

A Day in the Life

August 2006

I am often asked to describe my typical day here in Uganda and I never know quite how to answer. Some days are more eventful than others, and no day is ever completely routine. Today there is no music festival, nor is it a school visitation day. I'm not traveling to a village deep in the bush, nor am I visiting our friends and students in Gulu. I'm not even going to downtown Kampala. There are no prize bulls or goats in this story, but a pig will make a brief appearance.

The school term ended yesterday, and we had collected report cards from about sixty of our sponsored students. Now I would photocopy the reports for our files while we had power. Because of scheduled load-shedding, we have commercial electricity every other day. Today was an "on" day and I wanted to take advantage of the situation so we could return the original reports to the children before many of them returned to their family villages for the school holiday. Then I spent some time preparing solicitation letters for the Children's Fund.

Sharon has been working six and a half days a week at the hospital, so I offered to do a little shopping for fresh vegetables. On the way to the Kasubi open-air market, I passed by the house where one of our students was spending the school holiday. This girl is in sixth grade at a village boarding school. She ended up there last year after she had a discipline problem with her mother with whom she had been staying. She had been beaten on the head with a soda bottle and subsequently ran away from home. I didn't want her to remain alone in the village, nor could I send her back to her mother's, so I prevailed upon her young stepmother to take her in to spend the holiday with her three half-siblings. I had crayons and coloring books for the kids and a little extra money for mom to buy food.

I'd heard stories about the irresponsible, drug-addicted, alcoholic father, but there he was when I arrived, calm, industrious, and sober. His latest venture is raising pigs, and he hasn't yet accumulated enough cash to build a sty. A number of giant hogs were rooting around the yard, and as I tried to navigate my way around their stout aromatic bodies, one big fellow unexpectedly charged and nuzzled my rear end with his snout, much to the amusement of the children. After greeting the family, I privately gave mom the money so it wouldn't turn into beer or banana wine, and left for Kasubi.

The sprawling outdoor market was bustling with activity and the women selling the vegetables brazenly and laughingly called to me, "*Muzungu*, over here!" I found what I needed and marveled at how much I could buy for so little money. I accumulated a large bag of fresh tomatoes, green peppers, carrots, and potatoes for the equivalent of two dollars! Then I crossed the road to buy bread and eggs before returning home.

Last week I had told Ssem, a contractor friend, that I wanted to visit *Jjalja*'s house to see about adding a "bathroom" to the premises. Many of you may remember the old woman who takes care of about a dozen orphaned grandchildren in a small house between the main road and a swamp. Last year we finished her house and earlier this year we added a pit latrine, but the family has no private place to bathe. A bathroom is actually an outdoor stall where one takes soap and a basin of water, and maybe a towel. That's how most people wash themselves here.

Ssem arrived and we headed off to *Jjalja*'s. She and the kids were happy to see us, and after the obligatory greetings we inspected the site and agreed on a proposed location for the addition. As we were about to leave, *Jjalja* insisted we come in to see baby Simon whom she said was "sick." I remembered that he had cerebral palsy, but still I was shocked by what I saw. The two-year-old was all head and belly, with tiny, vestigial-looking legs and arms dangling limply from his distended torso. His head lolled open-mouthed and his eyes gazed into nowhere. Eleven-year-old Fiona picked him up and gently held him while I sat down on the bed, feeling stunned and helpless.

I soon came to my senses, though, and called Sharon on my mobile phone. She prompted me with some pointed questions, and ably assisted by Ssem as translator we determined that Simon was seriously malnourished. His mother has been feeding him only milk from a cup. We gave her instructions on how to prepare maize-flour porridge fortified with milk, eggs, and other nutrients, provided her with a little money to buy these items, and told her to come to our hospital for some nutritional counseling.

We departed again, and just to add a bizarre note to our leave-taking, we passed a madwoman sitting on the side of the road playing with the gravel on the berm. As we approached, I recognized her as one of *Jja/jja*'s daughters, the mother of two of our kids. She seemed about midway between manic and normal, so I greeted her in *luganda* and had a brief but interesting conversation. Then Ssem and I boarded a *matatu* back to Namungoona.

That evening I found two of our high school students, Sophia and Batte, waiting to give me their school reports. I reviewed their performances, gave a little advice for improvement, and sent them on their way as night was falling. So ends another day in Uganda.

Postscript: Five days later

Today while I was in town, Sophia and her sister Maria, cousins to little Simon, tearfully came to tell Sharon that he had died this morning.

2nd Postscript: Two months later

I was informed that the young mother of three who allowed her stepdaughter to stay with them during the school holiday was admitted to the hospital. I went down to visit and saw the ambulance preparing to transport her to the main government hospital in Kampala. She was suffering from an infection following a miscarriage. She did not survive.