

Redefining Rich
eSwatini (Swaziland) 2007
Carlo Capua

“I wanna be RICH when I grow up.”

Sound familiar? Most of us can remember hearing (or boldly stating) this on playgrounds, in classrooms, or at sleepovers when we were kids.

As a kid, I fondly remember tuning into channel 5 on Saturday mornings to watch my favorite cartoon, Richie Rich. This kid had it all – personal butler, huge mansion, live-in chef....and practically everything he owned was gold.

I envied him.

Most of us tend to think of being rich or poor in terms of money and possessions. Being rich in an 8 year-old’s mind means not having to work and still being able to buy anything you want. Poor means being unable to go out to restaurants with your family, not getting that new Spiderman backpack, or having few presents under the Christmas tree.

These terms are often used loosely in context. For example, “Papua New Guinea is a really poor country.” In fact, New Guinea is the richest country in the world in terms of languages, boasting over 800. Socio-economically, however, it is considered a developing country in terms of GDP when compared to other world superpowers.

During my 12 days in Swaziland I thought a lot about the words “rich” and “poor.” Was it really a poor country? How do we define “rich” and “poor”? Are they really poorer than I am?

Here is my experience.

First, as I do with my students, let’s address the common stereotypes we have of Africa.

1) Africa is a country

Many of us have heard someone exclaim “What an exotic and dangerous country that Africa is!” This is pitiful. I have noticed this much more since coming back and talking to people about the trip. And yes, I correct them every time. There are 53 countries in the continent Africa, each one being significantly different in terms of language, dress, music, physical features, customs, and religion.

2) Everyone in Africa is black

I didn’t remember this from my World History class, so don’t feel like I am lecturing you here. During the scramble for African land in the late 1800’s, many European countries threw their hats in the ring, including Belgium (Congo), England (Swaziland, South Africa), and Portugal (Mozambique). Although a majority of African people are black, a handful of countries are indeed multiracial.

3) All people in Africa are suffering

Go to any country in the world and you will find people who are suffering. Are there a higher percentage of people without the most basic necessities in Africa? Yes. Is everyone unhappy and dying? No. Is the media responsible for creating this image and furthering the stereotype? You bet.

Watch movies like “Blood Diamond”, “Amistad”, or “Hotel Rwanda” which show the struggle of Africans and how foreign (i.e. United States) people come to their “rescue” at the end. Is it a fair and balanced look at the culture? No. Does it sell movie tickets? You bet.

4) It is always hot in Africa

A good part of Southern Africa is at the same latitude as Australia, which means that the seasons are opposite to those of the USA and most of Europe. I wore a sweater and jacket during most of my July visit to Swaziland.

5) Africa is all jungle

That’s like saying that all of California has beach-friendly weather. Just look at San Francisco.

6) Africans ride lions and elephants

This stereotype is undoubtedly perpetuated by the Tarzan story. And by the way, wasn’t he white? Oh, wait, I forgot. He was the son of a British Lord who was marooned on the west coast of Africa by mutineers. Um,.....yeah. Right.

The Kingdom of Swaziland, sandwiched between South Africa and Mozambique, is one of the last and longest reigning monarchies in the world. Originally a colony of England, it achieved a peaceful independence in 1968.

Interesting Swazi fact #1

Polygamy is an accepted part of Swazi tradition and is still legal (but very rarely practiced today). Upon stumbling onto this little piece of information, I told my family and co-workers that I would be personally bringing as much Swazi culture back as I could. I think everyone found it funny except for my parents.

Interesting Swazi fact #2

Just about everyone loves King (*Inkhosi*) Mswati III. He holds absolute power – political parties are banned and he can veto any legislation. People love the king; he is a symbol of what it means to be a Swazi.

Interesting Swazi fact #3

Elephants can run up to 45 kilometers per hour (30 miles per hour). And as one of my Swazi students put it best, “Carlo, I don’t have to outrun the elephant. I just have to outrun YOU!”

Interesting Swazi fact #4

The HIV/AIDS infection rate is 26% (highest in the world) and average lifespan is around 33 years (lowest in the world).

From the day of my arrival, people of Swaziland rolled out the red carpet for me. My schedule was very full, and considering the time and resources, I walked away feeling like I had accomplished everything I could have.

Accomplishments

- Started an Mbabane GAP alumni program with 13 members, 3 sponsors, a mission, and bylaws
- Created a mini-ILA stereotype-breaking and teambuilding program targeted at high school students
- Visited communities of child-headed households to learn more about the HIV pandemic and distribute donated clothes with AAMICALI (NGO)
- Appeared on national TV three times, newspapers 7 times, and radio once promoting Fort Worth-Mbabane partnership and mission of Sister Cities
<http://www.observer.org.sz/main.php?id=36086§ion=main>
- Visit to the Mbabane Lions Club to introduce program and appeal for support of ILA students and partnership during GAP trip in 2008.
- Strengthened partnership with City Council of Mbabane
- Visited 4 high schools of former ILA students to promote 2008 GAP exchange
- Debriefing at US Embassy in Swaziland to discuss future possibilities

I had my share of eye-opening experiences, starting with my first visit to a real African church. My friend and host Bongani had told me a lot about his church. It was in the middle of a very rural area. There were about 30 members, and the sermon and prayers were all in siSwati. I could sense that he was a little hesitant about inviting me, but I told him that I was excited to go and take some candid pictures of people.

After the half-mile trek through the mountains (he wasn't kidding!) we arrived at a very modest white tent with a group of about 15 people waiting inside. I asked Bongani why the other half of the parishioners didn't come. "They don't have any clothes or food at the moment," he said.

It is indeed sad that while many people suffer from lack of food, others are dying from overeating. What really kills me is that at the current "growth" rate, in the next five years 4 out of 10 adults in the USA will be obese while 2.6 million people will continue to starve in Africa.

The most memorable experience I had was during a visit to one of Swaziland's rural communities. The Mbabane GAP Alumni students and I went to learn more about the situations of many "child headed households." As HIV is sometimes (not always) passed from a mother to her newborn, there are literally entire communities of orphaned children whose parents have died as a result of HIV.

We went to visit a girl named Cassandra. A frail 18 year-old, she had a beautiful smile and warm spirit that I will never forget.

Cassandra was a victim of her own culture. In Swaziland there is a misconception, primarily on some rural areas, that having sex with a virgin can cure your infection of HIV or AIDS. Consequently, one day an older family member raped her with the hopes of curing his illness.

After Cassandra became infected, her health began to deteriorate. When we visited her she was bedridden. And although she didn't say much, just the fact that she welcomed us for a few moments into her house, her life, was touching. I promised to visit her next year.

Two weeks later, she passed away.

Conclusion

Going to Africa this summer was an empowering experience. I use the word "empowering" in the sense that in the ensuing 2 months of summer programs in Texas and returning to school in Mexico, I gave 20 presentations about my trip, mainly to students. I studied them closely as they took in what I was telling them. Watching their reactions to the pictures, faces, and stories I was sharing with them, I could almost see both the stereotypes breaking in their minds and the pain they felt for some Swazi children in their hearts.

This told me that somehow I had reached them. And being able to reach a group of 150 restless and elite Mexican high school students all at the same time with just a microphone and a few pictures (and without talking directly about sex, violence, or video games) was indeed a victory for hope. This was indeed empowering.

There may not be many stretch limos, mansions, or private swimming pools in Swaziland. But people make it a priority to spend time with their families. Children enjoy and appreciate spending time with their parents, grandparents, sisters, brothers, etc. They are not in a hurry to dash through dinner and jump online to see who they can chat with. Nor are they in a rush to move out of their house as soon as possible (I have concluded that teens in the US are the only ones in the world who think this way.) They welcome extended family, and especially the elders, into their homes, rather than shipping them off to nursing homes.

This trip showed me that notions of wealth (just like beauty, power, and intellect) are always relative to your own experience. We can most accurately define being "rich" and "poor" based not on the amount of stuff we have, but on the difference between what we have and what we actually need.

Africa is nicknamed the "dark continent." However, I see Africa as a bright light in our hope for a responsible, healthier, happier example of a united global community.

Perhaps one day, through bringing the world together with a little "Swazi spirit", we can ALL be rich.

In every sense of the word.



The Mbabane GAP and I with Cassandra.



Gift exchange with Mbabane Mayor Bennedict Bennett.