

The Rich Family's Mission to Eldoret

Kids recall babies, teens and lessons learned

Josiah D. Rich, MD, MPH is an infectious disease specialist and Professor of Medicine at the Alpert School of Medicine at Brown University. He and his wife, Pat, and their children, Nick, then 17, and Nola, then 14, spent the month of August 2010 in Eldoret. While Dr. Rich worked at the Moi Hospital, his family volunteered at a pediatric and teen center.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JODY RICH, MD

JOSIAH D. RICH, MD, MPH

When we planned the trip our expectations were vague but we felt there was an opportunity to experience life in Eldoret that should not be missed. In preparation, we were concerned about where we'd stay, what we'd eat and how we would get along. But upon arriving in Eldoret, our concerns about ourselves were eclipsed by the community at IU house. We were quickly integrated into the rhythm of daily life and provided with many opportunities to help.

For each of us, the daily routine differed. Jody attended rounds, Pat and Nola helped out at the Sally Test Pediatric Center, and Nick volunteered at the Tumaini Teen Center. Each day we learned a little Kiswahili, a child's name, a way to comfort and a renewed belief in the strength of hope. The staff, patients and children we encountered, whether it was at the Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital (MTRH), Sally Test, the Tumaini Teen Center or the Imani Workshop, were endlessly generous with their time.

It was a privilege to visit MTRH/Moi and the lessons we learned about human dignity and the strength of hope will be with us forever. We are deeply indebted to Dr. and Mrs. Joe Mamlin for their generosity and vision in creating a collaborative community of support and education. ❖

NOLA RICH

In 2010, I spent a month at the Moi Hospital/Indiana University medical compound in Eldoret, Kenya with my father, mother and older brother. It was the summer before I would enter high school and start a new chapter of my life. My family and I prepared for this visit by getting vaccines and taking malaria medicine; reading up on Kenya, and packing carefully, bracing ourselves for this extraordinary trip. We were prepared for practically anything from mosquitoes to sunburns, but nothing could have prepared me for the emotional connection I felt for the people we met.

Upon arriving, we quickly settled into the compound where visiting faculty and their families lived. Everyone

ate meals together. We developed a comfortable daily rhythm in which we were able to check in with each other throughout the day and share our experiences.

Our daily routine had many highlights. Before leaving for Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital (MTRH) in the morning, my family and I took Kiswahili lessons from Wycliffe. He was a regular fixture in the common area of the compound waiting for his next student – always prepared with a lesson and always ready to engage anyone who passed with a Kiswahili greeting or short conversation. Wycliffe's lessons helped us progress from Kiswahili greetings to simple sentences and a sense of the culture. For instance, while we were learning the days of the week in Kiswahili, we also learned that in their culture Saturday is considered the first day of the week.

After our daily lessons with Wycliffe, we would leave the compound but

never without salutations from Happy Michael, the compound guard. You couldn't help but smile back at Happy Michael as he stood waving with both of his hands as we walked up the rutted dirt road leading toward MTRH.

My father would go off to do rounds at the hospital and my brother helped out at a teen center for street children. My mother and I would go to the Sally Test Pediatric Center at the Moi Hospital. The Sally Test Center was set up to provide a place for children who were long-term patients at Moi to have some normalcy during their stay. It was an area where children could play or keep up with their lessons or just be cared for in a setting that was away from the clinical areas and be normal kids. Most of the children I met at the Sally Test Center had been abandoned. Victims of poverty, their parents often just don't have the means to pay or stay with a sick child. Unfortunately, this creates a steady supply of orphaned children to

be cared for and demand for extra help and hands at the Sally Test Center.

I fell in love with the Sally Test Center and looked forward to each day there. My daily routine at the center consisted of holding baby Alex, who was only a few months old, and looking into his happy, chocolate eyes and hearing him try to turn his baby gibberish into my name. You wouldn't have known that he had been abandoned at the entrance to the hospital as an infant. He seemed so full of life and eager to explore the world around him. His little fingers would struggle to wrap around mine and he would look at me as though I was the most interesting person in the world. I will never forget the connection I felt to him.

When I wasn't holding Alex, I was playing with Sydney, a two-year-old orphan with malaria. Whether it was because I made a funny face or because he was being tickled or for no reason at all, Sydney was constantly giggling. He





had the most contagious laughter that would never fail to brighten my day. If Sydney was otherwise occupied there were always other children to attend to. For instance, there were the two young twin sisters who would always be tickling and wrestling with each other. They glowed with happiness and as soon as I met them I knew they had an incredibly strong connection with one another. They had severe burns all over their bodies because their father had lit their house on fire, killing their mother and other sister. However, if the burns weren't visible, I never would have known what tragedy they had endured. They were as happy and playful as any other children.

Each of these kids had a story, a history of courage, survival and perseverance that would devastate most human beings – but not these children. They were hopeful and happy, despite everything they had been through. They sang and danced and gave love with such ease. When we would sing, it would fill the room with love and happiness despite all that they had been through. They had accepted us and loved us with such ease that saying good-bye was truly heartbreaking. When they sang to me I appreciated the time I had with them, rather than think about the possibility of never hearing their voices again. I followed their lead as they showed me that our goodbye should be a happy moment, not a sad one. They were strong, and showed me how to be strong, too. ❖

NICK RICH

I can remember the scene vividly. I am passing around a soccer ball with friends on a makeshift field between a farm and a rushing grey river. The morning air feels clear and cool and from a distance, it might look like a typical day of good, healthy fun. But upon closer observation, the scene reveals itself as quite out-of-the-ordinary. Word has spread of the afternoon game for kids of all ages, and that participants can also attend a picnic afterwards. Kids pour in from every direction and mayhem seems imminent. We quickly form teams and start the game. The players run, pass, jump and kick with surprising agility and skill. Everyone is laughing and smiling and glistening from their exertion in the afternoon sun.

Despite the wholesomeness of the scene, there are a few hints that this is not taking place in Anytown, USA. Twice during the soccer game for example, the ball accidentally rolls into the nearby river. Each time, Javan, a sinewy 14-year-old, strips off his clothes and, in one fluid motion, plunges headfirst into the river to retrieve the ball. I look up in amazement at Javan's lack of hesitation to risk his health and wellbeing for a soccer ball. Burning trash heaps along the edges of the field teem with kids scrounging for scraps of food or metal to salvage. The field itself is located behind an industrial district and the river Javan dove into is a repository for both industrial and human waste.

The soccer game was actually an outreach activity in Eldoret, aimed at reaching homeless street kids; many addicted to sniffing glue. The purpose of the soccer game was to bond with the kids by playing a game, providing a meal, and telling them about the nearby Tumaini Center. The center is a drop-in program where teens could find refuge from their lives and struggles on the streets.

In the summer of 2010, while my father worked at the nearby Moi Hospital, I volunteered at the Tumaini Center and worked with its staff to help the street kids of Eldoret. The mission of the Tumaini Center is to provide hope for children who are considered a nuisance to society. As a volunteer, my role was to engage the participants by playing games and sharing meals that consisted of porridge or cooked corn meal.

The first meal I shared with them was particularly memorable. Not because it was an especially good meal, but because it was a rite of passage. To the street kids, I was a typical "Mzungu" – a white American. Sitting at the crowded table I lifted the mug of porridge to my mouth, and got the distinct sense that all eyes were on me. I suddenly realized how important this moment was to my relationship with these children. Although the purple-brown liquid smelled like rotten eggs and had the texture of old milk, I drank it down and managed a smile when I lowered the mug. In return, I received smiles of approval and a few giggles. Sharing their meals, the staple food that sustains them, helped dissolve a cultural barrier. Although I was still an outsider, they now accepted me as a friend.

Despite the distance, I still feel a strong connection to the Tumaini Center and the street kids. I hope that my contributions were as great as their influence was on me. I learned how the simple gesture of playing a game and sharing a meal can dissolve boundaries and create a trusting bond. I also learned how rewarding it is to go outside my comfort zone and learn about other cultures. I find it ironic that these kids, cast-off from society, have actually taught me so much about tolerance and hope. ❖