wind felt on my face riding on the back of a motor bike through the slums; and the excitement I found in riding the loud, flashy, hot, crowded, and bumpy matatus for hours at a time.

Above all else, I am most appreciative to the people that I met in Nairobi. I am humbled by the gratitude and generosity that others showed me including, such as children hugging me and gently shaking my hands to greet me as I arrived to their slum or school; my host family cooking me delicious meals, folding my blankets after a night's rest, and talking with me for hours at a time about our cultures, backgrounds, and traditions; and agency staff who took me everywhere and carried my bag for hours on end to ensure my personal safety and the safety of my things (e.g., cell phone, laptop; things that most people I met would only dream to have).



Across all of these interactions, there was a mutual desire to connect and to learn from one another and understand our similarities and differences. There was also laughter, especially as we navigated language barriers or when learning about a novel cultural practice or tradition that was perceived by the “other” as quite the idiosyncrasy. Despite our many differences, there was something quite simple and human about the way in which we

Prof. Edwards (r.) wearing a Kenyan necklace, a gift from Maureen (l.), a member of Ujamaa Africa forever bind us.

connected, and although thousands of miles apart, our devotion to preventing gender- and power- based violence are the ties that will

I keep thinking back to conversations I had with NMNK and YMT instructors. In every conversation that I had, someone uttered some variation of “the person that I was when I started here is not the person that I am today.” The instructors were referring to the profound personal impact that their work as NMNK and YMT instructors had on their personal lives. Although I was impacted in a very different way, I also am not the same person that I was when I embarked on my journey to the African continent. I am returning not only with more knowledge of and a deep appreciation for the work of Ujamaa-Africa, but with a sense of humility, gratitude, present-mindedness, calmness, and purpose that I did not have prior to my journey. I look forward to returning to Nairobi one day and in the meantime doing whatever I can from the U.S. to support the critically important and impactful work of Ujamaa-Africa.

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