

The Boston Globe

A summer of tackling AIDS

Bentley DB helps stricken in Africa



By Julian Benbow
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Text size

Tim Grovenburg's last tour stop in a summer spent abroad was Arusha, a city technically only two years old, cool, dry, and sloping in the northeast region of Tanzania, a country where tourists can enjoy some of the world's most beautiful views at the same time that natives struggle to earn a dollar a day.

From the first week of July to the first week of August, Grovenburg stayed with volunteers and natives in a house in one of the more attractive parts of a region that showcases Mount Kilimanjaro.

Whenever he got the chance, he would go to a dirt road behind the house and run 300-yard shuttles.

"I would come back covered in dust just going back and forth on this dirt road just trying to get in shape for football," said Grovenburg.

The locals thought he was nuts.

He told them he played defensive back for Bentley College.

It didn't help much.

"Some of them had never seen an American football game," he said. "I'd tell them, 'I play a college sport and I'm trying to get in shape.' They'd just laugh and think I'm crazy for running around all day."

All they knew about American football were the players on the T-shirts they wore, the kind that read "Chicago Bears - 2006 Super Bowl Champions."

Grovenburg, who grew up in Wilmette, Ill., before coming to Bentley to play football and study corporate finance, accounting, and management, said, "I wish that shirt were true."

He kept trying to teach them.

"I showed the people I was working with some online videos of American football," he said. "It was fun."

It was one of his smaller missions.

In the wider lens was a fight against AIDS in Tanzania, a battle that WOFATA (Women Fighting Aids in Tanzania) and the Texas-based international volunteer organization Global Crossroads have been vested in for years and one that Grovenburg joined for a month.

Over those four weeks in Arusha, Grovenburg met dozens of women, and many of their stories followed the same outline. A lot of them got married young.

"When I say young, I mean like 18," said Grovenburg.

They start large families, with four or more children.

"The husbands cheat on them," he said.

In the process, the men become infected with HIV and give it to their wives. Then the husband dies.

"When a husband dies, usually common practice is for the wife being tested for HIV," said Grovenburg.

The results are almost always the same: The women find out they have HIV at the same time they find out their husbands have died, leaving them as their families' sole means of support.

And at the moment when this catastrophe comes into focus, Grovenburg said, "We come in."

"Some women were depressed and wouldn't get out of bed," he said. "Some of them were really hopeful and thinking about getting better."

One lady fit the typical description. Her husband died and left her with four children. She found out that he also left her with HIV. She didn't really have any skills. Only an idea.

"She saved money from selling tomatoes and shoes and stuff like that on the street and bought a bus ticket to Dar es Salaam [the capital of Tanzania]," said Grovenburg. When she arrived, she found a clinic and learned how to perform "batiking," an elaborate process of hand-dyeing clothes and bags typically sold to tourists. The woman started batiking, doing just enough to support her family.

"After about maybe three months," Grovenburg said, "other women started seeing how well she was doing and how well she was able to support her family and started asking her how to batik."

She eventually stopped batiking for herself and would teach other women.

Grovenburg and the volunteers also taught women batiking, so they could make money and ultimately a better life.

"It was inspiring seeing how these women are able to overcome obstacles and take care of themselves and their family," Grovenburg said.

That wasn't the original plan.

"I was not out to be Mother Teresa or save the world," he said.

WHOLE NEW OUTLOOK

The plan was to take a global road trip with his high school buddy, Blake Jones, a pre-med student at Boston College whose parents had spent time in Africa as biologists and encouraged Jones to do the same. He and Grovenburg decided to backpack through Europe for two weeks, then go to Africa.

"You definitely get a whole new outlook on life," Jones said.

From the 57-year-old woman who had been infected for 13 years and never shown any symptoms to the woman who found out she had HIV in January, barely a year after her husband died, and who hadn't told the kids how their father passed or that she was infected herself.

"You never meet those kind of people in any other walk of life," said Jones.

Grovenburg and Jones fall in the target demographic as volunteers for Global Crossroads.

In February, President Bush took a six-day tour through Africa and asked that his Emergency Fund for AIDS Relief be increased from the \$18 billion spent so far to \$30 billion for the next five years, saying at the time, "It's in our national interest that America help deal with hopelessness, and it's in our moral interest that we help brothers and sisters that hurt."

"To step outside your environment and want to make a difference in this part of the world is quite an undertaking," said Cheryl Owens, the Africa program coordinator for Global Crossroads. "They're not just going on vacation, they're going to help someone that's asking for help."

A GOOD START

The inspiration, Grovenburg said, was realizing exactly how much help they could offer. Women who would start out depressed and insular would begin to open up after two or three visits to their homes.

"We learned that some of them had really good ideas, Grovenburg said.

Like the woman who needed 20,000 shillings.

"It's like \$18 or something," he said.

The woman saw it as start-up money. She had noticed that a lot of people in her community had trouble getting detergent because the market was a mile away. She thought that if she could buy a big bag of soap and sell it in smaller quantities, she could make a profit.

"She would never be able to get the 20,000 shillings on her own," Grovenburg said. "But we gave her the initial start-up and she went and she sent her daughter out to buy some detergent - like, a huge industrial bag."

She bagged it and sold it.

"Within a week, she had to go and buy another bag of soap," he said. "It had already sold out."

Grovenburg has been back in America almost two months - long enough to train with the Falcons and trudge through a 1-2 start to the season. The priority this week for Bentley is fixing a pass defense that has given up

893 yards and 12 touchdowns. But with the experience in Africa fresh in his mind, he realizes some priorities are larger.

"It's still hard for me to understand how they were feeling and how they're feeling now and how you deal with something like that every day," he said. "It's inspiring when people do decide that they can make their lives better no matter how bad they get."■

http://www.boston.com/sports/articles/2008/09/24/a_summer_of_tackling_aids/

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