

On Thu, 11/19/09, Staci Pham <stacipham@yahoo.com> wrote:
Hi folks,

I hope this email finds everyone well. So much has happened since the last time I've written. First off, I moved to town about a week ago. The problems in the village were really starting to affect me and I was having a hard time dealing with everything. Emotionally, I felt drained. I was always exhausted and had a hard time biking to work and back. In addition, because some of the problems with stealing, I was starting to resent some people in my village. Peace Corps (PC) and I were in talks about moving me and the move was implemented last week.

No longer am I a village girl. Now, I'm a town girl. The town I moved to is called Mansa. This is the capital of the Luapula province. Zambia is divided into different provinces and the one I live in is called Luapula. Recently, I started my new job. The organization I work for is a nongovernmental organization called Luapula Foundation. They started out assisting orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) with school fees, school supplies and so forth. A couple of years ago, they linked with a partner and started a HIV/AIDS testing center at their offices. They also conduct mobile counseling and testing (CTC) for HIV/AIDS. In addition, they train the caregivers/guardians of ovc on conservation farming (using organic fertilizer and pesticide and other methods not to deplete the soil of nutrients).

The department I'm in is called Health Promotion. It's a new department and I'm starting from the beginning. I mean this literally because I'm the only one in the department. I've been brainstorming ideas and now I'm planning out different strategies and methods on how to promote health. Some health topics we're trying to promote are male circumcision, family planning (Depovera, oral contraceptives, etc.) and couples counseling and testing for HIV/AIDS. We receive your grant in Dec (next month) so I am just planning and strategizing. Health promotion is new to me and I'm excited to learn more about it. In the village, my role was mostly of a teacher. I was teaching about health in clubs at schools, to individuals and also workshops. This is a new field for me and I am excited to delve in and learn something new.

If you folks recall, in the last email I wrote about planning a HIV/AIDS testing event in my community. That event took place on Oct 30, 2009 and was very successful. I think about 300 or 400 people came out to the event. There was a soccer game, cultural dances and skits. I organized for an organization to come to my community and conduct testing, overall about 123 were counselled and out of those, 85 people were tested. The event was a success in my eyes because I encouraged and supported one of my neighbours and she agreed to be tested. My neighbour lost her husband about 9 years ago from malaria (it was suspected) but she had been fearful and has never been tested for HIV/AIDS. I went with her into the testing room for support and after testing she received her results. She was petrified and I was so proud of her for conquering her fear. Also, another friend of mine got tested and he wanted me to be in the room when he got the results. It felt so good to know that I made a little difference in their lives just by encouraging them to go and get tested for HIV/AIDS. Zambia has a 15% prevalence of HIV/AIDS. I'm relieved to report that this event was one of my proudest moments in Zambia as it went really well.

Besides the HIV/AIDS testing event, I also facilitated at two workshops. The first was about HIV/AIDS (prevention, signs and symptoms, male circumcision etc). While the second workshop I facilitated in was about gender and HIV. I didn't feel the first one went very well but I am happy to report the second went smoothly. The participants were lively and were enthusiastic about learning in the second workshop. I am so glad that I left things on a good note and I felt that I put all my effort into my community. It was sad to say good bye to some of my neighbours and children but I know it was time to leave. I plan to come back at least once before my service ends.

I apologize for writing so much; I just had so much to share with everyone. I'll continue to update everyone on my work, life and Zambia.

P.S. In my new job, I work 5 days a week, 8am-5pm and I'm discovering that it's exhausting!

Much love to everyone,
Staci