

# jitegemee

\jee-teh-geh-máy\ v [Swahili : sustain yourself] : empowering street children through **education**.

Dear Friends,

December, 2009

*Each December, we invite a recent visitor to Jitegemee to share their experiences with the entire group of Jitegemee friends and supporters. This year, our letter has been written by Jenya Kahn-Lang, a college sophomore and daughter of our board member Shulamit Kahn. Jenya accompanied her parents on a trip to Jitegemee this past August.*

*Thank you all for supporting this life-changing organization. Because of you, Jitegemee helped 160 former street children get an education in 2009. Because of you, Jitegemee was able to provide hot lunch for nearly 100 people every day during a time of hunger. Thanks to you, Jitegemee has raised about half of the \$150,000 needed to build its new building. We hope you can continue to show that support to these very special children during the coming year.*

The Jitegemee Board

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“Nyama! Nyama! Nyama!” shouted the boy in the center of the circle as he cupped his hands around his mouth and leaned back, his voice cracking at the effort.



“NYAMA!” everybody else responded. Looking around the yard of Jitegemee’s rented house, I was shocked to realize that every single student had contributed to the thunderous echo. Nyama means “meat” in Swahili and is the refrain in a Kenyan children’s game, signaling that the leader was about to announce the name of an animal. About one hundred kids, from 5 to 21, stood in front of me, and I could not find one who did not seem genuinely excited about jumping every time the animal’s meat was edible. As my visit to Kenya continued, I became increasingly impressed by these Jitegemee students. No game seemed too boring for them. No joke seemed too bland. No kid was too ‘uncool’ to talk to. No challenge was too tough to overcome.

I had come with my parents to visit Jitegemee and to participate in a workshop that involved architects, students, guardians and teachers in planning a new school building to be constructed on an acre of land that Jitegemee, a program for street children in Machakos Kenya, had just purchased.

I spent my first few days in Kenya in this workshop, working together with a planning committee of 25 students and adults led by two incredible members of Architects for Humanity. The entire committee travelled to Nairobi to learn how to keep a building naturally cool by shading it from the sun, how to collect rainwater from a roof, and other forms of sustainable, efficient architecture. At the University of Nairobi, we got a lecture from one of Kenya’s most prominent environmentally-sustainable designers. In a small town north of Nairobi, we visited a school with a beautiful library large enough for the community to learn and study in, a far cry from Jitegemee’s small library in a cramped teacher’s office.

Although no one on our planning committee had ever designed a school before and many had no more than an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education, they soaked up the information. They understood our budget limitations and the importance of prioritizing. When we were introduced to the intricacies of solar panels at a well-known company in Nairobi, not a single committee member believed the product was worth the high prices. Even the fourteen-year-olds understood the value of money and the concept of trade-offs.

The lessons learned will extend well beyond Jitegemee's new home. When an architect explained that the orientation of a building can have an enormous effect on the temperature within it, the guardians immediately began talking about the orientation of their own houses. They could scarcely wait to return to Machakos and spread the news of what they had learned.

Enthusiasm and a sense of responsibility were traits that everyone in Jitegemee shared. I was fortunate enough to accompany about 130 Jitegemee students and staff to Amboseli National Park on its annual field trip. We slept in bunk beds at a dusty primary school. Our visit to the park the next day was marred by the same severe drought that had created food and water shortages in Machakos. At Amboseli, the lack of water had destroyed much of the vegetation, leaving the wild animals without food. We were all silent as we passed zebra carcasses in the dust. Still, the circumstances did not keep the students from enjoying the trip. Many were excited simply to be on a bus for the first time and to journey far beyond the edge of their town. Others took full advantage of the environmental lesson in front of them. Muli Kieti, a recent high school graduate who is now doing an unpaid journalism internship at a state-run news wire, spent the entire time in the park jotting down notes for an article he planned to write.

Muli is about my age, and he already knows that he is passionate about journalism. In fact, it seemed that all the Jitegemee students my age had already established their goals for the future. Most of the vocational students introduced themselves with both their name and their trade. Two girls my age informed me numerous times, through their giggles, that it was not acceptable for me to be in college and not know what I want to be when I grow up. They had a point. While I spent my freshman year dabbling in subjects like linguistics that I had no intention in pursuing as a career, these vocational students had already started their own businesses and were earning money to support their little sisters and brothers.

These kids had grown up on the streets and most were still often forced to skip meals, yet in the bus to Amboseli they offered me half of the snack that the teacher had just given them. On our overnight trip, despite having gone to bed very late, despite the lack of warm water and the inescapable dust, the Jitegemee students woke up before the sun rose to wash themselves and polish their shoes.

The students refused to accept the identity of "street kid." They presented themselves as respectable, young individuals with bright prospects. As equals, we compared music tastes. As equals, we taught each other games. As equals, we shared details about our lives.

As I watched the group play *Nyama* again, however, the truth dawned on me: We were not quite equal. I would get bored of jumping every time somebody shouted "cow". I would never choose to wake up at 5 a.m. to polish my shoes. I could never relate to each new Jitegemee student and give them the comfort of knowing they were not alone in what they have been through. In truth, each Jitegemee student was superior to me in mental strength, compassion, and self-awareness. They were fortunate to find Jitegemee, and I was fortunate to experience, however briefly, the family that they have become.

*Jenya Kahn-Lang*

