

Red Dirt and Love
By Emma Parkinson

Something you notice about Uganda right away is the intense color. Fruits seem more vibrant, and the sky seems bluer against the background of green trees and winding roads. People's clothes stand out against their dark skin, and the buildings they inhabit have a clear outline against the backdrop. Most obvious is the brilliant red dirt that coats you like water, sticking to the clothes you wear and embedding itself in your hair. We would be scrubbing it out for days after we got home.

On June 9th, 2013, our group of 16 departed for a ten day service adventure in Uganda. A rough 8000 miles away from Chicago O'Hare International Airport, Mityana, Uganda houses the center of the Maranatha Integrated Schools Project, of which KidsUganda is a close partner. Past projects have raised money to build multiple structures and facilities at all five of the schools.

For the first ever KidsUganda Youth Board Adventures in Service trip, 13 Youth Board members from three different high schools and two colleges gathered together in the name of service. The community was eager to help as news of our trip spread. Students gathered at CROYA to make friendship bracelets and classroom items such as flash cards and math tools. Members of the Youth Board wrote letters to top medical companies to ask for donations of any supplies that they could offer. After many Thursday night meeting and hours of hard work, together with our three chaperones, we braved over 16 hours on multiple planes to our destination.

With only eight days in country, we did and saw incredible things. Children swarmed us as we would unload our bus with things that had been donated by generous people at home. As we tied on the hundreds of friendship bracelets made by students all over the community, the smiles and gratitude were evident on the faces of the children. Visiting all five schools in the Maranatha Integrated Schools Project, we could see the good the schools were doing. The main school, Mizigo Primary, was large and had many facilities such as a boys and girls dorm, a sick bay, and a kitchen area. Across the street, Mizigo Vocational/Secondary School hosted students of high school age. Nkonya, located in a fishing village, was smaller but no less exciting. Kigalama and Kyetume were both remote, hosting children of a younger age.

At Maranatha, love, much like red dirt, is tangible. There is an overwhelming connection between the children and everyone around them. The bond from teacher to student, and even student to student is incredible. We were

lucky enough to be swept up into this incredible love, and we felt it from each and every child we met. The hard truth is that many of these kids have horrible home lives, living in poverty, many walking miles to school in the dark. Worst-case scenarios include sexual abuse and parents dying of AIDS. Despite this, the children are happy to be at school and they easily give their love to you.

During our time in Uganda, we heard countless stories of tragedy and triumph that shaped many of the children's lives. Two boys named Steven and Jonathan captured the hearts of our group. Young brothers, they had attended one of the smaller Maranatha schools until very recently. Their mother died of AIDS and their father is a legally blind alcoholic. He would make the two boys walk him to the bar and he would drink until he was too drunk to take them home. Often times they would sleep in bushes on the side of the road. When Patrick and Eva heard about their situation, they moved them from the rural school to the boarding accommodations at Mizigo, where they now live. When we first met them, they were timid and sad little boys. But after a day of trying to get them to smile, we were able to make them laugh and enjoy themselves, despite the recent tragedy that hung over them.

Our trip group learned about love and happiness. We have broadened our perspectives and are aiming to focus more on others. Life is a precious thing, and we have seen that firsthand. The KidsUganda Youth Board will determine what projects to focus on in the future. We hope to improve the lives of the children that gave us so much more than we can ever give them. Members of our trip left a piece of themselves with those happy, smiling children at Maranatha.

For more information about our trip and what we did, read our blog: www.kuybuganda2013.blogspot.com.