The children of Musoma
Keval Ashok Shah goes on a life-changing journey to help make a difference in Musoma, Tanzania

After months of anticipation, Tanzania came into view. What better way to define this than with the snow peak of Kilimanjaro, glistening in the moonlight. It was enough to wake us up after the exhausting 14-hour journey from London Heathrow, as we drove along a pitch-black road to an inn in Moshi, where we were going to spend the first night. Nothing prepares you for its wonder at its immense size. The team staring out of the windows were Dr Manny Vasant, Mrs Meena Vasant, Dr Kishor Vasant, Dr Auriel Gibson, Hudson Cook (a builder by trade), Fleur (a dental practice manager) and myself.

On the road
The next day, we visited the town of Moshi, which is situated 70km east of Arusha. What struck me immediately, was the pace... how laidback everything was, compared to London. No one seemed to be in a hurry, and I put it down to the blazing midday sun. After buying much-needed bananas, chocolates and water, we visited Marangu Falls, in the foothills of Kilimanjaro. We stood for a while and took in the sight of the 60-foot cascade dropping into a plunge pool, which led away as a rivulet through a dense jungle that seemed to stretch for miles.

The next we made our way back to the airport to fly to Mwanza, the southern port of Lake Victoria. Looking out of the plane, it was easy to see the devastating impact of human activity on the environment. Hundreds of hectares of forests had been cleared to make way for grazing and farming, evident by myriads of white lanes in the barren land. But that was what it was – barren. I don’t know if it was due to lack of rainfall, or overuse... it just seemed like a huge waste, land that could no longer be used by people or animals.

Upon landing, we visited the Hindu Union Hospital, where I witnessed a small portion of the enormous contribution Manny had made to the healthcare in Tanzania. The dental clinic he donated was well up and running, except for a handpiece, that he quickly made a note to fix.

A few more bottles of water, and we began on the three-hour journey to Musoma, with the Serengeti rushing past us. Upon landing, we visited the Victoria Disability Centre (LVDC), with nothing more than its renovation.

Arriving at Musoma
Dreams aside, we reached Musoma, to be warmly welcomed by Denis Mahina, Andy Vandanzt, Lizzie Cameron and her parents. Denis, a small man with a big heart, started the Lake Victoria Disability Centre (LVDC), with nothing more than his savings and determination, to improve access to social, economic and educational opportunities for disabled youths in the Mara region of Tanzania. Many articles are constructed by the trainees and assistants (for example, desks, bicycles for the disabled) and sold to help fund the project. The project is otherwise funded by donation and has charitable status. The absence of regular funding is a continual problem.

Andy Vandanzt, a 22-year-old qualified carpenter/joiner from Suffolk, is spending three months in Musoma to teach his skills at the LVDC, and help with its renovation.

Lizzie, a 26-year old graphic designer from Edinburgh, Scotland, found out about the project, and joined him, to work with the local disabled children and teenagers. She has been living in Musoma for a year now, except for one month this summer, when she returned home to get a job to fund her work and living expenses in Tanzania.

A vibrant and beautiful town, Musoma is situated on the shores of Lake Victoria. Manny and Kishur grew up here, which explains their deep love for the place and its people. Sadly, ever since the 1970s, the town has suffered economic decline. The isolated rural majority across Mara continue to suffer from abject poverty due to an absence of employment opportunities, ill health caused by malnutrition, and shortage of schools and affordable health centres.

Back to school
We planned to work in Musoma for four days, and Lizzie organised our schedule to see and treat the children from the Mwembeni Deaf School, the Mwisenge Blind School, the Maryann and Kishur grew up here, which enabled rural majority across Mara continue to suffer from abject poverty due to an absence of employment opportunities, ill health caused by malnutrition, and shortage of schools and affordable health centres.
The surgery itself needed a lot of organisation. This was probably the first time that the challenges of health care in the developing world, hit home. Everything that I took for granted working in my cozy clinic in Northampton, had to be arranged—the different types of equipment, nursing staff, the administration, ensuring infection control, and making sure we did not get in each other’s way working in a small room. But Auriel’s determination and Manny’s cool exterior drove us on. At the end of the day, we were exhausted, but very happy that we could slightly improve the lives of these children.

While the first day’s challenge was verbally communicating reassurance to the kids who could not see, the next day’s hurdle was to successfully gesture to those who could not hear. The teachers at the Maswengeri Deaf School taught us basic sign language, but I realised that if you looked into the child’s eyes with an honest willingness to help him/her, that child put all their trust in you. A gentle reassuring hand on the shoulder was enough to put them at ease. The most challenging were the mentally impaired kids, but the headmaster’s kind words and reassurance enabled their compliance. Children that thought they had a systemic illness or condition, were referred onto Dr Kishor Vasavada, who could facilitate further treatment.

Whichever school we went to, we were welcomed wholeheartedly. The blind kids had never had their mouth checked and treated. So, understandably, a number of them were pretty apprehensive about what was to be done. But after a few successful check-ups, word spread among them, and everyone happily consented to it. I needed to revise my Swahili quickly to enable reassuring conversation. Thankfully, I was in the company of very helpful people, and everything ran smoothly. Halfway through my check-ups, the children sang songs to show their gratitude; their voices were simply divine.

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