Predeparture

I decided over winter break of my first year of medical school to commit to the JeffHealth summer program. I have always been interested in global health, and after attending information sessions put on by JeffHealth, and speaking with past travelers and with Dr. Plumb, I thought that this would be a wonderful opportunity to gain more experience in this field. I had never traveled to a developing country before this trip, and if you’re in the same boat as me, the preparation for it can be a little daunting. Buying a flight and getting the necessary vaccinations were the most important aspects of the preparation. I would also advise you to double check that your passport does not expire within 6 months of travel, since this makes it invalid (I happened to catch this mistake one week before departure!). Packing for the trip was also much different than packing for any other trip I’ve taken. Speaking to past travelers, and reading the “Rwanda Survival Guide” document on the pulse website were really helpful in deciding what to bring.

Arrival in Kigali

I would be arriving in Kigali on July 1st, and would be meeting up with the other JeffHealth travelers a couple of days later. I have to say, I was feeling a good deal of anxiety the day before leaving. Traveling to a completely foreign country, and being there on my own for a couple of days felt a little scary! Yet despite my anxiety upon landing in Kigali, my arrival could not have gone more smoothly. I was picked up from the airport by Victor, an RVCP exchange student, who immediately made me feel welcome and at ease.
The day after my arrival, Victor took me on a tour of the capital city. We went to see the various markets and groceries, the money exchange offices, and the main bus station, called “Nyabugogo.” Victor then took me to his fellow medical student’s home to have a traditional Rwandan lunch. I was thrilled to be in such a new environment, and was already feeling like I would be spending my summer in the best possible way.

During the next couple of days, I explored Kigali and got acclimated to my new surroundings. Rwanda certainly holds true to its description as the Land of 1000 Hills. There are mountains in every direction, and the scenery is breathtaking. I discovered Bourbon Coffee, the Western-style coffee shop with delicious coffees and the much desired wifi access. I took in the many differences between this city and my current city of Philadelphia. The capital has a complex of paved roads, but also rugged, uneven dirt roads requiring 4-wheel drive. There are sidewalks in some areas, but not others. There are moto taxis everywhere, and the traffic and street activity can be overwhelming. There is also a mix of clothing styles, with some people wearing suits and business attire, while others are wearing traditional colorful skirts and dresses. I also was impressed by how clean this city is. There is almost no litter on the streets, and plastic bags are actually illegal. The last Saturday of every month is a community service day, where people help to clean up their neighborhoods. My last day in Kigali happened to be on July 4th, which is Liberation Day. It marks the end of the genocide, and this year was the 20th anniversary (this is different from Independence Day on 7/1, which marks the independence from colonial rule). On this day we met Guido, another RVCP student, to go to a huge celebratory concert in a nearby soccer stadium.

Once the other two JeffHealth travelers, Melanie and Alda, arrived, we packed up and got ready to head out to Rutongo, where we would start our work in Akarambi village.

**Arrival to Rutongo**
We traveled by taxi to Rutongo. The ride was about an hour, over a mostly dusty, and rugged terrain. We drove along the mountainside, and the scenery was absolutely beautiful. We were met by our translator Andre, who took us to the parish house and introduced us to Father Etienne. After putting our things into our new rooms in the parish house, Andre took us to the restaurant/pub nearby to buy us a drink and go over our teaching plan. He is a teacher at a local school, and is a leader in the community. He told us all about the improvements that have been made in the village since JeffHealth has been involved, for example that family size has decreased from 5 to 3, that malnutrition has become almost nonexistent, and that mortality during childbearing has gone down now that women are more likely to deliver at the local health center. Andre grew up and was educated in the village, and is very proactive about improving his community. He even designed and built a new type of stove in his own home that is better ventilated for burning grass (instead of firewood, since there is a shortage).

**Introduction to Akarambi village**
Today Andre took us to Akarambi, which is about a 40 min walk from the parish house. Everything today was a new experience for me. We walked along red dirt roads, with views of the mountainsides the whole way, and passing houses made mostly of clay. We came across children pushing jugs of water or bags of supplies on bicycles, and playing with sticks and balls made of recycled materials. We said hi, “muraho,” to everyone. Everyone without fail responded with a smile and a hello in return. Many of the children came running after us screaming with delight “muzungu!” (which translates to foreigner).

The tour of the village was a totally overwhelming experience, and for me like a crash course in public health. First we went to see the rabbits that they breed for meat. Once the rabbits mate the owner must give a baby rabbit to his neighbor; there is a similar system with pigs. We then watched a handoff ceremony in which some of the young rabbits were given to their new owners. We also went to see a beekeeping project in which villagers with HIV/aids sell the honey as a
source of income. Then we met with the community health worker who runs the family planning center. The center offers birth control (provided free of charge by the Rwandan government) as a way to reduce family size. They had many different types of birth control, including Depo, 2 variations of the Pill, Cycle Beads, and condoms. We learned about some of the misunderstandings and rumors about birth control, such as that the injections can cause obesity or cancer, and that long term birth control use can cause sterility or deformation.

Andre described family planning as the most important teaching subject, since people who have large families cannot care for all of their children. For example, they may have difficulty covering school and healthcare fees.

A typical teaching day

Today we did our first day of teaching. We prepared all morning for our lesson on family planning. This involved making an outline of what we wanted to go over. It included the following components: introduction, anatomy, types of birth control (including how to use them and their side effects), and debunking myths. We made a presentation using construction paper, and used mostly drawings and pictures to convey the topics. We left at 2pm to get there in time to meet Andre at 3pm. Of course we got lost on the way, and started asking passersby and the troupe of kids following us how to get there. Unfortunately none of them spoke
English! We ended up running back when we realized we had gone the wrong way. By complete luck, we found a man who knew Andre and who walked us to the village. That was a relief!

We taught the lesson to the 5 villagers who make up the health committee (4 women and 1 man). We taught out on the grass outside of the “headquarters” that has all of the old JeffHealth materials. The committee received us very kindly and at the end thanked us “from the bottom of their hearts.” Throughout my time in Rwanda, I was struck by how kind and welcoming all of the people we met were.

We went about our future lessons in a similar way as the first day. In the morning we would prepare an outline, make a poster presentation, and then walk over to meet Andre and teach in the afternoon. We presented lessons on HIV/AIDs, sex education, the prevention of soil transmitted worms, prenatal care, and drug and alcohol abuse. We had a particularly rewarding moment during our last day of teaching, when we gave a presentation on drug and alcohol abuse to the health committee. During this lesson, we explained the dangers of “chief,” the illegal beer from Uganda that is 300 RWF cheaper than the standard Rwandan beers, but whose side effects include blindness and neurological symptoms. After the lesson the women thanked us and said that they hadn't know how dangerous “chief” was, and that they would now stay away from it.

A meeting with executive secretary for the Murambi sector
Today we went to meet with the executive secretary for the Murambi sector. We took our first moto taxi ride (~20 minutes) in order to get to the meeting. They are essentially dirt bikes used for taxis and they are everywhere. It was actually kind of fun! The meeting with the executive secretary went well. He asked good questions of us, and inquired about whether JeffHealth could expand its work into a neighboring village. In the end, he approved our work and that was the goal.

**Weekend adventures: Wildlife in Rwanda**
On our first weekend off we did a safari day at Akagera National Park. It was pretty amazing to see all of these animals in the wild. We saw zebras, giraffes, monkeys, baboons, antelope (impala, waterbuck, topy), hippopotamus, alligators, wart hogs, and one elephant.

On my second weekend I went to Volcanoes National Park to see the much famed silverback gorillas. After leaving our hotel in Kigali at 4:30am, we arrived at the park reception area at 7am where they provided us with coffee and tea. Then we learned that we were assigned to trek the sabyinyo group of gorillas. From the reception area we drove to the edge of the forest. Then our group of 8 people hiked about 30 minutes up a steep hillside, where the guide waited to hear from the trackers the location of the gorillas. The trackers track the gorillas from the time they wake until when they nest at night. That way they know where to look for them each day. There were 3 silverbacks in the Sabyinyo group, with the leader grooming his son to take over. They look incredibly human, and their sheer size is very impressive. Apparently the average weight is about 250kg, or 550 lbs. It was such a cool experience to actually follow them as they moved, and to get so close to them. We also saw a 6 month old baby who was playing with its mom, and even breastfed at one point. This was quite an amazing day.

A visit to Rutongo Hospital and Murambi health center
Today was a big day. In the morning, we walked to Rutongo District Hospital to see if we could make an appointment to have a tour. When we arrived however we were whisked away by a staff member who had us sign in and said we could see everything then and there. This hospital has 200 beds, 8 doctors, 34 nurses, and 18 midwives. Nurses here can prescribe medications, and seem to do more than in the United States. The hospital has internal, maternity, pediatrics, and surgery wards. We saw the operating room, autoclave and all. We also went to the nutritionists office to ask him questions while our guide translated. The nutritionist provides counseling as well as food stuffs to his clients. Then we went to see the laboratory which had 5 divisions. After that we went to see the integrative center, where HIV patients are given counseling. I asked about the biggest challenges they faced, and the answer was that the hospital was too far away for many people to reach, and that there was a shortage of providers.

In the afternoon, we walked over to meet Andre to take motos to the health center. We sat with the director and presented the report we presented last week to the executive secretary. We saw their laboratory, intake center, IT center, new maternity ward, HIV counseling area, and hygiene office. We were also shown the cabbage garden which is used to teach HIV patients how to eat healthy foods, and also used as a source of income.

Today was a great experience meeting different healthcare providers. We learned a lot about the community-based, decentralized system that is the basis of Rwandan healthcare. In this model, the community health workers are a central component.
Today was a really fun day. We met Andre and took motos to the school where he works. There we had a warmup with the kids, and then played a 40 minute soccer match. We had an audience of at least 200 people, and there was music playing the whole time. At halftime we did our presentation on the health consequences of drug/alcohol abuse. The police chief also gave the school children a talk on the negative effects of drug and alcohol abuse on the community and society. Afterwards we drank soda with both teams as a sign of goodwill. I think that partnership through sport, and especially soccer, is really a special thing, in part because it is so universal. I am a soccer player myself, and it is exciting to be able to come halfway across the world and play together the same game, even though we don’t speak the same language. This was one of my favorite days of the whole trip.

The Water Source
Today we went to go see the water source. It was a very sobering experience. It was an incredibly steep hike down, and was very easy to fall. We were holding trees and bracing ourselves the whole way down, and this was without the burden of carrying heavy jugs of water. Andre told us that everyone, including pregnant women and children, are expected to go fetch water. We saw children going down this trail who were around 3 years old. Once we got there, the water we saw ran clear, but the environment certainly did not meet the standards of cleanliness we expect and are accustomed to at home. It made for a pretty stark contrast to our access to water. It was also exhausting. We left the parish house
at 2:15, met Andre at 3pm, hiked down the steep slope to the water source, then took a flatter route back that was less direct, and got back to parish house at 5pm. It all made me feel incredibly lucky. Acquiring a water pump is one of the major projects planned in Akarambi, but it is being put on hold until the village is electrified. Andre says he is hopeful that the village will have electricity by next year.

**Departure from Rwanda**

I had one day in Kigali before my flight departed in the evening. I spent it at the genocide memorial in Kigali. In a country of 8 million people, 1 million people were killed, and 2 million were displaced. The exhibit had 2 stained glass pieces by an artist whose father was in a Nazi concentration camp, and there were rooms dedicated to other genocides, i.e Armenian, Jewish, Cambodian, and Namibian. I thought this worldwide perspective on genocide was really impactful. The whole museum was built and is operated by Aegis, a UK-based nonprofit that does genocide research and prevention work. There were also rooms in the exhibit dedicated to the children who had been murdered. There was a quote there that read: "if you save one life, you save the whole world." It's truly amazing how far this country has come in just 20 years.

My experience in Rwanda was like none other I have had before. I learned more than I could have imagined about public health and about the culture and people of Rwanda. I was so impressed by the efforts of the government and Rwandan
people to improve their country and their communities, and I hope to come back very soon!