

The Safe House - Blog Post
Indigo Miller
May 15th, 2017

Clouds of grey dust billowed between the buildings this past Thursday and Friday as workers drilled a much needed well. The noise and not so thin layer of dust brought reliable water to the Safe House making the commotion well worth it.

In the three weeks I have been here, the Safe House, or Nyumba Salama, has lived up to its name.

This place provides so much more than safety for girls and young women fleeing the brutal practice of female genital mutilation (FGM). Here young girls find safety from an early marriage and obligatory end to their education. The Safe House provides safety from ignorance, as girls here are free to attend primary and secondary school or the vocational skills classes provided in house. The Safe House cultivates safety from poverty, as girls develop confidence and skills that increase their value in their families and communities beyond just that of marriageability. The Safe House also goes above and beyond by filling the role of family to a vivacious three year old, who was abandoned as a malnourished infant, and a young mother and child who seek divorce and freedom from domestic abuse.



It is a humbling experience to join a community like the one cultivated at the Safe House. I was initially drawn to their work via their frequent and hope filled Facebook updates, and I am now honored to contribute what I can for the six weeks I am here volunteering. Though my interests lay in health education, the Safe House is in need of a permanent computer teacher as well as an English teacher for the girls who are unable to attend formal school. For these six weeks I am happy to take on that role while providing health input when necessary.



Each morning I join the twenty some young women taking vocational classes in the Safe House computer lab. We immediately start a figurative dance with the laptops and the chargers to see if we can keep everything charged up enough to practice typing skills and maneuvering the Internet. The group often piles several girls to a computer and takes turns practicing typing games, writing

letters, or challenging my Swahili to English skills with Google Translate. It's very clear their desire to learn these valuable technical skills is never hampered by the challenges

posed by using donated computers that are in constant need of IT maintenance along with the struggle to keep those battery bars full.

While the computers themselves persistently test my patience, when I am teaching English I find I rely greatly on the patience of the girls as I put my beginner Swahili to work teaching their beginner English. The group has a wide range of English knowledge and skills, but it is a joy and a challenge to move slowly through lessons with those who need the help, while allowing those who can, help me in the learning process as well. Most notably the group loves to sing. I am thankful for my repertoire of youth camp songs that have proven an effective and fun way to practice the challenges of English pronunciations.

There are diverse health needs here as well. Girls of all ages create a mild chaos in the daily activities of living with 80 girls in one bunkhouse. I have counseled about the only proper use of toothbrushes, how to avoid all too frequent UTIs, and how to care for ones body through puberty. I also look forward to teaching about menstrual hygiene and the use of both disposable and reusable cloth pads that the girls are making themselves.

I am providing what help I can during the short time I am here, but ultimately the experience of witnessing the hard work and patience that Rhobi the Director, Neema the Social Worker, and each of the staff and volunteers dedicate to all of these girls is a testament to the need for broad changes. Their daily struggle to provide education and opportunity to these girls with few options is constantly met with frustrating challenges like get their funding for food and supplies from their governing diocese in Musoma. The Safe House staff heroically shelter, feed, and educate girls while building bridges back to their families with hope of cultivating communities that turn their back on harmful practices like FGM and child marriage and open their eyes to the benefits of educating their girls alongside their boys.



Incredible work often requires give and take and finding a balance between chaos and order, or commotion and progress. Just like the drilling of a well, providing safety and education to girls in need requires being open to a gritty reality in order to drink the fresh water of change.



-Bio-

Indigo is a registered nurse from the United States who is passionate about women's health, reproductive education, and traveling. This is her second time to Tanzania, and she has been here volunteering in Arusha since October 2016 before coming to Mugumu in April 2017. She will start school this fall at Boston University pursuing a Masters of Public Health.