

## The Juliette Low Seminar by Heidi



People smiling, despite living in poverty, is my lasting image from my time in Kenya. It was a very humbling experience because it was the basics of life. But even though they were living in extreme poverty they were always laughing and having a good time.

I spent three weeks in Kenya on my Juliette Low scholarship. I spent a few days in the capital, Nairobi, then a week the village of Londiani, before attending the Juliette Low seminar at a conference facility an hour out of Nairobi.

For me the experience was eye-opening from the moment I stepped off the plane. Even my host family in Nairobi had a lifestyle quite different from what I was used to. Constant power outages means electricity is unreliable in Nairobi, but my host family's power had been completely cut off as a result of the unpredictable grid. No running water and no flush toilet were also a challenge. You had to fill the cistern with a bucket to flush the toilet and have bucket showers. It was really interesting to be staying with a family very similar to my own who lived like that.

My host family worked in embassies in Nairobi and had travelled the world with their work so were relatively affluent compared to many in Kenya. In the next stage of my visit I was to discover how the majority of Kenyans lived and the hardships they face every day.

## **Friends of Londiani**

As part of a group of 16 guides from throughout the world and five Kenyan guiding volunteers I took part in Friends of Londiani projects. Established by the Irish Girl Guides in partnership with the World Association of Girl Guides (WAGGGS) the Friends of Londiani began in 2002. It followed on from a service project at the Bethel Children's Home, a Londiani orphanage. The Friends' prime goals are to improve access to clean water, health and education in Londiani and the surrounding district of Kipkelion.

Kipkelion is located in the north west of Kenya on the Ugandan border. The village of Londiani is about the size of a small suburb in New Zealand but it has a density of population not seen even in the inner city areas of our bigger towns. Even though that little village was 10 minutes to walk across it wouldn't be uncommon for 10,000 people to live in it. There were just people everywhere. I think that was the biggest thing that struck me, it was the people, the amount of people.

While the image of Africa is often of a dry, hot country Londiani was warm for most of the day, only getting hot at mid-day, and was very cold in the evenings. The surrounding area was also relatively lush and green, and I was impressed to see crops of corn growing to head height. Located at an altitude of over 2,000 metres made the going tough at times and I had to take that into consideration. You had to pace yourself so you didn't suffer. You couldn't run round, you just had to plod along because you'd get tired and dizzy.

Most homes were made of mud with either a thatched or an iron roof. Iron roofs doubled as a means for collecting water. Sanitation was basic, consisting of pit latrines with squat toilets.

One of the Friends of Londiani projects was to improve the conditions of the pit latrines by installing ventilation pipes to remove the fumes, making them less of a potential health hazard.

Like many areas of Africa clean water is not always available in the Kipkelion region and this lack of clean water has a devastating effect on the health of the local people. I spent one day working on a water tank programme. Eight new water tanks were put into a local village. Each water tank would service about 10 families. That meant 80 families had access to clean water for drinking and cooking.

The water tank project was typical of the work done by the Friends of Londiani. Their mission is to work in partnership with the people of Londiani and the surrounding areas to create sustainable community projects to enable people to improve the quality of their lives based on their own values. It's giving the people the power to change their own lives.

The Bethel Children's Home is a home for orphaned and abandoned children, many of whom have families affected by Aids / HIV positive. I spent a day working in the home and her group painted furniture and walls, planted vegetables, did gardening and generally helped out in the home.

My guiding experience really came into play when I helped run a summer camp in the local school for boys and girls aged five to 16. We taught them games and songs, the basic girl guide things.

Another day was spent surveying the people in the local area to ensure the Friends' projects were meeting the needs of the people and to ascertain what future projects were necessary.

We would go to a little outlying village in the district and we would survey the families about how many were living in the home, what were their ages and what kind of facilities they had. It went through health, how many children were born, deaths in the family, education, what their toilets were like, their water supply, what they grew and how they made their money.

This gave me an understanding of the way the people lived. People would make gadgets for hand washing facilities and proper drainage for their dishes, the sort of things we would do in New Zealand on a camp for fun but they were doing it to better their lives.

I also got to meet many of the locals, an experience that I treasure. When we visited the village the children would flock to you. We'd have 20 kids following us around.

I soon became aware that the rat race meant nothing in Africa, but a health day gave her some insight into just how laid back things could be. In Kenya there doesn't seem to be any stress or rushing or being on time. It's more, it will be done when it's done. The health day was classic, it was meant to start at 8 o'clock in the morning, we opened the gates at 11 o'clock but people waited and they were happy to wait.

Stations were set up around a large field with information on malaria, nutrition, TB, Aids, hygiene, de-worming, maternal and child health care, and dental health. Between 500 and 1,000 villages turned up for the health day. In groups of 20 they would go round each station. At this health day malaria was a big focus, with the Friends of Londiani supplying simple means to combat the deadly disease, such as malaria nets. Friends of Londiani are an organisation trying to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015; they are well on their way to achieving most of their targets.

### **A Safari in Leadership**

After my week in Londiani I travelled back to the capital to attend the Juliette Low Seminar. Held at Brackenhurst, a Christian camp with motel units and seminar rooms, I joined 64 participants from 61 different countries. The biggest contingent was from Africa, with 29 African countries represented. Juliette Low seminar focus on leadership development, and under the title A Safari in Leadership, the Kenyan event focused on the newly-launched WAGGGS leadership development programme.

Participants were taken through five of the modules in the programme; ourselves as leaders, our own personal development as leaders, advocacy, the position that WAGGGS is taking with advocacy and diversity.

They talked a lot about the service guides are doing, whether it is service or advocacy and how service projects can be turned into advocacy projects.

When we do service projects it is easy to speak out about things, to do the project and then to educate others about it as well. They were saying that if we just put a little bit more into our community service projects then they can turn into a bigger advocacy project and really get our message across.

As part of the seminar the participants spent a day looking at local advocacy project, and I visited the Kibera Girl Guides Centre. Kibera is the second largest slum in Africa, after Soweto in South African. Kenyan guides established a centre in Kibera in 1997 to help girls who can't afford secondary school education. Primary school education is free in Kenya but you have to pay for a secondary education and many parents in Kibera can't afford to send their daughters to school. The centre provides vocational training so the girls will be able earn money for themselves when they are older.

Visiting the centre was inspirational. "The Kenyan guides are really good at helping the community and this little centre is the oasis in this huge slum area."

I visited the homes of some of the girls from the centre and says this was an amazing experience.

They live in a square hut made out of whatever material they can get hold of, either wood, mud or corrugated iron. The shacks are lined with cardboard for warmth. They normally partition half the house off, with one side for living, the other for the bedroom and there could be up to eight people or more living in these shacks.

Theft is not an issue in the slum because there's nothing to steal. The biggest fear for the girls is being raped. When night falls they're shut in the house. If they need to go to the toilet, even though it's a short walk of 10 to 15 metres, they have to use a chamber pot or have a family member take them for protection.

There were areas in the slum awash with mud and toilet waste and people often emptied their chamber pots straight into the street rather than the latrine. The smell was just out of this world. It was shocking, visiting these girls and seeing how they lived.

Talking to the Kenyan guides I discovered the problems of Kibera are not easily fixed. The government were trying to fix it. They'd move out a section of people to build new homes, but meanwhile the people had problems getting to work or school. They couldn't always afford the extra bus fares from where they had been relocated. For many this meant the difference between survival and sinking into extreme poverty.

After my visit the Kibera slum the Juliette Low participants spent time reflecting on what they had seen and discussing the issues of diversity, accepting others and the impact of their attitudes on other people. They then launched into goal setting and action projects for what they would do when they got home.

My Action Plan is attached and is written for Project GOLD.

At the end of the seminar I spent a few days around Nairobi doing city tours, visiting museums and animal centres. On one of the days we went to Neyri to visit Paxtu and BP's grave.

Now the JLS Facebook page is busy with messages firing around globe at one another. I would love to return to Londiani in the future with the possibility of leading Project Awhina. . I think the Irish team of people that they have there are just amazing people and the Kenyans are amazing. The Friends of Londiani have created a little piece of paradise, and I believe that New Zealanders could help in their aims to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

I wish to thank GGNZ for awarding the Juliette Low Scholar of 2009 to me. It was an outstanding experience that I will always remember.