



### **Working To Empower : DR Congo HIV/AIDS Seminar**

During the spring of 2005 WTE was connected to Artistes Pour Humanité (ArtHum) by RESPECT International. In a partnership, the three organizations created proposals and drafts for the work of the following year. The issue of HIV and AIDS was selected as a needed topic because many Congolese refugees have begun to return and the processes of war and displacement have increased prevalence for refugees in general. The original project was to have five three-day seminars in refugee areas, however due to continued fighting at the time of the program the schedule was altered for the sake of safety. The second draft was a larger program lasting one-week where participants would be brought from locations all over the Eastern Congo region. The central location was chosen as Baraka, about 90km south of Uvira, a treacherous dirt road that took five hours to traverse. The participant number was drafted at fifty, but ended up being sixty. Participants living more than 15km away had their transportation taken care of via central locations, mainly from Uvira. Housing and food arrangements were made and paid for the program. ArtHum also provided musicians, with WTE buying new guitars and a generator for the area.



The project team (WTE Educator, ArtHum Team) left from Bujumbura, Burundi on Friday April 7<sup>th</sup> for a long journey to Baraka. We missed our first bus, but eventually got rolling with much of the supplies packed in a truck – much of the food is either not available or very expensive in Baraka. We reached the Burundi boarder, a rope across the road beside a worn down building, and crossed with no problems. Next we had to walk through an area neither DR Congo nor Burundi, while the trucks contents was inspected (this is important and diamonds, gold, and guns are often smuggled across the boarder). The mountains of the region are breathtakingly beautiful, along side a large lake teeming with fish and fishers. We reached the Congolese boarder, also a rope beside an old small building, and faced a little trouble with my visa. The visa problems originated in the fact that the Burundi office can not give visas, and so I had to have a “flying” visa since I could not go to Kinshasa (hundreds of km away) to get the stamp. After some talking I did get the entrance stamp and we moved on. I took a motorbike taxi (passing UN Peacekeepers fixing roads, a contingent from Pakistan) and visited the ArtHum office in Uvira, was joined by more team members and we moved on for the lengthier portion of our trip to Baraka. I thought that a 90km drive would be fine, but the ‘road’ was mostly potholes and dirt tracks, often muddy and water covered as we drove alongside Lake Tanganyika. Along the way I was told of the many problems, one moving story of 720 orphaned children listed at the ArtHum office who cannot attend school because of the fees. We began our journey to the ‘anthropologists dreamland,’ which only really means a place that is relatively poor, without buildings and cars, and most importantly very few foreigners.

At one point along the road a river had overtaken everything and we crossed by foot and the van took at run across the water. Our trip was going well until it got late, we were stopped by armed men, some in military uniform others not, all carrying AK-47’s. As I speak no Swahili, Lingala (linga franca of the military), and little French this was a disturbing experience but turned out to be fine.



We could travel no further as it was too late and we would disturb the people of the cities along the road. As our only solution we slept in our cramped van until dawn. An additional personal problem was the mosquitoes, much more in this area, but in addition my malaria pills are required to be taken with food, which we did not have so I failed to take the medication on certain days because of this. All along the way we passed many road blocks, seemingly set up by whomever wanted one, and had to pay a crossing fee.

The following morning we reached Baraka, only 19km from our stop point, a city with no paved roads or buildings beyond two stories, most also clearly being heavily affected by the war. That first day we greeted various local officials (immigration, NGO’s, UNOCHA,

UN Peacekeepers) and we also got our first bit of food in 24 hours time. There was no hotel so I was lodging in a Catholic mission. If one doesn't look closely, Baraka is a beautiful place. The mountains, lake; green surroundings, and sun all add up to a tourist heaven, but reality is much different, nearly all the residents of Baraka are suffering in some form (mentally, economically, educationally, physically). It was this night that I went into a nearby village named Mwambangu where I was introduced, via an organization of illiterate women, to four-hundred children unable to attend school because of the fees. They ran around in a hectic swarm screaming as a mzungu (white person) came to visit them. They were unanimously excited, and curious.

The following morning, Monday the 10<sup>th</sup>, we had to visit one more official before the class could start one time at 8:30am. The story turned out much different, if you recall I said that at the border I had an entrance stamp and a flying visa, not good enough for these administrators (who all work in small offices in places that are falling apart, something that would be abandoned in Canada). Anyways, to make a long and dramatic story shorter, these men demanded \$166 USD for the return of my passport, which I did not want to pay. At the end of the day, UN OCHA and UN Peacekeepers had arrived, but I went home with no passport and having done basically no teaching. The passport was kept by these officials until Friday (five days later) when it was clear they were not following the law, I was not going to pay, and was making a big deal about it all. They gave it back without any payment as we had contacted officials in Bukavu, Uvira, and Kinshasa.



On Sunday night all the participants met for dinner, some drama, music, and introductions of peoples. The seminar did begin on Monday, but not until late afternoon. At this point I introduced myself, the class, and had everyone share some of their experiences of HIV and AIDS. Since I had wanted to spend the first day casually we did not lose too much,

but did make the seminar more formal as there wasn't much time for sharing experiences and personal stories. Tuesday we all continued as if my passport did not matter, covering topics of an introduction to HIV/AIDS, the specific characteristics of the virus, the history of the virus, and a round of questions. As we were a little behind in schedule, Wednesday we talked about individual level transmission and prevention, with a few hours of questions and concluding with some group work regarding the local area and transmission. The next day we talked about social factors, had more questions, and another group project about the social factors in Baraka. On Thursday we had an interesting class on treatments, with a talk from a local doctor who is working on herbal treatments. Friday we talked about culture, stigma, age, religion, and ethnicity with an important focus on gender. On our last seminar day we talked about examples of successes and failures (countries and programs), with lots of more time for questions. In comparing this one week 9am to 5pm class, we spent as many hours as a typical university course does in a semester. The participants were continually engaged, asking questions, working late on their group assignments, and eager to teach others. Many also got an opportunity to teach within the class via the group projects.

At the close of the program, also on Saturday night, members of the community gathered around a nearby school and certificates were handed out. One participant in particular was the National Director of the AIDS program, another being a journalist who spoke about the daily teachings on Baraka radio. The music attracted many people, where a peer educator (also a participant) handed out condoms to those in attendance.

In the end, all the participants had places to stay, meals to eat, and a seminar to attend. They began with many simple questions and ended with debates currently being had in Canada. I had an opportunity to talk on every topic I wanted to, and did so in a manner that all the students left with an understanding of each of the many ideas. We left Congo on Sunday, little over a week later, having left sixty trained peoples for HIV and AIDS education. Each of the group assignments asked to identify a problem in their community and to think of a solution, many looking forward to put them into action. One in particular is the beginning of a radio show as the National AIDS Director worked with the journalist, another being an introduction of the teachings into primary and secondary education (many teachers were also in attendance). The participants left asking for more resources, which will be sent via the mail, and quite happy about the seminar as a whole. Working To Empower aimed to build local sustainable developments with this teaching program, only time will tell if these goals are met, however participants were empowered and motivated with information and the tools for sustainable education were provided. As far as the teacher and organizer is concerned, despite various problems the program went very well and the goals have already been met as local developments are occurring and continued education is happening via various avenues.