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 make us wake 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 beauty, and one can only gawk in 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 else… it just seemed like a huge waste of 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 on the right as we touched its barren land. But that was what it was – barren. I don’t know if it was due to lack of rainfall, or else… it just seemed like a huge waste of land that could no longer be used by people or animals.

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 Kishor 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.

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.

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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 Mwembeni Blind School, the Mwisenge Blind School, the Mwembeni Deaf and Intellectually Impaired School, and the youth from the LVDC. One in ten people in Tanzania are disabled – 3.5 million people suffer from a physical, mental, hearing or visual impairment. This statistic is high because of causes such as catching malaria or meningitis as a baby, unprofessional administration of herbal medicine,
inside the clinic
The surgery itself needed a lot of organisation. This was proba-
bly the first time that the chal-
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thing that I took for granted while working in my cosy clinic in
Northampton, had to be arranged – the different types of
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not get in each other's way work-
ing in a small room. But Aureil's deter-
mination and Manny's cool exterior de-
serve much praise. At the end of
the day, we were exhausted, but very happy that we could
carefully improve the lives of these children.

While the first day's chal-
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could not see, the next day's bur-
dle was to successfully gesture to
those who could not hear. The
teachers at the Mwensi Blind
School taught us basic sign lan-
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The most challenging were the men-
ting blind kids, but the head-
master's kind words and reassur-
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Children that thought they had
a systemic illness or condition,
were referred onto Dr Kishor
Vasdev and facilitated further
research.

Whatever school we went to,
we were welcomed wholeheart-
edly, and treated with respect
and genuine affection. All the lit-
tle kids rushed to shake our
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smiles got imprinted in my head
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Prevention always being bet-
ter than a cure, we returned to
the Mwensi Blind School, the next
day, and gave a little talk on tooth
decay and dental care, responsible
for it. We then sat down with each
kid, and taught him/her how to
brush well. Thankfully, no one
found it boring because my bro-
ken Swahili proved to be thor-
oughly entertaining. At the end of
it, even I couldn't keep a straight
face!

We spent the remaining days in
Tanzania, admiring nature in the
Serengti and Ngorongoro. Words cannot describe the feel-
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most beautiful animals on Earth –
wildebeests migrating in their
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But it is the quiet moments
that don't move you, the Serengti
sunset will.

Despite all that we have
been blessed with, we choose to
destroy it, and deny the goodness
of this world to the children of its
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dentistry, including units and dental chairs, and med-
ic necessities like oxygen cylin-
ders, defibrillators and beds.

Prevention better than the
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The unseen killers in this part
of Africa are malaria and HIV.

The population of mosquitoes
grows, the nearer you get to the
lake. A number of Dennis's fam-
ily members, including himself and
little Rodney, have tasted the
wrath of this disease, and he
is now in the process of raising cap-
itual to build a house away from
the shores. But it has been chal-
genging for him, as most of the
people around him do not
work.

Prevention is key to the re-
duction of the prevalence of
these diseases. Education and
prevention are the weapons of
choice. Just at the entrance of
one of the schools, we discovered
a massive collection of stagnant
water – a breeding ground for
mosquitoes. Measures such as
screening of the houses, and the
provision of mosquito nets,
would go a long way indeed.

Over the years, Manny has spent
significant time and energy, in
the company of very helpful
staff to teach the necessary
cure aids in her daughter's work,
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Manny and Aureil have put	heir efforts into creating a medical
and dental training centre, adjacent to LVDC.
This would aim to train local persons
who will become the change.

More than 200 kids are being
brainwashed by the media that
we are all in short supply. Swahili is
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enjoys learning it. And if the
language is not done well, it
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The view over the Serengti
raising awareness and funds to
improve healthcare in Musoma.

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