

2017

## Eldoret, Kenya: Creating a Music Experience for Street Youth

Michael J. Peters

*Purdue University*, peter100@purdue.edu

Ethan C. Wahl

*Purdue University*, wahle@purdue.edu

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### Recommended Citation

Peters, Michael J. and Wahl, Ethan C. (2017) "Eldoret, Kenya: Creating a Music Experience for Street Youth," *Purdue Journal of Service-Learning and International Engagement*. Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5703/1288284316523>

Available at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/pjisl/vol4/iss1/5>

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# ELDORET, KENYA:

Creating a Music Experience for Street Youth

Michael J. Peters and Ethan C. Wahl, *College of Pharmacy*

## ABSTRACT

The authors of this essay completed an advance pharmacy practice experience in adult medicine at Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital in Eldoret, Kenya. In this article, they describe their efforts to establish a music experience program with the Tumaini Innovation Center for street children while on rotation in Eldoret, Kenya. Through the foundation of the program, they hope to provide an outlet for the children to express themselves while filling a gap in fine arts training provided by the center.

## KEYWORDS

Kenya, music, performance, street children

## INTRODUCTION

At-risk street youth in Eldoret, Kenya, are highly susceptible to falling into a dangerous pattern that oftentimes leaves them homeless, fending for themselves, and abusing illicit drugs. A street child is defined by the United Nations (Panter-Brick, 2002, p. 149) as:

any boy or girl . . . for whom the street, in the widest sense of the word, has become his or her habitual abode and/or source of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected, supervised, or directed by responsible adults.

Programs have been established by both local and global organizations that attempt to provide structure and an environment for growth for these street youths. Sadly, despite best efforts from a multitude of individuals and groups, the dangerous lifestyle of being a street youth in Eldoret remains all too common, as the limited resources are not able to address all needs.

We were fortunate enough to be selected to complete an eight-week advanced pharmacy practice experience at

Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital in Eldoret, Kenya. This experience allowed us to provide clinical pharmacy services as part of a medical rounding team at the second largest public hospital in Kenya. In preparation for this experience, we enrolled in an elective course at Purdue: Pharmaceutical Care in Developing Countries (CLPH 457). This course provided significant background information on the variances that exist in the practice of medicine in Kenya, the differences in structure and operation of Kenyan hospitals, and an introduction to Kenyan culture. The course also prepared us to apply for grant funding for student service-learning projects from the Purdue University Office of Engagement.

After learning about the challenges faced by street youths in Eldoret and the funding opportunities available at Purdue, we decided to create an experience for the children. After working with our community partner to better understand the needs of street youths, we decided to provide exposure to music and the chance to learn to play instruments as a means of self-expression. Many studies have been conducted to illustrate the impact

**Figure 1 (banner image, above).** Wahl practices in the final tune-up before the concert.

musically influenced self-expression programs have on mental health. Particularly relevant to the street youth population in Kenya, research has illustrated a reduction in grief-related symptoms and behavioral stress in pediatric populations through musical self-expression programs as short as eight weeks in duration (McFerran, 2011). Though we are not trained music therapists and we were constrained to an eight-week period during our rotation, our past positive exposure to music provided us the chance to share the benefits of a structured, music-driven self-expression program for the street youth in Eldoret. The support and mentorship we received from leadership at Purdue and at the Tumaini Innovation Center (TIC) was immensely critical to the success of our program.

## DESCRIPTION

TIC seeks to improve the lives of street youths in Eldoret by empowering them with hope, knowledge, skills, opportunities, and resources necessary for them to find a healthy alternative to street life (Tumaini Center, n.d.). Street youths in Eldoret are in need of shelter, education, medical care, and other services that will enable them to discover their own paths toward healthier, happier, and more productive lives. The future paths of these children will vary widely and may include returning to school, learning vocational skills, gaining employment, starting a business, reuniting with their families, living in a children's home, living communally, or even living independently. TIC supports and empowers the children, regardless of the route they've chosen for their future (Pekny, Schellhase, Pastakia, Kimani, & Miller, 2015; Tumaini Center, n.d.; Schellhase et al., 2014).

TIC provides an array of opportunities for street children. Available services include full-time housing for up to 16 street youth, schooling opportunities for primary education, practical skills for farming and engineering development, and mentorship from past street youth who have found a healthy adulthood after coming through TIC. However, current programs do not include art initiatives or other forms of creative expression (Pekny, Schellhase, Pastakia, Kimani, & Miller, 2015; Schellhase et al., 2014).

The Tumaini Music Experience Program was developed to fill the gap at TIC in arts and creative expression and to provide a more complete level of education for street youth. Music experience sessions were to be taught twice per week for at least one hour and included instruction on a variety of instruments, including keyboard, tambourine, maraca, rhythm sticks, drums, and kayambas, a traditional African instrument (see Figures 1 and 2). In addition to the instrument component

of these sessions, singing and dancing allowed for an enhanced level of expression. Songs performed by the children included both traditional Kenyan pieces and American melodies. A typical lesson was comprised of thirty minutes of small-group practice divided by instrument and thirty minutes of large-group practice focused on harmonizing the small groups.

The student role and involvement in this program began with our creation of the music experience concept in spring 2016. The idea was to communicate with TIC leadership to establish a realistic plan for the program. After discussion, we developed a lesson plan to span the eight weeks we would spend in Eldoret to ensure an appropriate structure was in place. We then shopped for instruments locally in Eldoret and lead instructors in the music sessions on Tuesdays and Thursdays. On Fridays we would spend time at TIC, but the focus was on developing stronger relationships with the street youth by playing their favorite game (soccer).

This project would not have been successful without the immense support of local Kenyans to serve as translators and individuals who knew the street youths on a more personal level. This support came from the director of TIC, Purdue faculty, and teachers at TIC. Their support allowed us to create a sustainable music experience program that would continue after our eight weeks in Kenya were over. A final performance at the end of our time in Kenya was scheduled as a surrogate marker of the progress we had made. In the end, the incredible performance by the children hallmarked the project.

The Tumaini Music Experience Program is still going strong, and opportunities exist for continued involvement by Purdue students. Student participation will be instrumental in the continued success of the program, and each



**Figure 2.** Instruments are examined prior to the first practice.

year, Purdue sends approximately 24 student pharmacists to Kenya. In spring 2017, student pharmacists received another grant to support the purchase of more instruments and sound equipment, work with the youth during their lessons, and hold another community concert.

## COMMUNITY IMPACT

TIC was positively impacted and was ready to work with us. Leadership at TIC anticipated our arrival in Eldoret and had prepared the street youths for an exciting opportunity. Preparation had been made by the educational instructors at TIC to assist in the music experience sessions and to help acquire the instruments.

Success was measured through monitoring the progression of skills in the street youth who were learning the instruments. Apart from traditional Kenyan song and dance, none of the street youths at TIC had reported experience with formal musical training or instruments in the past; an initial, informal conversation was held to confirm this. The baseline skill level for the street youth was evaluated during the first session, where introductions to the instruments were made. They started with a complete unfamiliarity with playing the instruments. Through our lessons, the youth were given the unique opportunity to achieve individual successes and growth within their instrument groups, and then to incorporate these individual triumphs into the overall success of the group. Our final marker for impact was the musical competence displayed during the street show performed at the conclusion of our eight weeks in Kenya. During the approximately thirty-minute show, the TIC youth performed several songs in English and Swahili, in addition to short choreographed dances. The audience totaled approximately 40 North American guests and Kenyans staying in Eldoret.



**Figure 3.** The final practice for the concert occurred outdoors for a more realistic practice.



**Figure 4.** Peters and Wahl celebrate with the band after a successful performance.

In addition to the level of performance, we were able to subjectively measure our success through observation of the positive impact of music and expression on the street youth themselves. The smiles and cheerful outbursts when playing a song correctly were far more telling of our true impact than the skills of the instrument play (see Figure 3). The looks on the children's faces when they found success and camaraderie with their fellow instrument players were what the project intended to achieve (Figure 4). These types of expressions paralleled what we witnessed when they achieved success in football (soccer) during our recreational sports days.

## STUDENT IMPACT

The opportunity to work with the youth at TIC was unique and rewarding. In establishing the Tumaini Music Experience Program, we demonstrated the impact health care providers can have outside of the hospital setting and in the community. The World Health Organization (n.d.) defines health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. In accordance with this definition, the program we created was a means of providing health care, but not in the traditional sense. While not directly related to pharmacy care, the music experience provided an outlet for the youths at TIC to express themselves with the purpose of improving their health and well-being.

Creating a new program in a resource-limited setting like Kenya is not easy. Challenges such as purchasing quality, reliable instruments, or obtaining transportation for the children to attend their performance were barriers to our success. The most significant challenge was communicating with the children during lessons due to the language barrier. Through the support of our Kenyan colleagues and the perseverance of the children, we were able to overcome these challenges to successfully complete our music lessons. Eventually, we transformed

the perceived disadvantage of differing language into an advantage, integrating both English and Swahili music into the final performance. Creating an experience that blended North American and African cultures provided a platform for a more complete understanding between individuals from different backgrounds.

The primary goal of our program was to provide a tangible impact on the lives of the children who participated, but we also experienced personal victories along the way. These victories were present in the growth of the children and in our ability to achieve success in the face of adversity. In creating the music experience program, we built relationships with our Kenyan colleagues, learned to remain flexible and to persevere in trying circumstances, and fostered creativity in those who participated. We also gained confidence in our abilities to teach and create lasting, service-driven relationships.

## CONCLUSION

Just as the children we taught benefitted from their experience as students, we benefitted by serving as teachers. We learned about the positive effects of service and our own ability to make a difference in the lives of others. As a result, we are more cognizant and open to service opportunities in the future, both locally and abroad. Additionally, we were fortunate enough to partner with individuals in Kenya who were passionate about the program and its continuation. With the help of these dedicated individuals and the continued involvement from Purdue students, we anticipate program growth in the coming years.

The purpose of our music experience program was to provide a creative outlet for youth who had experienced the harsh realities of life on the streets in Kenya. We were afforded the opportunity to experience firsthand the transformative, healing nature of service and music. In the process of accomplishing our goal, the lives of the children who participated were positively impacted, and a sustainable program providing volunteer opportunities for Purdue student pharmacists was created.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project was made possible by the support of individuals from Purdue University's campus in West Lafayette and partners in Kenya. We would like to specifically thank Dr. Ellen Schellhase for serving as our writing mentor. We would also like to thank Dr. Steve Abel for serving as a faculty sponsor and Samuel Kimani for serving as the community partner sponsor on our Purdue Student Service Learning Grant. We would additionally

like to thank Dr. Monica L. Miller, Dr. Carol Ott, Dr. Sonak Pastakia, and Dr. Rakhi Karwa for their assistance in the planning of the service-learning experience. Finally, we would like to thank Dr. Benson, Ester, Dennis, and Dr. Chelsea Pekny for their invaluable assistance in implementing the music experience program in Kenya.

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## AUTHOR BIO SKETCHES

**Michael J. Peters** is a fourth-year doctor of pharmacy candidate from the Purdue University College of Pharmacy with a minor in economics from the Krannert School of Management. Michael worked as an intern at Purdue's Center for Medication Safety Advancement and was involved in the Rho Chi Society at Purdue as the Alpha Zeta chapter president. He plans to complete a combined PGY-1/PGY-2 health-system pharmacy administration residency at Methodist University Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee, upon graduation in May 2017, with a focus in pharmacy leadership.

**Ethan C. Wahl** is a fourth-year doctor of pharmacy candidate in the Purdue University College of Pharmacy. He previously attended the University of Indianapolis where he received a bachelor's degree in chemistry. While at Purdue, Ethan was involved in the Purdue Academy of Student Pharmacists in conjunction with the American Pharmacist's Association, serving as the international and community outreach vice president. Upon graduating in May 2017, he plans to complete a PGY-1 residency in pharmacy practice at the Richard L. Roudebush Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Indianapolis, Indiana.

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Peters, M. J., & Wahl, E. C. (2017). Eldoret, Kenya: Creating a music experience for street youth. *Purdue Journal of Service-Learning and Engagement*, 4, 18–21. <https://doi.org/10.5703/1288284316523>