

Last summer my best friend and I spent three months living and tutoring in the Sandra Lee Center HIV/aids orphanage in Mbabane, Swaziland. It's an interesting trip for us to explain; everybody asks about it, but aside from my mother, few truly want to hear. Our classmates resent us deeply, as if the few times we mentioned it we might have taken the liberty to nominate ourselves for a nobel prize, whereas our adult friends have the misconstrued idea that we deserve one. They've created a lovely romance, *Two Kenai High Girls Spread Love and Education To Africa!* When writing an essay for the purpose of endorsing myself—an all too familiar concept this year—what better story than that?

But in truth, what I felt the most at Sandra Lee was my immense inability to help anyone where they were truly in need. What world takes only three months to change? We spent 10 hour days grasping at straws to teach a decade's worth of missing education to 31 orphans in time for their exams. Another fail, and some of them would be done with their education forever. In spite of our dedicated pursuits, long division couldn't be mastered by a child who lacked both the ability to perform simple addition, and the care to ever learn. Swaziland has a beautiful culture, but the nation is plagued by a lack of education: it sets the tone for sexual, racial, and economic inequality. I fell hopelessly in love with those kids, and was heartbroken to watch their young lives already shaped by disadvantages they were unaware they had the power to change.

With a desire to understand the educational problem, we reached out to one of the kid's schools. A misunderstanding with the administration led to our volunteer employment as teachers of all third- and fourth-grade reading classes, four times a week. We became aware that the Swazi public school system was, for the most part, unregulated by the government. This particular school served little more purpose than that of an equally unregulated day care facility. With more time in the classrooms, I had an inkling that it wasn't missing book knowledge setting their students back, but the lack of motivating relationships between the masses of students and their educators. Why were two inexperienced 17-year-old girls their first exposure to passionate, encouraging, and attentive learning? It didn't matter their background of neglect, be it educational, nutritional, or emotional. Developing a belief in their capability to think for themselves, their unique potential, and that somebody—somewhere in the world—would care if they reached it, transformed the classrooms we taught in. Intellectual insecurity towards learning became a hungry excitement to discover, and progress. I saw hopeless disadvantage in a world that I didn't understand, but in just days those kids showed me how powerless disadvantage can be in a life dedicated to overcoming it.

They might never receive devoted teaching from their schools, and my orphanage kids might still fail every exam they take. They might leave school and become farmers, or maids. My own ideals of occupational success don't amount to importance in their ability to lead a good life. It doesn't matter if those kids can pass the SAT's. What matters is that they never, for one second, forget that they have capable minds. They can think, and learn, and explore, and fight for what they believe. They might even overcome a government that oppresses their gender, religion, sexuality, or race. I might not be able to take three months and change the face of that country, but those kids can.

I have always had teachers who loved me and believed in the things I could do. Their influence in my life pushed me to believe I could conquer the world if I wanted, and until

recently, I was ignorant that some lived without that hope. I was ignorant of the beautiful opportunity hope can create, and the immobility in a life without it. This is the most powerful lesson I have ever learned, and the way I hope to empower my classmates, coworkers, family members, and friends. I want to believe in them, and give them every reason possible to believe in themselves. They can change their own worlds if they want to. Together we might just be able to change ours.