

Comfort the Children International is a brave little organization that does community development in Maai Mahiu, Kenya. They want to see the livelihood and happiness of Kenyans increase. The headquarters for the organization is based out of Austin, Texas, but all of the projects and initiatives are geared towards helping the community in Maai Mahiu. Maai Mahiu is located on the central Naivasha highway that connects several important trading cities within the Great Rift Valley Region and Nairobi. As a result, Maai Mahiu is a unique melting pot of many surrounding tribes and people. The quality of life, however, is treacherous. Trash and sewage cover the streets, and it almost constantly smells like burning rubber. Prostitution is one of the town's biggest industries and STD's run rampant. Needless to say, there are a lot of Kenyans there who see no hope.

As the name suggests, the original focus of the organization largely involved taking care of Kenyan children with mental or physical disabilities within Maai Mahiu community. The program began to evolve once the leaders of the organization realized that "helping" is not single faceted and that we could not address one area of need adequately without addressing all areas equally. From there the organization began to explore ways to improve the livelihood of these broken communities by approaching community development holistically. The five initiatives that CTC has honed in on are: Education, Environment, Economy, Health and Community. Essentially, through these initiatives, CTC aims to fight the cycle of poverty by empowering communities to help themselves.

The diversity of CTC's different project designs and strategies for empowering community is delightfully overwhelming. Projects range from recycling trash to fuel a

bread oven for the community, to setting up poultry farming, to organizing support groups for grandmothers fostering orphaned children, to connecting Kenyans with organizations like Whole Foods for marketing handmade products, to sponsoring local football (soccer) teams, and the list goes on.

Last year I actually had the privilege of working with CTC as their On-field Media Manager. Growing up in East Africa has provided me with a unique skill set of being able to understand Kenyan culture, knowing when it is appropriate to pull out a camera or not, and knowing how to conduct interviews with different types of tribes. Despite my confident enthusiasm, however, last year proved to be somewhat unproductive. That's not to say that last year was a failure. Last year's internship taught me a lot, and I had a tremendously valuable experience, but I was not able to produce as much video for CTC as I had hoped. No sooner had my internship ended before I began dreaming of ways I could return for another shot.

Prior to returning to Kenya this year, I spoke with CTC's Creative Director, and we talked about what we could have done differently to make my work in Kenya more productive. After I received internship funding from Sewanee, CTC actually flew me to their headquarters in Austin so that I could meet their US team in person and get a better feel for the organization as a whole. Though I was only there for a few days, my time in Austin was extremely inspiring and I was able to prepare my mind and spirit for my video project in Kenya. I will admit that I also was a little intimidated. Though my job description had more structure and significance to it, I feared I wouldn't be able to complete all of the "assignments" that CTC had laid out for me as far as certain videos and footage that they wanted captured and edited.

This year marked the 10th anniversary of Comfort the Children International. It also marked the coming together and harvesting of many of CTC's projects. It has been a truly beautiful few months. Some of the more exciting successes have been seeing the continued flourishing of CTC's partnership with Whole Foods, the groundbreaking for *Ubuntu* café, the Maasai beadwork partnership, and (finally) bringing water to the new seven acres of land CTC has begun building on.

The advantage of returning to an organization as an intern was that I was able to hit the ground running. I had to polish the dust off a couple of old contacts and friendships that had tarnished a bit for the nine months I had been away, but I found myself being productive very soon after arriving. One of the more valuable skills I learned was to personally take more risks. Last year, one of my biggest enemies was my own lack of confidence. I was always questioning myself, is this really what they want? Is this professional enough? Will people think I am being exploitive? Is this interview appropriate? This year the same questions rose up everywhere I went, but I was much more cavalier when they came up. I went with my gut and didn't waste time. To my surprise, I got great feedback from the staff back in Austin and this inspired me to be more creative and bold in my filming and editing style.

The interesting thing about any type of video or media is that you have been given a large degree of power. People sometimes forget that about filmmakers. I often think people write guys like me off as tech savvy kids who like taking artsy photos of street musicians with their fancy cameras. But no, watching a video is having an experience. For people who don't have the chance to see firsthand what is happening with CTC in Kenya, my videos will be their experience. Therefore, I have the power to

decide what they will see - which largely shapes what they will believe and feel about the organization and the situation in Kenya. It is an entirely underrated position; even I underrated it until I actually began to do it and felt the effects and rewards of being able to shape others' perceptions.

Harnessing this power is exhilarating - I promise you that. But it is also terrifying. One of the things I kept looking for was accountability from my colleagues in Kenya. Though the Austin staff and Kenya staff work together in spirit, several thousand miles of ocean is enough space to lose some transparency between the two teams. One of the most helpful tools I was able to take advantage of was to show my videos to just about any and every CTC staff member who would give me the time of day to watch one or two of them. It happened more than once where I would put together a video that looked great, but I would have missed some important aspects of a project or initiative and the staff were able to remind me of these errors and hold me accountable. By doing this, the "shaping" was not entirely on me and my perceptions of what CTC was doing. I was able to publish videos that everyone felt comfortable with.

One of the more challenging aspects of this project was working with my boss, Cali, CTC's creative director. The dynamics were awkward because she was in Austin and I was in Kenya and our time zones never matched up. We ended up emailing almost every day. When I was able to get decent Internet service (rare), I would upload videos for Cali and other CTC Austin Staff to review and critique. The feedback was always helpful but the demands of the US branch were often rigid and particular. They had to be. CTC had promises to US sponsors and donors that needed to be fulfilled and shown. Rigidness and specificity, however, run very counter to Kenyan culture. Kenyan

culture, in general, is not time oriented. Things get done when they get done and that is that. Life is too short to lose your cool over trying to get things done. That is very different in comparison to typical Western culture where deadlines are expected to be met and progress is expected to be seen on a consistent and orderly timeline. Thus, it was challenging trying to honor the expectations of my Western boss and her deadlines while working in a relaxed Kenyan environment. Often interviews or certain shots got pushed off to this day or that day. I found myself writing tediously long emails to Cali to explain to her why I was off schedule. I don't regret writing a single one of these emails, though. One thing I learned was that communication is as important as getting work done. Honesty, a realistic attitude, and willingness to adapt and work hard are a recipe for success.

The ability to adapt is something I am continually learning how to do. Living in and working in Kenya will teach you not to act too quickly and not to be too surprised at any bizarre situation that pops up. This is not the same thing as lowering your standards. When things start getting crazy, lowering your standard or goal can make achievement a lot more easy and manageable. I used to think I had this down pretty well, but I was thoroughly humbled this summer. There is a balance between changing destination versus changing the course at which to arrive at the same destination. Sometimes an obstacle would pop up when shooting a video, and I would ask myself, "Okay, how can I still finish this video" or "Should I make a different video entirely?" And of course, there was never any black or white answer. I would shake my head, shrug, and keep the camera rolling. The idea is to keep moving forward. Sometimes I felt like I was stumbling towards my goals, swaying from side to side, leaning on this wall,

grabbing on to that rail, trying to focus on the end and keep my balance without letting everything blur. I am not sure if it was a good thing or not, but I learned to be comfortable in this chaotic work environment. I learned to have faith in myself and my work and trust that if I just kept stumbling forward, things would eventually fall into place.

And they did!

*If you are interested, here are some of the videos I worked on. They are all very short and the idea is to communicate CTC's vision without wasting too much of your time*

<https://vimeo.com/48007976>

<https://vimeo.com/47670948>

<https://vimeo.com/47602745>

<https://vimeo.com/45560675>