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Mr. Greco

English III

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An Ally for Kenya

First and foremost, I would like to thank Monte Fisher for taking the time to tell me about himself and his work with the Achungo Children's Center. Credit is also due to my parents for helping me brainstorm possible interview subjects. I must also thank my Freestyle Academy teachers for their endless support and encouragement as I traversed this challenging project. And to everyone involved with the Achungo Children's Center, thank you for making the world a better place by helping those who need it the most.

Going into this project, I had generated a couple ideas of possible profile subjects in my head. But after getting some feedback, I realized that they weren't that realistically obtainable or sound from a design standpoint. Feeling stuck, I asked my parents for their input. One of their suggestions was somebody my dad knew, Monte Fisher. After hearing about what he had done and stood for, I knew he would be a perfect person to interview. The main challenge I faced in this project was the time constraint, as being a Design student, there was a hard deadline to send our books off to print. Through this project, I learned a lot not only about the Adobe applications we used to produce our books, but also about what life is really like on the "other side". As you read through this, I hope that you will take a moment to consider and appreciate what truly brings us lasting joy in life.

In a world where everything seems to be objectified, it is so easy for people to be entranced by money, having it become the only thing they desire in life. But this is far from the

case for Monte Fisher. Being the executive director of the Achungo Children's Center, a nonprofit that helps to provide housing and education in Kenya, isn't necessarily a profitable occupation in a monetary sense. In addition to paying for his trips to Kenya in full, Fisher also donates thousands of dollars every year to the Children's Center. Even though some could consider it a financial loss, the money that he puts forth lets him gain in so many other ways.

Just the act of being in Kenya and spending time with the people there is something that is extremely special to him "in a way that is hard to explain" (Fisher). This feeling is boosted by the relationship that he has with the Kenyan students, where love and appreciation are the only emotions. He explains, "Because they are my friends, I am grateful that we are able to improve their circumstances through our care and educational advancement" (Fisher). This display of benevolence is nothing but in line with what other people think about him. When Stuart Sweet, a friend of Fisher, was asked about him, he only had positive things to say: "He's a smart, genuine person, high level of integrity. He's a very caring person also. He thinks about other people a lot and how he can help them."

Another invaluable benefit of Fisher's work is being able to learn and grow from his interactions with the Children's Center's founder, Michael Nyangi. Growing up extremely poor, it would've been easy for Nyangi to fall victim to the relentless cycle of poverty. Instead, he was determined to make a difference for the kids in his area, especially considering how "These are kids who, at best, are coming out of mud huts with no water or electricity" (Fisher). He has dedicated his life to helping them by exhibiting overflowing love and respect, and by instructing his staff to do the same. Possessing the greatest amount of compassion and integrity out of anybody that Fisher has encountered, he considers Nyangi to be a mentor and role model. "I think that helps make me a better person, just knowing him and trying to be like him" (Fisher).

But to Fisher, possibly the most satisfying reward in his line of work is the ability to share it with others. As he takes groups of people to Kenya, Fisher loves to see the changes that they undergo. A noticeable difference can be seen in how they think about themselves and how they go about living their lives as a result of experiencing Kenya and falling in love with the children there. In addition to taking people directly to Kenya, he also shares about Achungo through visits to primary and middle schools in the Bay Area. While doing so, he notices how local students form a connection with those in Kenya. While they may not have the pleasure of meeting in person, they sometimes exchange letters. To Fisher, “That has the power to broaden their perspective on what's important in life.”

The importance of Fisher’s work today is immeasurable. Although Kenya has a literacy rate higher than its neighbors like Ethiopia and Uganda (Vestal), it is still one of many underprivileged countries across the globe. From a lack of quality food and housing, life is so drastically different from here. And with roughly 30% of teachers in Kenya being undertrained, the quality of education is also lacking (Lewis). Just because somebody attends school doesn’t necessarily mean that they are receiving the same quality education as others may be. Even though Kenyan school enrollment percentage is in the 90s, more than 40% of young adults that have completed their secondary education only reach about half of their potential. When the amount of education students receive is adjusted for its quality, students are losing approximately 3 years (Kairu). The nature of this education epidemic in Kenya warrants attention, and Fisher is doing his part to make a difference.

After Fisher graduated high school, he spent a couple years at a school of travel study, going to different parts of the world like New York, Mexico, and East Africa. During the 8 months that he spent in Kenya, he began to develop a love for the country so much to the point

where it felt like his “second home” (Fisher). After his travel studies were over, he returned to get a degree in computer science while minoring in business, which started his software career in the Bay Area.

In 2010, Fisher had the opportunity to go on a service trip to Ethiopia with his church. While in Ethiopia, the landscape fondly reminded him of Kenya and the time that he spent there while he was 19, which caused him to become very emotional and nostalgic about it. Shortly after returning back home, he miraculously spotted a little notice for a school being supported in Kenya on a jobs and housing bulletin board. “I don’t even know what caught my eye, but it was seeing that, and having had that experience that struck me with, you know, I’d like to find out what’s going on in Kenya,” Fisher reminisced. Letting his curiosity get the better of him, Fisher called the number to talk with the woman who had posted it. And only three weeks later, he found himself with the new responsibility of being the Achungo Children's Center's executive director.

Today, Fisher still maintains the same role. One of his major responsibilities is organizing fundraising, which results in mainly individual donations. Being a nonprofit, this is how they get a majority of their funding. Fisher has started to take teams out to Kenya, which serves as a foundational activity. Through his church, he has the ability to advertise a service trip, which would interest people and make them fall in love with the Kenyan children. Upon returning home, many tell their friends and family about it, which extends the Children’s Center’s reach on the homefront. In addition to fundraising, Fisher is also the accountant and keeps track of all finances. Whenever needed, he makes disbursements to Kenya via wire transfers.

In the southwest rural part of Kenya, the Children’s Center has successfully constructed two primary schools, currently educating a total of over 600 students. Their work also extends to

local high schools. While they didn't build these schools themselves, they still financially support a couple hundred students there. They have also seen past students graduate, some of which continue their education by attending university in Kenya.

A story Fisher likes to tell is about a boy named Clements. While taxiing a girl to school on his motorcycle, there was a man that saw a little boy on the street. He was desperately scrounging for wood to burn and sell as charcoal, as he had no other means of survival. His education was confined to a secondary status, as survival had taken its place as a top priority. When brought to Achungo, Clements's life underwent a complete reversal. By the end of the year, he had joined the sixth grade and quickly became one of the best students. And soon enough, Clements was among the top of his graduating class of Homa Bay High School, the top school in the county. He now studies electronics at Kenyatta University in Nairobi, which is commonly argued to be the best university in all of Kenya.

"It is encouraging and rewarding and also a little sad," said Fisher. It's hard not to think about how easily Clements's life could have been overshadowed by poverty, and how there are countless children that are stuck in the situation that he used to be in. Because of this, immense amounts of inspiration can be seen in what Clements has been able to accomplish through the assistance of the Children's Center. Not only is he now attending university, but he has successfully made a trading bot that is able to maximize profits and minimize losses. He also assisted in the initiation of an Achungo Alumni WhatsApp group. For him, the future only looks bright. The best part about this is that this is by no means an isolated event; the Children's Center is benefitting countless children in countless ways.

As for the future, Fisher hopes to continue his current work with the Achungo Children's Center. Although a difficult and daunting task for sure, he hopes to continue expanding the

organization's reach through building more schools, especially since there is a seemingly infinite need.

Over the different trips that Fisher has taken to Kenya, he has had people from different parts of the country, although most of them are concentrated around Menlo Park and Atherton. As they prepare to make their way to Kenya, Fisher tells them, "you're now leaving fantasy land and you're going to Kenya to experience how most of the world actually lives."

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