

Kick it with Kenya:

Soccer is a universal language. Regardless of your global location, if you put a soccer ball at your feet people will emerge, wide-eyed and ready to play. It was with this knowledge that Charles Wambulwa, a Native Kenyan, and Michele Fujii a recent college graduate and volunteer originally from Poulsbo, Washington, founded the concept for Kick it With Kenya. Wambulwa has worked as a volunteer, a High School teacher and coach, and is now a medical doctor. Upon completion of his degree, he returned home only to be greeted by the sight of his people dying from preventable diseases. Additionally, he sensed an overall air of hopelessness and apathy among the youth in the community. He was thus inspired to actively educate and lift his people from a depressed condition to alleviate unnecessary suffering. Fujii had similar observations after volunteering at a health clinic in Kenya, "it seemed like every other patient was being treated for malaria or other easily preventable diseases. So, I asked myself, why can't we combine soccer and health education as a way of outreach to the youth in the communities?" After an introduction through Village Volunteers, a non-profit based in Seattle, Fujii and Wambulwa put their heads together and decided that a soccer tournament combined with a youth conference could serve as a magnet to bring people together to engage in healthy competition and learn about healthy living.

By: Alison Stewart



Soccer is the Medium

The First Youth Empowerment Conference

The timing of the first annual event was crucial considering the aftermath of the controversial and violent political elections held in December of 2007; rebuilding peace, trust, and a healthy community were paramount. In spring 2008, Wambulwa traveled to Kenya to lay the groundwork for the conference, while Michele spent several months fundraising to provide the necessary monetary support for the event, approximately three hundred participants.

From August 18-24, at a local school in Makutano Town, Kenya, the first Kick in with Kenya Youth Empowerment Conference transformed a community. Day one of the soccer competitions kicked off the conference and the following days, participants spent their mornings attending presentations and workshops addressing current social and health issues ranging from AIDS

awareness, to basic hygiene, to recognizing that those carrying diseases are not to be shunned, but supported.

During the last two days of the event the tournament culminated with the top four teams participating in intense semi-final and final matches. Though one team came out on top and holds the trophy with pride, all athletes and coaches received recognition with certificates of completion and T-shirts recognizing the event and the team's achievement level.

The Power of Coaches

Though the soccer tournament could be viewed as secondary to the health education participants received, important lessons are also learned through competitions. The majority of the teams in the tournament have played together for some time within a local club. Their coaches are unpaid and pull most of their experience from playing and observing, as coaches' training is not readily

available in smaller communities. Youth seek guidance from mentors, and this holds true on the soccer pitch. Practice and preparation under the direction of a coach allows for player creativity and independence once the long-awaited competition arrives. Fujii believes the most important aspect of coaching teams at an event such as this is “empowering the youth. Coaches should be teaching and coaching not only to play well and win games, but to also empower players with leadership and teamwork skills. Help them work well with others, how to resolve situations that may arise. The coach is also someone that the youth can go to and look up to.” Solid role models are often absent in many of these young people’s lives. A local coach who cares about their success inevitably serves as an individual to whom these players are drawn. “The coach has a lot of power to change the way a young person thinks and behaves. Having a team and a good coach gives the youth an opportunity to believe in themselves and each other.” Clearly, the “education” does not stop when players step onto the pitch; values, respect, teamwork, leadership, decision-making, and enjoyment, continue to be fostered and developed. This is precisely why Kick it with Kenya works. One cannot possibly separate soccer and life, because soccer is life.





Impact

Having the opportunity to both play soccer in an organized event and learn about issues that are faced on a daily basis was clearly a memorable and life-changing event for all involved. Healthy competition coupled with student-centered education allowed youth exposure to life saving skills in a short span of time. Prior to the program, participants were asked to pose anonymous questions that would serve to shape the health education curriculum. Throughout the workshop, these questions were addressed and the participants spoke openly about issues that are often considered taboo. At the conclusion of the week, participants shared the most important thing they would take away from the experience. Yonah, a teenage boy, sums up the majority of responses received, "It is my privilege as a youth to be in a stand and fight against AIDS in our society. I am lucky for the teaching has been open and we learned how to build a great foundation of our precious life within respect, love, honour in the society. It is easy for us as youths to stand for one another and save the future generation."

Sustainability

The 2008 tournament was an overwhelming success and several volunteers are currently preparing for the second annual tournament coming up in August of 2009. Last year's participants now serve as educators in their communities, seeking to inform and educate others about how a happy and healthy lifestyle can be achieved. Though this information is something often taken for-granted in the western world, people in Kenya hunger for such knowledge. Outside educators coming in can be effective, but it

can be most powerful to learn from your own. In terms of promoting continuity post-conference, Fujii supports "the goal is to reach the local youth because they are extremely willing to learn and absorb information and feel empowered when they are given the opportunity to teach others. By empowering a group of youth who will then go out and empower others with the knowledge they learned can be a very effective way of teaching. People are more responsive when they hear information from one of their own, someone they trust and respect, which is not always a foreigner." The youth involved each year will always be invited to attend the event to serve as a volunteer and/or educator. Providing participants with opportunities to share their knowledge and return again each summer as a volunteer will encourage the sustainability of this event, allowing it to grow and evolve each year. In addition to promotion of the event, within Kenya, Fujii hopes to acquire sponsors, and develop tournaments and fundraisers in the United States and eventually world wide in order to provide support for future conferences. Reflecting upon the first annual Kick it with Kenya conference, Fujii said, "If one youth left the week long conference and made the choice to make better decisions in life or talk with a family member about how malaria is contracted or if any youth taught someone else something they learned. Then yes, it has served its purpose. If playing soccer was keeping a kid from loitering around town and stealing someone's cows, then yes it has served its purpose. And if a youth left the classroom feeling empowered that he/she has a great future ahead of them, then yes, we're making positive change."

How Can You Help?

For the 2009 tournament, Village Volunteers and Kick it with Kenya are looking for up to seventeen soccer-minded volunteers willing to support the event that will take place in Dago, a small village in Kenya. This year the tournament is expanding in size and plans to include both women's and men's soccer brackets as well as introducing women's netball. The conference is set to run in August of 2009 but further support is needed. Beyond physically present volunteers, donations of soccer gear, trophies, school supplies, and uniforms and/or water filters to provide athletes with potable water are also sought.



To learn more about the program and how you can assist, please visit either of the following websites:

www.villagevolunteers.org
www.kickitwithkenya.org

Kick it with Kenya is an organization that seeks to use soccer as a platform to educate youth about healthy lifestyle choices. A week-long clinic takes place each August to bring soccer and netball teams together to compete and learn about AIDS, birth control, and preventable diseases.



Village Volunteers is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that works in partnership with rural village and capacity-building programs to support the development of sustainable solutions for community survival, education, and growth.