

POSSIBLE WORLDS



a **CUSO** reader on international development

Edited by Sean Kelly

A SANCTUARY FOR HOPE

By Sean Kelly

A CANADIAN VOLUNTEER OFFERS HELP – AND HOPE – TO STREET KIDS IN TANZANIA

Maryamm Himid arrives at work each morning hoping to leave with her heart intact. She knows that on any given day up to 200 sad stories will walk through the door of the children's centre located in Buguruni, an impoverished quarter of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, where she is halfway through a two-year volunteer posting.

Youth and children as young as three will arrive hungry, lonely and sick. Youth like Sadi Hajoge, a fifteen-year-old boy who came in dirty, malnourished and speaking the street language that defines his life. He sells gum, toilet disinfectant, toothpicks – anything to survive – and visits the centre for perhaps his only meal of the day. Hajoge is on the streets because his mom died and his dad is too poor to take care of him.

Himid is volunteering at a centre run by the Kiota Women's Health and Development Organization, known by its acronym 'KIWOHEDE.' This sanctuary from the street offers counseling, HIV testing and education, basic schooling, a warm meal and a place where children can act like kids.

The centre in Buguruni is a home away from home – or the only home – for children and youth in trouble. 'Trouble' comes in many guises: child prostitutes, orphans who have lost both parents to AIDS, sexual abuse survivors and the HIV stricken.

Himid counsels children and educates them about catching and spreading AIDS. Her background is in Early Childhood Education, so she also spends time with the very youngest. "Sometimes," Himid says, "the most important thing [you can do] is to offer some rare affection."

The 42-year-old Montreal woman is in the Southeastern African country with CUSO, a non-profit Canadian agency. Tanzania lies in the shadow of Mount Kilimanjaro, the highest peak in Africa. Around 37 million people call Tanzania home, with two-and-a-half million of them in the city of Dar es Salaam. Life expectancy at birth is 51.

Buguruni is a low-income district of hot and humid Dar es Salaam, made up of squatter shacks capped by rusty sheet metal. There is limited electricity and water. People dodge *daladals* (private mini-buses) in narrow alleys alive with survival. Small canteens sell beer and *nyama choma* (roasted meat) with French fries. In the evening, women set up shop selling *chapati*, a fried bread topped with egg mixed with potatoes, tomatoes and green peppers. Chickens and goats mingle with children playing soccer.

Some hang on by begging or stealing. Or selling their bodies. “I have never seen poverty like this anywhere,” says Himid. She was warned this would be a tough posting. Among the required qualifications, the job description listed the ability to “cope with grief and the sad situations of young people.”

And it has been a challenge. “I was surprised to see children without parents wandering the streets looking for food,” admits Himid. “I was surprised to meet young girls and boys who cared for their AIDS parents. I was surprised to see children wandering around the streets picking stuff from the garbage, not understanding what a toy is.”

For Himid, this posting is both a humanitarian offering and a return to her roots. Her parents were from Mozambique, but moved to Tanzania where Maryamm was born. Her mother and father are still in Africa, but she and her brothers and sisters travelled widely for schooling and work. Maryamm journeyed to London, England, where the young woman graduated from school and then university. She moved to Montreal, which she considers home, although she still feels a connection to all the countries she has lived in. “I’m some kind of a blend,” says Himid, who is fluent in English, French and Swahili.

She is also a single mother of two boys, 12-year-old Ashraff and 7-year-old Tarek, who are with her in Tanzania. While concerned for the well-being of her children – they don’t live in Buguruni but in a safer neighbourhood 30 minutes away – she believes the experience has deepened their sense of humanity. “My boys will go back to Canada passionately enriched with so many experiences, good and bad. They will appreciate more the things too many of us

“Sometimes the most important thing you can do for a child from the street is to offer some rare affection.”

take for granted, like education, food and shelter.”

Being a parent adds an emotional entanglement to working with children at risk. Himid looks into faces of the children she works with and knows that there but for the grace of god go her kids – or anybody’s kids. “I was born in the Developing World,” she says, “so I have always known that I wanted to reduce suffering somehow. I consider myself fortunate to get to know people from different backgrounds. I feel touched by their lives, their stories.”

“And I try to not have my heart broken by applying what I preach here everyday. And that is hope.” Himid tells of some youth going back to school because of counselling and support from KIWOHEDE staff. And of women who had never spoken to their husbands before about condoms now telling their partners to use protection.

Himid even sees hope in the bloodshot eyes of Sadi Hajoge, the fifteen-year-old street kid. Ostracized by the community at large, he is an angry and abusive teen who makes it hard to be loved, she says. “So I took him in my office and started to listen to his story. After a long counselling session, he left me feeling emotionally drained and unsuccessful because he was arguing about everything.”

She didn’t give up, and kept trying to break through, taking the time to hear the fear and hope and longing under the anger. Slowly he began participating in group discussions and other centre activities.

“Then the other day he was not feeling well, so I checked his temperature and he was burning up. I bought him food and medicine, and he started to cry – for me, this was something very unusual because he always acts tough and pretends that he does not need anybody. I think he is at [our centre] because he never had a place where he can call home, where people listen to him as a child and where he can open up and tell of his troubles, his joys and his interests.”

And so ended another day of work for Maryamm Himid, who picked up Ashraff and Tarek from school with a heart heavy but unbroken.

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Maryamm Himid, Ashraff and Tarek are scheduled to return to Canada from Tanzania in May 2005.