

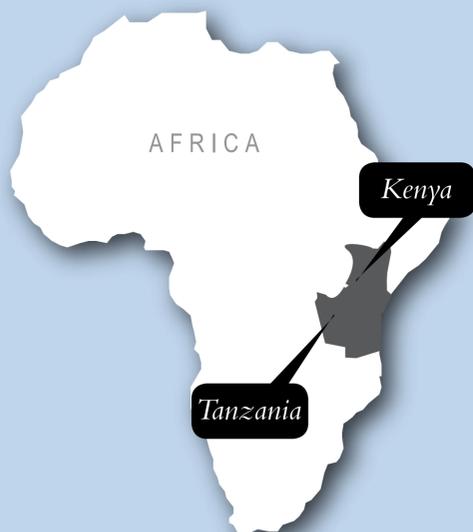


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This was my second time to Africa. Why are you going back, people asked. My first experience was a semester in Mali and it left me malnourished and weak from a simultaneous close-call with Malaria and Typhoid. It also left me shaken from so many certainties I had held dear and gravely confused about the notion of 'development.' Like so many that have gone before me, I was disillusioned, but also moved and changed by those months and the lessons taught by my Malian friends and family.

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## SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

Returning home, I knew one thing for certain, I could not be quiet. I talked to everyone about this experience and the more I thought about it, the more I was haunted by a need to go back, to understand and to find hope.

I worked to form a group of students who wanted to do the same. Calling ourselves SWEAT (Students Working in the Environment for Active Transformation), we worked to raise money so we would not have to go empty-handed. We chose the Green Belt Movement (GBM) as our partner organization and as an expression of our commitment to take on this challenge, we raised this money on the promise to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro. I decided to spend the first 5 weeks of the summer alone, working with Joseph Sekiku in a village in a remote corner of Tanzania, West of Lake Victoria and East of Rwanda. I became a member of FADECO, a group founded by locals, working directly with their community to create sustainable solutions to their problems, with a focus on protecting the environment. I learned how to design Solar Fruit Dryers and conducted workshops to train farmers in this process as a method of preserving harvests to prevent famine and as an extra source of income.

From there, I met my fellow SWEATers and began our ascent of Kili, following the Rongai route up the mountain's Northeastern slope. The first part of the trek was a long, slow hike allowing our bodies to adjust to the thin air. On summit day, we rose at midnight in the wind of Kibo Camp (15,600 ft) and set out on the steep trail, first to Gilman's Point and finally Uhuru Peak (19,340 ft.). At that height, stars don't twinkle. They move. And shooting stars explode, bright white flames bursting overhead. Up and up and up. Losing all sense of reason; some dropping back because of nausea, dizziness, pressure, and exhaustion.

Those quiet hours were harder than I'd imagined. I had expected it to be a

matter of my body finding its limit. Instead, it was mind and soul over matter. I still can't understand just what pushed me, but I know that standing at the top, looking around at friends, I experienced something which will mark a turn in my life and which I'll come back to again



and again whenever I need strength. Now I know why people are forever dreaming of climbing mountains. Standing on the roof of Africa,

the sky turned from black to blue and the stars faded, leaving only the morning star sitting on the edge of the clouds far below. Above these clouds, the sky has a sort of supersonic warp and clarity of light which makes you realize you really are in another realm.

Down from the mountain, we crossed into Kenya to work with the Green Belt Movement, a growing civil organization, founded by Nobel winning Wangari Maathai, rooted in a system of village networks who work together for social change through environmental conservation. Our host community was Chuka, a Kimeru village on the slopes of Mt Kenya, where we lived with families and became members of the GBM network.

In the morning light, we gathered and faced the mountain, praying together in gratitude for the source of our sustenance. Then, work began: digging forest soil, transporting it by hand, bagging it, building shade covers from branches, gathering germinated seedlings, and organized by species into rows. The next day, we would plant the mature seedlings near the school or market or along an eroded creek bed. On days 'off', we were back on the shamba helping with daily work: hoeing fields of

maize, digging potatoes or tea, harvesting beans, feeding cows and chickens, preparing meals, gathering cassava and yams, or carrying water from the spring. This was the hardest I have ever worked in my life. By the end of the day, my hands were covered in blisters and I fell into bed exhausted. Here, the whole community worked together as well, sharing their chores and their harvests.

I dream of going back to Chuka and I know if I find a way, I will be welcome. But unlike other places I have grown close to in Africa, I will not be troubled when I think of those people and their future. Instead I will look to them for guidance in how I live my life at home, the decisions I make, and the way I relate to my community. African friends I have had to say goodbye to in the past have always asked me not to forget them and to come back to work to make their lives easier. This is something that has always left me uneasy and confused, but in Chuka, no one did this to me. They asked me to come back because they would miss me, but they did not ask for help. They know I came as a student, to learn from them. They are proud of their hard work because it is the source of their wellbeing and an affirmation of who they are.



Chuka has what I believe is possible for almost any village on that continent and I hope in the rest of the world, a true quality of life. A way of determining their own future and sustaining their families, without compromising their identity and the land they look to for survival. I came to East Africa looking for hope, and found it—in a village and on top of a mountain. I left with wonderful friends, old and new, a passion to tell stories and to keep exploring, looking for greater understanding both at home

and in faraway places. For all of this, I want to offer my most sincere gratitude to Mr. Burch and the Fellows Program for making this journey, a thing of wild day-dreams, possible.