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Expedition to Kilimanjaro, the summit of Africa

The 'Seven Summits' are the ultimate peaks adventurers around all the world set their sights on, but only ever conquered by a selected few. And the Easter holidays just passed marked the time when the expedition team of The University of Hong Kong accomplished one of the seven- Kilimanjaro, the summit of Africa. Pioneering adventure education, The University of Hong Kong expedition teams have gone up to 6,000-metre peaks in Tibet and Qinghai, and have hiked snow-capped mountains in Japan, Taiwan and India. Reaching the highest point was an achievement in itself, yet what our teams celebrated the most was personal growth each member gained through the challenging endeavours.



On 22nd of April, our 21-member expedition team set off to Tanzania. The long flight was exhausting; nevertheless every member was in eager anticipation of the adventure ahead. Heavy rain cleaned up the air just before we set foot on the lands of Tanzania; everyone was revived by

the vitality the country exuberates: exotic plants blossoming in every corner, wild animals roaming about and genuine smiles showing on the faces of local people.

The expedition began with a day of hard labour at a local school; together with the students and parents, we built the foundation for one classroom at a corner of the campus which is now a landmark of our collaboration with our African counterparts. Language difference was no barrier to our exchange with the local youth whose



enthusiasm for learning and contentment with living a simple life was infectious. Parting the children for the African wilderness, we were greeted by Mother Nature whose power in shaping the weathered landscape never ceases to amaze. We make our way through damp rainforest and bizarre moorland, traveled between lush vegetations and desolate gravel in pouring rain and even snow blizzard. Thin air, coldness and high-altitude symptoms were there to test our determination and strength. Having ploughed through knee-deep snow for one whole night, we reached the Gilman's Point at 5,681m, which hardly resembles the Africa we first encountered. We were moved not just because we have reached our destination but because we have conquered the rugged terrain, freezing conditions and long distance with team spirit and unbeaten determination. Up at the top of Africa, we were never more inspired and felt never more appreciative of the nature and the culture this untamed land has to offer.



Student Participant - Shirley Wong

It was with much hope and anticipation of setting out on an adventurous and eye-opening journey our plane to Tanzania took off. Along with such promises, the airline carried my 21 teammates from the HKU community and I off to the mysterious and exotic land, faraway from the urban cut-throat landscape of Hong Kong. Our "mission" over the next two weeks was to consist of two diverse projects. Firstly, to engage in community service work, interact with the Tanzanian community and experience their culture. Secondly, to summit the tallest mountain in Africa, Mount Kilimanjaro (5,895m).

After a blessed landing in Tanzania, we had but little time to settle into the unfamiliar before we embarked on our first community service project. The project involved going to one of the poorer secondary schools in the region and to help the students build a new classroom with our bare hands and some fundraising. For the entire day, my teammates and I blended into a sea of African kids and their parents, each of us feverishly passing buckets of cement down the line of human chain to shift the raw building materials from one place to another.

Admittedly, our actual efforts in building this classroom were at best minimal in effect. Perhaps it would take a few more weeks of hard labor on the community's behalf before the building would be fully constructed. However, even given the little time we had with the kids, I have since reflected on the experience as an immeasurable and ever-lasting source of inspiration for myself and I am sure, for my fellow teammates.

Whilst interacting with the kids, I was profoundly struck by their beauty, their cheerful

characters, their optimism, wit and burning intelligence despite their seemingly inescapable poverty and their bleak socio-economic reality. I was in awe of their eagerness and zeal for learning and knowledge. Mary, a 13 year old girl I met had passionately recounted her dreams to me. She told me she wanted to be all these things, “a doctor, a scientist, a biologist, a traveler, a mathematician...”. Frankly, I was put to shame for taking so much for granted the privileged education which I enjoy throughout my whole life with effortless convenience.

After an initial two days in the township of Moshi (a regional town in Tanzania), we set off for our mountain climbing expedition towards the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro. Along the arduous journey of hiking up the mountain, combating altitude sickness and (sometimes) deflated mentalities, our team successfully reached Gilman’s Point (5,685m) despite the heaviest snow falls in the 3 years of Kilimanjaro’s history. We should all be very proud of ourselves for this fantastic achievement!

Once we conquered the physical challenge of our journey, we embarked upon our second community service which involved visiting an orphanage. The orphanage housed infants from a few months old to children aged 5 or so. Our team had also chipped in to contribute 10 boxes of milk powder as we were informed that food supplies were running out due to poor resources.

The experience of spending an afternoon in an orphanage with the African children was sad and profoundly moving. Many of the children were placed in this orphanage because of the dire economic circumstances of their family and some were there because their parents had died of AIDS (Africa is more heavily affected by [HIV and AIDS](#) than any other region of the world. An estimated 22.5 million people were living with HIV at the end of 2007. In just the past year, the AIDS epidemic in Africa has claimed the lives of an estimated 1.6 million people in this region. More than eleven million children have been orphaned by AIDS.) I felt I was experiencing the translation of what used to be a passive figure or fact into a harsh and heartbreaking reality. As we played joyously with the kids and clung to them lovingly, I could not help but wonder how these children’s lives would unravel and whether they would ever attain the basic necessities (health, nourishment, education and so forth) that the developed world takes so much for granted.



This trip to Tanzania has truly opened my eyes, and more importantly my heart, to the plight of those much much less fortunate than me. Impressed by the exhilarating beauty of their landscape and the generosity and simple goodness of the African people, it has certainly made me pause and reflect upon how I could better this world and contribute my little part to alleviate the suffering of my fellow human beings. Even though more than a month has passed since the expedition, I still feel myself deeply touched and moved by what I saw and experienced in Tanzania and I am sure this feeling will stay with me (and my fellow teammates) for a long, long time to come!