

Section I

The goals of this project were to bring awareness to the plight of disabilities among children and demonstrate its treatability in the Dadaab Refugee Camp. This included discussions with parents of disabled children to explore the ways in which war has affected their child's access to medical care, research to assess the unmet burden of surgically correctible disabilities among children in Dadaab, and the creation of a fund for the surgical care of children with disabilities in the camp whose families could otherwise not afford it.

In addition to the funds provided by Projects for Peace, this project was financially supported by other partnering organizations. BethanyKids, an organization devoted to the care of children with disabilities in Africa, provided in-country transportation and is shouldering the costs to disseminate the project's research findings. Handicap International provided free use of their vehicles while in Dadaab, and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) provided free accommodation and subsidized costs to travel from Nairobi to their base near the refugee camp. Lastly, but not least, individual donors contributed to this project via Africa Inland Mission International (Canada), a charitable agency devoted to the outreach and care of peoples in Africa. The costs of this project were greater than what was provided by Projects for Peace. However, this was not an issue because of the generosity of partnering agencies and individual donors.

The Dadaab Refugee Camp is located in the North Eastern province of Kenya, near the Kenya-Somalia border. It is home to over 400,000 refugees, many of which have fled from Somalia as a result of famine and civil war. The most recent estimates of individuals coming into Dadaab has been as high as 1500 per day. Many people who arrive are extremely malnourished and sick, accounting for half of the young arrivals into the camp and a 4.5 fold increase in deaths among children less than 5 years of age compared to last year. Humanitarian organizations struggle to keep up with the surging population needs. This includes clean water, basic shelter, food, and other essential items that are difficult to acquire in the middle of a vast Kenyan desert.

My time in Kenya was primarily divided between Dadaab and a town called Kijabe. In Dadaab, focus groups of parents and their children with disabilities were conducted with the help of translators and appropriate venues that were provided by Handicap International. There were some difficulties in organizing the appropriate groups, as residents in the camp often want to meet a visiting foreigner. As a result, some discussions were delayed or rescheduled so that staff at the various venues could reorganize the groups to ensure that they consisted of the intended participants. The discussions themselves provided valuable insight into the problems faced by residents in the camp. These discussions were coordinated to coincide with vehicles scheduled to travel between the UNHCR base and Dadaab. Because of security concerns, I was not permitted to stay in the refugee camp at night and like other staff was required to travel in scheduled armed vehicle convoys.

Kijabe is a rural area approximately 1.5 hours drive away from Nairobi, the capital city. What immediately strikes you about the town is the simplicity of its lifestyle. Meals were often a combination of stew, cornmeal, and cooked vegetables bought from the local farmer. The hustle of a major city is absent from the dirt roads and worn paths that connected the community. There was running water, electricity, comfortable yet basic accommodations, and nothing really to distract oneself with. In all of this austerity was BethanyKids at Kijabe Hospital, the 67-bed clinical facility that is the hub of BethanyKids' operations in Kenya. Most of my day-to-day activities, including access to the hospital's electronic and paper-based patient records, worked very well. However, there were frequent trips into Nairobi because many items were not available in the small number of stores in Kijabe, or if the only ATM in town was out of order. Depending on the traffic in Nairobi and the schedules of those whom I traveled with, these trips would often require an entire day so it was important to be flexible with one's schedule and the schedules of others.

One thing I always miss whenever leaving Kijabe is the relationships I have made with the local residents. They welcomed me with genuine friendships that were reinforced whenever I returned. However, many individuals also approached me because they thought I could help them financially. It is very normal for locals to ask for such assistance and important for one to give only within their means and in a way that does not foster dependence. Otherwise, the discouragement brought on by such one-way relationships can result in cynicism and a failure to recognize that the needs around you should not paralyze you from doing what you can. The creation of a surgical fund to provide children with immediate treatment was a means to responsibly give to a worthwhile cause.

My time spent in Kijabe and Dadaab, difficulties and all, was worth the benefits of this project. The establishment of the BethanyKids surgical fund will provide disabled children with increased access to treatment that can greatly improve their quality of life. Residents of Dadaab have been deeply appreciative of the efforts to give their disabled children a chance at a life that is free of the stigmatization and impairments associated with their condition. By curing children of their disabilities, families are better able to find relief that they desperately desire from caring for them, and communities are encouraged to view disabilities as mainstream issues. The reports generated from this project describe the state of a family's access to medical care for their disabled children, demonstrate the potential to cure many of these conditions surgically, and impact the lives of thousands of children in Dadaab and resource-poor areas.

Section II

Peace, as I would define it, is the state in which an individual can live their life free of need, want, persecution, stigmatization, and fear because of their life circumstances. It is the culmination of effort made by a group to recognize that differing philosophies may at some level be irreconcilable, but we should treat others as we would like to be treated and not be cynical or demonizing to our fellow human beings. In many respects, these conditions are afforded only to the privileged few, yet as described in many of the great documents of our world, peace is a right that we must strive to extend to all.

This project to care for children with disabilities meets the above-mentioned goals. By immediately providing children with surgical care to correct their disabilities, my team and I hope that communities will recognize that disabilities do not have to be met with fear or the accusatory impression that they are the result of misdeed. Instead, and as indicated in the discussions I held with parents in the camp, the treatment of disabilities among children gives hope for them and their families to recognize that in the midst of war, there still exists benevolence. There still exists that desire for peace, and this desire extends even to the most helpless and youngest of its members.

BethanyKids is currently the only provider of paediatric surgical care in Dadaab, and more help is needed. Hence, on a long-term basis, my team and I seek to attract greater attention to the region's unmet burden of disability. The findings from my discussions with parents about the ability to obtain care for their disabled child will be used by Handicap International, BethanyKids, and the UNHCR to improve their services in Dadaab. Another study, based on analyzing BethanyKids' records to determine the improvement in death rates and quality of life as a result of operating on children with disabilities in Dadaab, will be presented at major surgical conferences. We have already submitted our findings to the annual meeting of the Alliance for Surgery and Anesthesia Presence, a group of healthcare professionals that promote the delivery of surgical services in low- and middle-income countries.

This project has altered the scale of which I view human suffering and disaster. It is still difficult for me to comprehend the idea of thousands of men, women, and children seeking refugee registration each day in Dadaab. I process repeatedly the life that such individuals must live, to wake up every morning and ask themselves how are they to provide for their children in a world so cruel that they were forced to abandon their means to care for them. The things that I normally do every day – wake up in a comfortable bed, have access to food whenever I want, and study as a full-fee paying student in a prestigious university – humbles me because most if not all of the children I saw in the camp will not have that sort of life. I have done nothing to justify my status over those of the families I met in Dadaab.

This project has reemphasized to me that the problems of this world are not as explainable or simple to solve. In the camp, I spent numerous hours in conversations with parents over how the war in Somalia has affected access of care for their disabled child. What has brought hope is not simply a provision of material goods, for even if it were possible to grant everything there will be something missing. What has made a parent smile is not simply seeing her child being healed, but to know that he was healed because someone cared about him without expecting anything in return. And now that he can walk, she wants to be part of a process to ensure that, in a world that seems as cruel as it is, there is still room for her child and his dreams.

What I believe is irreplaceable is that the acquisition of peace must be supplanted with a desire for peace to be further realized, to live out one's life knowing that it may not be perfect, but it is perfect enough to give hope for its improvement with each passing day.

Peace to the Refugee: A project to care for children with disabilities in the Dadaab Refugee Camp in Kenya, Africa

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APPENDIX 1. Photos taken during the project in the Dadaab Refugee Camp.



A group picture of the parents and children of a focus group held in Dadaab. The far right child has a right club foot, a treatable disability that prevents him from being able to properly walk.



A picture with a Somali family whose two sons were born with cleft lip, a disability inhibited their ability to properly eat. The father reported that his children used to be made fun of at school because of their deformity, but after undergoing corrective surgery they now have much happier lives.



The mothers ask if I would like to hold one of their children with a disability at the end of our time together.