

**Rye Barcott    2007 Commencement Address to the UNC School of Public Health  
Chapel Hill, 12 May 2007**

*Introduction by Jessica Luginbuhl, Masters in Public Health Class of 2007, UNC School of Public Health, and Co-Chair of the Student Global Health Committee.*

Thanks, Jessica, for that kind introduction, and for not sharing any stories from my less auspicious moments at UNC, like trying to bounce football players from Players Dance Club on Franklin Street, an endeavor I met with limited success. As you can tell it's been all downhill ever since.

We are united here by a commitment to service, but service starts at home with mothers. No umbrage to Dads, but as my own Mom, an UNC SPH graduate, once told me, men don't get pregnant. And, speaking for myself, let's hope it remains that way for a long time to come.

And so, with Mothers Day so close at hand, could we start by honoring our mothers. Will all the mothers in the room please stand up. Join me in a round of applause.

And to commiserate with the gender that has not been able to know the joys of motherhood, could we also have a rousing ovation for the fathers with us here today.

So, full disclosure up-front. I'm a student, again, like you all still are, for another 30 minutes. But I also work for you. UNC's Student Global Health Committee has been supporting the organization I founded, Carolina For Kibera (CFK) for a number of years. You are our donors. And you are especially kind donors. Perhaps it's because many of you in this room know better than most how fortunate, how lucky, we are to be here in Memorial Hall, here in this world *full* of opportunities, soon to be Carolina alumni. Aside from this special place, it is this drive to serve others that unites us. Service can take many forms. But if you didn't have this motivation somewhere in your heart, running through your veins, you wouldn't be here today. You would be in a different major, at a different school, or in a different job, in a different place. But we are here together.

Many of you in the audience may share connections to underserved, disenfranchised communities that you have chosen to commit part of your life to helping in the U.S. or abroad. For me, that connection is with a community that is half a world away – Kibera. Kibera is perhaps the largest slum in East Africa, perhaps the largest slum in Africa. No one really knows, because there are no accurate population figures. Our best guess is that over 700,000 people live in an area about the size of UNC's main campus. Kibera's problems are those many of you have studied and already begun to fight: absence of basic healthcare, horrendous sanitation, unsafe drinking water, AIDs, malnutrition, sexual abuse, lack of education, jobs, and opportunities, and the list goes

on. But Kibera is also complicated by a history of ethnic and religious violence between Muslim and Christian groups.

I was a junior at UNC in 2000, the Millennium year, and I was planning on going into the Marine Corps, another form of service. I wanted to better understand ethnic violence in Africa, in part because I figured I may have to respond to it as a Marine. I studied Swahili here, took anthropology classes, and got a Burch Fellowship to travel to Kibera during the summer. In Kibera, I rented a one-room shack in a 13-room compound. 108 other people lived in those two rows of one-room shacks. I spent my time each day speaking to my neighbors and other youth in order to understand their lives and the problems they faced. I didn't expect to be so moved by the people I met, and I had no intention of starting a grassroots organization. I'd like to tell you about two of the special people who motivated me to take research to action.

One of the people was a 14-year old girl named Vanessa. Vanessa lived in my compound, yet I didn't see her during my first month in Kibera. I didn't even know she existed. But one day, I accidentally left a pair of muddy pants outside my door, in the three foot cement gutter that separated half of our compound. I returned that night and discovered someone had taken my pants. I knocked on each of my neighbor's doors and started asking them, "Do you know where my pants are?"

No one knew where my pants were, but everyone laughed at me. I later learned that in Kibera "losing your pants" was a local saying. It meant you were nuts, lost your marbles, gone crazy.

Well, I endured the laughing and finally reached the last residence in my compound, an 8-by-8 foot corrugated iron shack that perched precariously next to the rancid sump of sewage and waste water we all used for those purposes. An old Kikuyu woman with a wrinkled face opened the door. Everyone called her "Sho-sho," or grandmother.

"Sho-sho," I said, "I have lost my pants. Do you know where they are?"

Surprisingly, she did not laugh or smile. She simply said, "yes," and she asked me to come into her house. A paraffin lamp illuminated the room with dull orange light. The place was barren apart from some wood stools and a pink sheet that divided the small sitting area from the bed.

The grandmother pulled back the pink sheet slightly and then presented me with my pants, folded and clean. I was surprised by this random act of kindness I started to thank her, but she cut me off. "It was Vanessa," she said.

"Who?"

The grandmother pulled-back the pink sheet and asked Vanessa to come forward. Vanessa looked like a ghost before me. Her face was so emaciated her eyes appeared to be larger than her cheeks. Chunks of her black hair were simply gone. I held out my hand and she slowly lifted hers to mine. Her flesh felt like the base of a hot iron, as if the blood in her pencil thin body was boiling. It must have taken incredible energy for her to have simply gotten up to shake my hand, let alone wash the clothes of a stranger.

I tried to gain enough composure to thank her. She didn't respond. It was painful for her to speak. I told her I had just one question.

"Why did you do it? Why did you clean my pants?"

She looked me in the eyes and replied, “*Kwa sababu na kuwa na.*” “Because I can.” Because I can.

A week later she couldn’t, because she had passed away. According to her grandmother, Vanessa had contracted HIV after being sexually assaulted when she was nine years-old. Her life was cut short but not before she bestowed a kindness upon me that I will never forget.

Like many of you here today, I wanted to do something. I wanted to understand the injustice in this world that brings rise to such tragedies every day. But where does one begin? I had made a habit of not giving out money in Kibera, in part not to create dependency, in part for my own safety, and in part because of my own modest means. Many of the young people I spoke with wanted to start a sports organization. So I started thinking about that as a possibility. Days before I left, however, another neighbor of mine approached me. Her name was Tabitha Festo. 35 years-old, she was a widow with three kids, a former nurse who had been jobless for the last five years, since the Kenyan government had downsized its national hospitals. Our meeting was a confrontation. Tabitha, a generally mild-mannered person, was angry.

“You are asking all the kids about their problems,” she said, “but I’ve got problems too. Sit down and I will tell you my problems.”

“OK, mama,” I replied.

For the next two hours Tabitha told me about the many twists and turns of her life. Then she proposed a solution. “Give me 2,000 shillings (\$26),” she said.

“Why?” I asked, “I don’t give out money.”

“Because you can. I am going to sell vegetables,” she said.

“But everyone is selling vegetables?”

“No,” she explained, “I am going to buy them here in Kibera and sell them in Eastleigh (a Somali neighborhood).” In Eastleigh Tabitha could sell 4 tomatoes for 5 shillings, undercutting her competition, which was only selling 3 tomatoes for 5 shillings.

Intrigued by her conviction and her plan and feeling more than a little guilty, I handed Tabitha the 2,000 shillings and left Kibera the next day to return to the U.S. I had no idea whether or not I would see her again. But Tabitha started selling tomatoes in Eastleigh. She accumulated about a \$1 a day in profits, and she invested the money in a local “merry-go-round” savings group of other widows.

Tabitha found me when I returned to Kibera the next summer to start a youth sports association called CFK. She grabbed my hand and silently led me to her new two-room shack. She had turned it into a medical clinic. Although she had only the most basic medicines, her clinic was one of the only medical facilities in Kibera that was open 24-hours a day. Tabitha’s service was reflected by her selfless actions. Shortly after she opened her clinic, a woman abandoned a baby boy at her doorsteps. The boy, Ronnie, became Tabitha’s second son. He is in the first grade today. He is healthy and full of life and hope. Part of the money we raise each year goes to helping him, his brother, and his sisters.

Tabitha joined CFK and the Tabitha Medical Clinic became CFK’s second program, after the sports program. It was a natural fit, because CFK is rooted in the understanding that some of the poor have better solutions than we do to the problems they face. No one knows better than they what their most pressing needs are, and how

their needs could best be met. I'm sure some of you already know communities most affected by poverty must help themselves out of poverty – but sometimes with partnerships with those of us who are blessed to be from worlds full of resources and opportunities.

Tabitha's clinic grew slowly at first. We struggled to find affordable medicines and maintain a sustainable operation. But Tabitha strove on. After a year, she stuck up a sign in front of the clinic. It read "Tabitha Clinic: Sacrificing for Success."

Tabitha's work was a sacrifice. She could have done other, less charitable things with her money. She could have given the baby boy abandoned at her doorstep to a local church. But she didn't. Why? The answer is the same for any of us here who decide to pursue lives of service. In order to do so you must find ways to sustain and rejuvenate yourself so that you don't burnout from the physical and mental hardship. It can often feel like a thankless, even at times lonely road. You have to find a meaning in the sacrifice. Tabitha did, and I did too. We gained a fuller sense of community and civic mindedness. We gained a fuller sense of *ourselves*. In other words, the sacrifices became a larger part of us, a calling that motivated us along our journey to be better human beings. And we benefited spiritually in ways we might not have otherwise. We found sustenance in the sacrifices.

I read Tabitha her last will and testament in 2004. Her appendix had suddenly burst, and an infection spread inexorably throughout her body. She was in too much pain to write. But she spoke to me softly and stoically about her journey through life, her aspirations for her clinic and her children. Then she took my hand into hers. It felt as though her skin was on fire, just as Vanessa's had been. I leaned over to hear her. She whispered, "Together, we have sacrificed."

I kissed Tabitha on the forehead, where my lips broke beads of sweat. The next morning, with her children asleep by her side, Tabitha passed away. She had what appeared to be a faint smile on her face.

So we are fortunate that Tabitha's vision lives on. The Tabitha Clinic now treats over 20,000 patients a year. Your Student Global Health Committee money helps support it. And CFK helps build leaders both in Kibera and the U.S. Last year Laura Louison, who is a master's student in Maternal and Child Health graduating today, volunteered at the Tabitha Clinic and helped develop our youth-friendly HIV/AIDS service. Laura was able to travel to Kibera on one of CFK's James and Florence Peacock Fellowships, which provides a small travel grant to select UNC student volunteers thanks to the generosity of another great North Carolina Institution, the William Rand Kenan Charitable Trust. Laura's mom, who's here with us today, helps CFK sell beads made by HIV-positive widows – the same women Tabitha once served during home-based care visits.

And, would you believe that both UNC and Duke Hospitals have each pitched in \$50,000 to build a new 16-room eco-friendly Tabitha Clinic in the heart of Kibera? The success owes a great deal to CFK's Board Chair, Kim Chapman, an alumni of the UNC SPH undergrad and graduate programs. Kim has always done us proud, representing CFK in November 2005, when Time Magazine recognized our organization as a "Hero of Global Health."

When Kim was pitching Duke for a donation, they asked her how much it would cost to change CFK to “Duke for Kibera.” She told them, “We are happy to take your money, but we would never sell our souls to a blue devil.”

More to the point, our clinic has been transformed into a full-scale medical facility by a lot of Kenyans and Americans who embraced Tabitha’s calling to sacrifice for success. One of those special people is Heather Burke. After graduating with a master’s in public health, Heather went to work for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and served in Nairobi as the Infectious Disease program deputy director. She spearheaded a partnership between the CDC and CFK. She took risks. She sacrificed. But from that sacrifice, she also benefited. She expanded her mind-set; she found a community that loves and inspires her. And her work enabled the Tabitha Clinic to employ two full-time medical doctors, the only medical doctors accessible every day to residents of Kibera. Heather is also a mom. While with the CDC in a distant, windswept village in Northern Kenya near Somalia, she came across a tiny baby girl with a distended belly and no parents. Heather followed her heart, her guts, her instincts. Baby Halima is now Heather’s daughter.

This March, Heather came out to our Tabitha Clinic groundbreaking ceremony and then flew back to Atlanta to begin her next battle. Heather fights to make her world and *the* world a better place. Why? *Kwa sababu na kuwa na*. Because she can. Because you can. Because we all can, and it’s well worth the sacrifice.