From Athletic Tape to Africa
by Erin Wollett

When I first came to Wilmington College and found out who my roommate was, we instantly clicked. I as an agriculture major and she as an athletic training major, she tolerated the smell of my boots after I returned from the barn for lab and I served as a model on whom she could practice taping and wrapping joints. It wasn’t long before we realized that, similar to duct tape, her athletic tape could fix just about anything. We had an abundance of it with rolls scattered everywhere and found uses for it all around our room; however, my personal favorite use was when I used this tape as an interactive “bucket list.” I ripped small strips of tape from the roll, wrote my “bucket list” items on each one with colored sharpies, and secured them on the wall above my top bunk. These strips of tape read things such as, “Be Summa Cum Laude,” “Join a sorority,” “Be an FFA State Officer,” and “Go to Africa.” I figured as I completed each item I could remove the strip of tape from my wall with hopes of none of them remaining when I graduated college. Slowly but surely these pieces of tape found their way from my wall to the trash can as I completed each task. I am happy to say that upon returning from Kilgoris, Kenya on December 24, 2014, I was able to remove the last piece of tape from my wall.

In November of 2013, I made the decision that I was going to take action on my dream to go to Africa. I approached some faculty at WC and was told to start with baby steps and work my way up. I reluctantly agreed, but when these “baby step” trips didn’t work out, I figured we might as well take the plunge. With the support of a couple professors and the research assistance of Google, I was able to create a partnership with Village Volunteers, an organization based out of Seattle, Washington who has projects stationed all around the world. We decided on their location in Kenya due to their missions of agricultural sustainability, education improvement, and community development. Throughout the next year, I recruited faculty and students who were interested in travelling, we obtained our passports, visas, booked our flights, and finalized the projects that we would complete while abroad.

On December 11, 2014, Martha Hendricks, Mikayla Conrad, Dillon Davidson, Anna Heineke, and Ryan Starks, and myself met at the Columbus airport to depart for the trip of our dreams. We flew from Columbus, Ohio to Toronto, Canada where we were delayed five hours due to a snow storm. Eighteen hours after our departure from Canada, we connected through Adis Ababa, Ethiopia to Nairobi, Kenya. Due to our delay and the danger of travelling through Nairobi at night, we met with our host, Emmanuel Tasur, and stayed the night in a hotel before departing for the village the next morning. We travelled five hours with occasional stops for Kenyan Chai, all the while seeing baboons and other wildlife alongside of the road and realizing that traffic laws were not really a thing in Kenya. When we arrived at Emmanuel’s home we were greeted by a backyard picnic and loving hospitality from his wife, children, and house help. We were shown around the property, settled into our guest huts, and were introduced to Emmanuel’s sister, mother, nieces, and nephews who lived on the same property. As a part of our project, we brought a shipment of indestructible soccer balls for the students at the school; so in attempt to make sure they were truly indestructible, we engaged into a game of soccer with the children. I am reluctant to admit they kicked our butts.

The next day, we were taken to the academy where we would be volunteering. In 2008, Emmanuel decided that the education system in Kenya was not satisfactory, so he developed his own private boarding school in Kilgoris. He makes sure to apply for grants and donations so that children with disabilities can afford the tuition at his school and get a proper education. We were given a tour of the classrooms, offices, and dormitories.
Emmanuel showing us around the school, A painting on the wall, and Martha reading through one of the exam books.

We were fortunate enough to attend a local church service where we were the guests of honor. Our host gave testimonies about the story of Jeremiah building the wall and how spectators stood by and veered doubtingly. He spoke about overcoming adversity and the negative opinions of others in order to fulfill our dreams which I found highly applicable to our current situation. Our conversations had with him were inspiring and the stories he shared with us about the Maasai culture were fascinating. When the service completed, we were greeted with cultural signs of respect by the congregation outside of the church and went on our way to the local stockyards. We were greeted by warmth and joy from the people at the yards. They swarmed to us, engaged in conversation, and posed for photos. Emmanuel showed us around, treated us to sugar cane, and taught us how to properly bid on cattle.

Chatting with some locals at the stockyards and taking a break to enjoy the scenery that the school overlooked.

When we returned home, we were greeted by more Chai tea (something we would indulge in at least three times a day!) Each day we would awake to the sound of the rooster crowing outside of our hut, have a homemade breakfast, and head off to the school to help them work. We did various different tasks such as painting the dormitories, cleaning and reorganizing the classrooms, and building a playground for the students. When our day of work was done, we would head home for Chai and to spend time with our host family. We played soccer, went on hyena hunts, taught them various card games, did yoga, and hiked a monstrous hill in their backyard (something we would probably classify as a small mountain).
For the first three days of our journey, we were joined by Joshua Machinga, founder of the Common Ground Program in Eastern Kenya, who would instruct a Farmer’s Workshop at the Sirua Aula Academy. We were joined by approximately twenty farmers from the local areas as we learned about bio-intensive farming methods and engaged in hands-on practice as we built a raised garden bed on the property. We would start whenever the farmers could make it to the school, as they travelled by foot. We quickly adapted to the idea of “Kenyan time,” whenever life happened, it happened. There was a quote written on the wall of our hut that read, “Time only exists on your wrist, so don’t worry about it.”

We often visited the village of Kilgoris where we could wander around and visit with the locals. We were often greeted by echoes of children shouting, “How are you!?,” hugs, and wide smiles. We tried more sugar cane and experimented by tasting roasted maize. Joshua often served as our guide around the village as Emmanuel was following up with his cohorts in Seattle, a task that could only be completed in town as we did not have electricity on the property. However, every time before we would leave, we would all gather together and enjoy a soda from a glass bottle on some type of veranda.

During the second week of our trip, we spent a day on the Mara Safari. Our driver, Job, was an amazing tour guide who knew almost everything about the wildlife. We saw all of the “Big Five” except for cheetahs and went on an hour and a half extended game drive to spot a black rhino. We ended up finding two grown rhinos and a baby! For lunch we stopped at the Serena Mara Resort, a five-star resort where we enjoyed lunch and juice over a phenomenal view of the safari.
When the time came, we departed with heavy hearts. In my journal I captured our thoughts as we pulled away from the village and onto a paved road, “This just doesn’t seem right. We’re supposed to have bumpy, muddy car rides, and bucket showers, and squatty potties. We’re supposed to sleep in our hut and get chilly in 70 degree weather and pretend to like Ugali (a very dry Kenyan cornmeal) just to be polite. I wish that Kenya wasn’t half-a-world away.” This trip was the experience of a lifetime. With forty-four hours travelling home, we had time to reflect on this crazy, incredible, once-in-a-lifetime experience and the new friends that we had made. We tried to think of singular stories that we could tell our friends and family that would make them feel the magic we had just lived over the past fourteen days. We had thirteen hundred photos, an umpteen number of memories, some souvenirs, horrible hair and body odor from only taking bucket showers, completely unique bonds with one another, and hearts that were overflowing with joy. We could make them Kenyan Chai or show them videos from the Ugandan Orphans Choir that sang Christmas Carols to us in the Amsterdam Airport, but would that really make them understand the undying beauty of this place half-way around the world or the love that you felt simply by meeting somebody new for the first time? This joy that we held in our hearts would never fade or die away, and I have come to the conclusion that the only way to truly share the bliss of Africa is to treat each and every one that we come into contact with, with the same exultation and elation that we lived for those fourteen days in Kenya. Then maybe, just maybe, everybody will be able to feel the magic of the Maasai.