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Sylvia Zukowski '12
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Dreams Realized in Unexpected Places

September 8, 2011

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – How many Lenscrafter, Sunglass Hut, or Pearl Vision locations have you driven past during your lifetime? Now pretend none of these places exist, what would you do if you needed a pair of eyeglasses? For many of us such a scenario is hard to imagine.

However, Erick Henderson, a senior biology and pre-optometry major at Illinois Wesleyan University, has not only imagined such a place but traveled to one. This past summer, Henderson traded in baseball games and family cookouts for – one could say – an eye-opening experience. In June 2011, he traveled to Lamu, Kenya, where he served as the optometric technician at the Lamu Center for Preventative Health (LCPH).



Lamu Center for Preventative Health in Lamu, Kenya.

Founded by IWU alum Munib Abdulrehman '02 and Rebecca Gearhart, associate professor of anthropology, LCPH is a non-governmental organization, which provides healing services and preventative health education to residents of Lamu and the surrounding islands. Although located abroad, LCPH is also represented on Illinois Wesleyan's campus through a student-run organization by the same name. While LCPH offers many educational programs, an eye care-related program had not been developed – this is where Henderson and Gearhart would find a common goal.

According to Gearhart, LCPH was established to stand apart from other health organizations by focusing on educating the local community versus simply treating illnesses. LCPH initiatives have included: nutrition programs geared towards young children, CPR classes, and diabetes prevention and awareness. "Our goal is to disseminate information so that Lamu residents can rely on their gained knowledge to take care of themselves and their families," said Gearhart. "We are constantly working with volunteers, the Red Cross, and sailing doctors to provide this community with tools to live healthy lives. The goal of LCPH is not to cure, but to heal."

As a junior in high school, Henderson was interested in the sciences and helping others through his church. Through that same venue he was introduced to a local optometrist, who allowed him to experience a day in the life of an optometrist. It was after this shadow experience Henderson realized his passion. "This doctor was a great person, he loved his job and his ability to help others, and that is what I wanted my future to look like," he said.

In September 2009, after completing an optometry internship and returning to IWU, Henderson recognized the need for a service organization related to eye care. "I saw the need for not only an optometry-related group, but also one that would focus on community service," he said, "I gathered a group of IWU students that had this common interest and we started the Optometry Club." The following school year, Henderson displayed the club's mission at the Registered Student Organizations Fair. Gearhart was also at the fair when she approached Henderson. "I explained to Erick the eye care needs of the Lamu community," said Gearhart. Through this conversation, Henderson and Gearhart found that their organizations had mutual interests – preventative healthcare and helping others. Henderson's response to the meeting was unexpected – Henderson said, "I knew right away that I wanted to help and to gain the invaluable field experience."

Through private fundraising, he obtained necessary medical supplies and airfare. "I was able to collect more than 300 reading glasses and 150 sunglasses to distribute," he stated. Gearhart and Abdulrehman, who were also traveling to Lamu, offered Henderson living accommodations above the health center in gratitude for his efforts. For 10 days, Henderson performed reading evaluations and glaucoma checks while distributing reading glasses. He also stressed the importance of eye protection. He said, "many of the residents of Lamu do not fully understand the damaging effects of the sun and was I able to make them aware." However, it was not always easy to convey his message. Henderson said, "I did not understand or speak any Swahili when I first got to Lamu, Professor Gearhart and Munib were always with me translating." Yet the language barrier did not stop him from passing out all of the donated eyewear.



*Henderson and Abdulrehman '02
visiting with a patient.*



Gearhart translating during an eye exam.

Traveling to Lamu turned out to be an affirmation of Henderson's passion for optometry. "I never realized how getting a pair of eyeglasses could change a person's life. For the first time," he said, "one 22-year old woman could see clearly and I had something to do with that." Henderson credits his coincidental meeting with Gearhart and his summer abroad, to his continued desire to help others see.

Though it was challenging at times, the experience was one that he says, "I will never forget."

Next year, Henderson will attend graduate school and hopes one day to open his own optometric practice. As he continues realizing his dream of becoming an optometrist, Henderson is certain of two things: he will return to Lamu and

he will continue his academic and professional careers on the basis of helping others.

Contact: Sylvia Zukowski '12, (309) 556-3181