

2016 Kenyan grad student blogs together

## **NOT FROZEN AND OTHER SHORT ISLAND STORIES**

Posted on [November 29, 2016](#)

### **NOT FROZEN AND OTHER SHORT ISLAND STORIES**

**Written by Anne Shileche**

Not frozen and other short stories are true accounts by a Kenyan on a small island called Prince Edward Island, located away from the rest of the world. Accepting to pursue her dream of attaining international education, thanks to the generosity of the Queen Elizabeth II Scholarships and the prestigious University of Prince Edward Island - Canada, she arrived on this island, where someone knows everyone and everyone knows someone and in total they make up about 141,000 people.

Three months before her arrival on the island, she met some *islanders* who warned her of one thing, three times; cold, cold, and cold. Anyway, she got the message in the repetition of the words and packed warm clothes as well as psychologically prepared herself for the winter and the ice as they were referred to. Assuming that the change in temperatures would be sudden, she carried her puffy jacket throughout the airports waiting for an *icy* opportunity to put it on; well it never came and she's still waiting for it. She arrived on the island and found the sun shining brightly, then she was told to enjoy the sun while it lasts because in November you shall see snow and freeze. November is here and as much as the temperatures have declined, she has not yet frozen, she's starting to think that the weather on the island has sensed an additional number on the hundred and forty one and has refused to act normally.



### **See the Kenyan with a puffy jacket on an island**

She spoke to me about school and being a student at a new learning institution. The smile on her face was an indication of things progressing well, she praised her faculty for the great support she's receiving towards her study. Speaking of any differences between her current and previous education, and she makes gestures using her hands to indicate that her current studies are more focused on application of knowledge, emphasizing on doing things as opposed to just learning about things. She uses a statistical example to drive her point home; she says that she has never coded, and was not planning to, in fact she assumed that only geniuses code. Therefore, when her biostatistics professor introduced the course and said they will be coding, she wondered how. Now she codes using a statistical software and she's enjoying it.

She tells me that she has sampled a few special events on the island and she would like to share them. She mentions Halloween first and explains that she doesn't know why people celebrate it but she now knows how they do it, and before she tells me more, she is laughing out loud. When she becomes calmer, she narrates that people dress up in very weird and scary costumes, and houses are decorated with funny stuff and carved pumpkins; she exclaims "where I come from, pumpkins are boiled and eaten, but here pumpkins are carved and put at door steps". However, despite the scariness of the costumes, there is one Halloween tradition that she loved; that of giving candy to children as treats. She praised her generous house owner, who provided a bunch of candy to dish out to children, as she generously dished them out, she also took about four or so to treat her stomach.

Thanksgiving and remembrance holidays made more sense to her. She said that most islanders spent time with their families and were grateful for the opportunity to live on the beautiful island they were on. She confirms to me that she too had many things to be grateful for, including but not limited to family, friends and food. Talking of food, she told me her crazy idea of making *pink chapatis* with her housemate (see photos), *chapatis* is a Kenyan meal cooked from wheat flour and always white in color. For Remembrance day, she felt happy to honor the fallen soldiers on their quest for peace, just as she would do back home for the freedom fighters who stood up against oppression by the colonial government.



### **Two Kenyans playing with food color in the kitchen**

Lastly, she mentions potluck and clock and I get confused. What does she mean? She explains that potluck is a tradition on the island where people who are attending a social event bring food as opposed to the host preparing all meals. She finds this a perfect solution to a number of kitchen problems; one, the host does not have to bear all the cost associated with feeding everyone; two, the time needed to prepare all those meals is saved by each person preparing one or two meals; and three, the stress of cleaning up the mess in the kitchen after cooking for so many people is eliminated. Concerning the clock, she talks of a time difference of six hours between the island and her home town, which makes it tricky to communicate. She further enlightens me that the island has now moved clocks back by one hour to Eastern Standard Time, and so it is now seven hours time difference between PEI and Kenya. She cracks me up narrating how she walks home in the dark at five in the evening because the sun has already set with the daylight hours getting shorter.

We finish off in a very jovial mood, and gives confirmation that this Kenyan scholar has so far had a wonderful time on the island, even managing to bike a part of it. She promises to keep the stories coming as the events unfold. She has now fixed her eyes on Christmas - let's wait and see what she makes of it.



**The biking crew**

## **My ‘cow phobia therapy’**

By Grace Wanjohi

Since childhood, I have had a fear of cows. This fear began while in grade 3 when our neighbour’s cow broke from its shed and decided to chase after me. This ordeal left me cow-phobic and suspicious of every cow. However, it is now evident to me that among the many benefits of the UPEI/FHF QES project to me is ‘cow phobia therapy’ through exposure to them. My therapy began in Naari, Kenya where I had a chance to to accompany the vet team for a day. With all the vets around, I felt pretty safe and even helped out in some of the cow-assessment activities. I marvelled at some amazing facts I learned from the experience; that only cows who had given birth produce milk (seems obvious, but not to me then), that the cow pregnancy test involves sticking one’s hand into the cow’s rectum to feel for a calf, and that cows can be dewormed by just pouring the dewormer on their back.



*Above: The vets doing their assessments while Grace learns how to measure a cow’s heart rate*

After arrival in PEI, I was scheduled to visit a dairy farm and was up to the cow task, now with slightly more experience. Anne and I visited the Bysterveldts farm where we were warmly welcomed by Janet Bysterveldt. She took us round her enormous farm, diligently explaining what happens in each of the areas that we visited.



*Above: From left Anne and Grace after an activity-filled day at the farm*

*Below: Anne listening keenly while Janet explains the farm operations*



The level of organization on this farm was quite high, as seen from the cow barns to the corn, hay and alfalfa fields and eventually to the kitchen garden. It was also highly mechanised with high hygiene standards and balanced cow nutrition and consequently, high milk production. Although we helped out in various tasks, I enjoyed caring for the calves the most, I guess it reminded me of the new-borns I used to passionately care for. We prepared milk formula for the calves, we fed them, and we ensured they were comfortable.



*Above: Grace delivering milk to feed one of the calves*

The Open Farm Day was another good opportunity to interact with cows and so I took it up whole-heartedly. Despite the unfriendly weather, I was eager to see the robotic milkers at the Golden Bay dairy farm. Ken and Teresa Mellish served us a delicious hearty lunch prepared from fresh vegetables from their farm and then, we headed to the dairy farm. I was expecting to see a human like robot but to my surprise it was a computerised system that would clean and massage the cow's teats and eventually do the milking, indicating the amount of milk produced from each teat. The system could also detect the number of times and time intervals between which a cow came for milking such that a cow could be rejected if there was insufficient time since her last milking.



*Above: From left Emily and Grace watching the robotic milker perform its task*

The cow barn was also exceptionally clean due to a mechanised system of conveying dung to a central place before being spread on the fields growing the animal feeds.



We later went to a Christmas tree farm, a farming concept that I had not thought of before. The farmer, who started off this venture as a hobby, was now selling his trees every Christmas season. Although at the moment it was raining cats and dogs, we helped shear one of the trees and better still, choose our Christmas tree!



*Above: Grace and Emily posing beside their Christmas tree*

Steermans Quality Meat farm was the final stop for the day. The farmer seemed to talk a ‘different kind of English’ that was enjoyable to listen to. He had heavy weight turkeys, which is every farmer’s joy, but as a dietician, I thought they needed an immediate nutrition intervention. We also toured his beef cattle barn and later the meat store, where we got enough meat supply for a month, thanks to Teresa.



*Above: Inside the beef cattle barn with our host farmer*

Since my ‘cow phobia therapy’ began, I have only met friendly cows. Are the cows friendly for a reason? Do fierce cows still exist? These two questions still linger...

## **The joy of experience**

Posted on [September 18, 2016](#)

A Farmers Helping Farmers welcome for Sarah and Emily

by Sarah Wangeci

Experience is said to be the best teacher and in this case I concur. It has been a while since I felt this way; finally I was in PEI had a tour of the campus and island. The cool breeze, the beautiful sceneries and the well lit roads left me mesmerized. Everything is enchanting, including the people and the food, and did I mention I had my first Cow's Ice Cream (orange and pineapple flavour) one of Canada's authentic ice cream brands?



**(From left Sarah Wangeci and Nora McCarthy Joyce)**

Parenting is an amazing experience and my stay in PEI has made me recall how precious parents are in nurturing their children to discover what their purpose in life is. Dreams are only actualized when a child is fostered psychologically, socially and economically. The government is an equal partner in parenting and enforcing children rights. There are different institutions in place to preserve these rights. For instance, children have the right to free education from elementary to high school. The government also funds part of their university or college tuition fee. In addition to this, health care is free to all the citizens, although one may need to wait for some non-emergency procedures and pay a small fee for a drug prescription.



**(Cavendish Beach, Prince Edward Island)**

I was privileged to work with the nurses at the Public Health Nursing, the dietitians at the Public Health and Family Nutrition Program, as well as CHANCES (Caring, Helping and Nurturing Children Every Step). In Canada, dietitians play a key role in development and implementation of nutrition policies, nutrition assessment, nutrition screening, nutrition counselling and education. These services, among others, are integrated with Public Health programs. Family and individual health and nutritional status are assessed periodically. Every parent attending a prenatal class fills out a questionnaire which helps the care-giver assess the food security status of the family. If need be, the family is put on social security assistance.

Public Health Nursing specifically deals with screening and immunization of the general public and the also new-comers (mostly refugees). Their main mandate is to enroll, screen, vaccinate and do home visit follow-up for anyone who seeks their services.



**(Public Health Nursing; from right Valerie, BJ, Michele and Sarah)**

The provincial and federal government collaborate with partners to ensure that the five main pillars (mental wellness, being physically active and reducing sedentary time, living tobacco-free, healthy living and consuming alcohol responsibly) are addressed for a healthier and productive society.

I am astonished to know that children here start working at a very tender age; as early as 13 years of age - something that is very uncommon back at home (Kenya). In Kenya this would be considered as child labour which is illegal and punishable by law. No employer will be willing to offer you a job until you are of legal age (18 years). I have found this to be a good practice of instilling good moral values (independence and responsibility) in a society. One key thing that I have noted is that parents in Canada inculcate the saving culture in their children at a very early stage of life. Hence, the majority are able to save up and afford to pay for much of their college expenses. Acquiring these life skills is equally as important for anyone who wishes to lead a quality and healthy life.

## **Experiencing the Island and the ‘Islanders’ of Prince Edward Island**

By Anne Shileche

Two weeks in Canada and I have lots of stories to tell. Being the adventurous and daring spirit I am, I have had exciting days here already. As a Queen Elizabeth Scholar at the University of Prince Edward Island, I look forward to two great years of knowledge advancement, professional growth, lasting friendships and networks and inter-cultural experiences. Kenya and Canada are thousands of miles apart; it takes at least a day to travel from Nairobi to Prince Edward Island (PEI). Being here, far away from family and friends was a bit hard for me at first, however, the warm and welcoming nature of people here – *the islanders*- as they commonly refer to themselves - helped me to relax, settle and feel at home.

What story should I tell first? I guess I will start from what puzzled me the most and walk you through other exciting and common stuff. Back home, we are like beehives – I guess you know how hives are always a buzz of activities. PEI is totally the opposite, it is calm and composed. It was more amusing to me that only a handful of buses (about 5) form the public transport system operating in the main town, Charlottetown. Most people own cars, thus they don't use buses that often. Nairobi has thousands of public transport buses called '*matatus*' used by people whenever and wherever they are going. It took me a while to get used to the idea of not having *matatus* around. Traffic jam is not part of their daily vocabularies; they hardly experience this compared to Nairobi where it's very common and can extend multiple hours due to its high population.

Canadians love cooking! They cook a wide variety of foods and they cook them really well. I love cooking myself, but I feel that I have so much to learn from the *islanders* when it comes to cooking. Their kitchens are well spaced to accommodate more kitchen equipment for preparation of different meals – they make lots of cakes for desserts – and they bake a number of times. I have been privileged to taste different flavors of cakes like – lemon, chocolate, ice cream, blue berry etc. For some people, making bread is like a daily routine, I have never baked bread in my life and I think that will be changing soon once I learn the recipe and the tricks to do that. I tried making muffins a few days ago, I was surprised how easy the process was, I guess I will be much of a muffin maker from now on. People here do really enjoy cold drinks; they are always having their drinks with ice cubes even when its chilly.

The island food is not that different from our foods in Kenya. People here love eating fresh food products; many people have kitchen gardens especially those who have back yards and they grow different kinds of vegetables, including beans and Irish potatoes. Potatoes is one of the island's major crops produced, it is cooked differently; if one chooses to boil and mash up, they remove the peelings while those who deep fry or make stew don't. Meals are almost always served with vegetables, mostly raw ones A.K.A. salads, especially in the summer. People have a long life span; at 70 years, most *Islanders* are still independent and can engage in so many activities - I have seen them drive and still go to work. Dairy farming is commonly practiced here too – farms on the Island are large (running into hundreds of acres), highly mechanized and run as family businesses. People shop in the summer and store their favorite food stuffs to use in the winter because crops don't grow in the cold.



**Trying my luck in the kitchen:**

Above; with Grace and Emily frying some kales, the Kenyan style



Below; carrying muffins which I made for the first time

Islanders do like summer and it was great but very short. Fall and Winter are coming so we must prepare adequately. All I know about winter is what I have been told; I am waiting to experience it – they say that it will be very chilly and we shall have snow days - those days you miss school or don't go out of the house because the snow is too much. I hope I will be warm enough to punch the letters on my keyboard and give you a hint of what winter feels like – from a Kenyan who's enjoyed the sun from January to January, year after year, all her life.

People here are social; one of the trademarks of an *Islander* is that they will smile or wave at you when you meet them. During my walks or jogs, I have always had people greeting, smiling and waving at me, this has always made me feel good and welcomed in the community – I am learning to do so, for example, today, I smiled and waved at my passersby. I have been invited to several barbecues and dinners, had some delicious meals and got to make friends. They also enjoy a variety of music – for example, I got to learn of a radio station liked by many because it plays a mix of the old (80/90's) and latest songs.



### **Islanders love to relax, socialize and have a good time**

There is so much to see on the Island. The place attracts lots of tourists especially in the summer season, the red sandy beaches are something to enjoy. Thank goodness, I came here when the sun is still shining brightly; I have been to the beach, the museum and taken a tour to the ocean waters. I look forward to visiting many more places and engaging in many other fun activities as I juggle between studies and life on the Island with the *Islanders*.

## **Dairy farming in PEI, Canada: small lessons**

By Anne Shileche

In August, I visited a farm in the outskirts of Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, Canada. I was excited to be on this road drive; I had been in Canada for just three days and was still getting used to the new environment. I come from Kenya, East Africa, anyone who's been here understands how different things can be between the two places. I packed my bag nonetheless and got my boots ready for a day in the farm. My study courses at University of Prince Edward Island is part of a wider research program entitled *Integrated Innovative Research & Training Methods for Improved Sustainable Livelihoods of Smallholder Dairy Farmers* – thus it was much helpful for me to visit a Canadian farm so as to observe and learn what goes on there and if possible borrow a leaf. The farmer was kind and delighted to have us on the farm, she even offered *Tacos*, a Mexican favorite for lunch, I did enjoy it.

We spent some hours on the farm observing and learning. First, we got to drive and see large tracks of land on which several crops like barley, corn, oats, soybeans, and alfa alfa were grown. We got to understand that the farmer has many cows (over 100) thus requires adequate amounts of feed for them. She explained that people who are considering getting into dairy farming in Canada must have reasonable acreage of land so as to produce feeds for their livestock since purchasing them is quite expensive. Because the tracks of land are large, they have to use machines during planting, weeding or harvesting; this saves them time and money. Most of the feeds are stored in silages and hay bays for usage during winter.



## **Harvesting of barley**

In the barn, we saw many cows, comfortable in their individual spaces and very healthy. We noticed strings tied on their tails and lifted up on a frame, this was a bit strange and the farmer explained that this helped the cow stay clean preventing occurrence of diseases like mastitis. The cows were very healthy, the udders were so large and their bodies round and thick, I had not seen such a cow for a long time – although I must admit that I don't stay around cows very much – but for sure, these cows looked healthier than those I have seen in Kenya. The farmer categorically explained that they take nutrition, hygiene and comfort of their cows very seriously. Animals receive a mix of required feeds in recommended ratios and are regularly checked for diseases. The floor in the barn is cemented and kept very clean, its washed twice a day and there is a mechanized way of removing the cow dung from the barn. The cows sleep on hay that provides them with comfort from the hard concrete surface. We also observed that calves, non-milking and milking cows are put in separate barns so as to meet special needs like food and disease control.



**Cows on the farm – notice the hay under them, raised tails and how clean & healthy they look**

### **Cleaning of the barn**

(All the dirt is pushed in the ditch which mechanically rotates dumping the dirt in a tunnel while the rails get washed automatically too)

While this farm is considered an average farm in Canada, it produces around 3000 liters of milk every day, this gives us an idea of how dairy farming is developed in



Prince Edward Island and other parts of the country. I also learnt that Ontario has a number of farmers with very large dairy farms that produce large quantities of milk. Milking of cows is done by machines, this ensures that milk is not contaminated by any microbes, the farmer has also invested in coolers that keep the milk at recommended temperatures until it is picked up for processing. The owner of the farm uses dung from cows to grow crops and keeps records of all her animals.



*(left)* Using a milking machine

*(Below)*

**Coolers for storing milk until pick up time**



Naari climate in Meru Kenya favors dairy farming, this practice is important and has become one of the main sources of income for dwellers. However, farmers practice small scale dairy farming with most rearing between 1-10 cows and producing between 5-20 liters of milk a day. Naari Dairy cooperative has over 80 farmers who produce close to the same amount of milk one Canadian farm produces. This shows that milk production in the area is low and this program

will be helpful in assisting farmers to improve the health and welfare of their animals in order to increase milk production and quality eventually increasing their income levels.

From my observations and learning at this Canadian farm, I will encourage small scale farmers in Kenya to try these practices in a bid to improve their dairy farming:

- i. Make sheds more comfortable for cows – lay some grass on the floor so that cows have a soft pad to sleep on. For farmers who have not made a roof and some kind of walls for their cows, they can consider doing so to prevent extreme hot and cold temperatures to their animals.
- ii. Farmers should consider making cow shed floors concrete in order to maintain good hygiene for the animals. Also make plans of cleaning the cow shed at least twice a day and moving the cow dung a distance away from the animals. Let them have some fresh air in the shed as much as possible.
- iii. Consider tying the tails of your cows up on one of the frames on the shed – do it with care not to hurt or make your animal/s uncomfortable. This helps the tail not to get dirty keeping the udder clean and preventing mastitis.
- iv. Try give your cows different kinds of feeds in considerable ratios (as advised by the veterinary) to ensure they consume needed nutrients for milk production and disease prevention.
- v. Get in touch with a local veterinary and ensure that cows are regularly checked – this will help cows to be healthy as diseases or conditions are diagnosed and treated early enough.
- vi. Utilize cow dung to grow crops whose left overs can also be used as feed for cows
- vii. Keep records of the cow/s – not just on milk production – but also on issues like birth, calves, disease incidents and reproduction activities. This will help farmers quickly know if something is wrong with their cow/s and take necessary measures to help them. Also it can the risk of animal/s being stolen because identities like name tags, numbers and special marks on them are well documented serving as evidence that the animal belongs to them.

Life in the other side of town

By Emily Kathambi

It has been a little over ten days since I got to Charlottetown airport on a Saturday night after 24 hours of travel. I have been involved in quite a number of things and activities, visited some places and experienced different lifestyles. With the curiosity I brought from Kenya, I was in Lennox island the very next day after my arrival to attend a “Pow-wow” which turned out not to be happening due to some date mix up and instead we got to Kenny’s and I dare say the wings and the sweet potato fries are to die for. The following week I got to visit two dairy farms in different sides of town where I was involved in a herd health check and farm work. In the SandyRae farm where I stayed for three days, I got the full experience of working in a farm which included; machine milking cows, rolling straw in the fields, feeding cows and calves, and stall management, with my highlight being driving a tractor.



Sara and I at Kennys.



Enjoying milking a cow at the SandyRae farm.

The weekend was buzzing with activity as the farmers helping farmers fundraising barbecue happened on Saturday afternoon, I was involved with the preparations, welcoming of the guests and the food was delicious. In addition, I had the honor and privilege of meeting Dr. Ian Dohoo who is an Epidemiologist and author of Veterinary Epidemiologic Research Text book. On Sunday we took another shot at the POW WOW and got to see the first nation's aboriginal people in their cultural regalia and dancing to traditional songs and drum beats. The experience was just incredible.



Dr. Ian Dohoo and I at the FHF barbecue. Sara and I with two aboriginal dancers at the Pow wow.

That being said about work, the culture shock has been inevitable with drivers sitting on the left side of the car and driving on the left side of the road, which is utterly confusing for me, and I keep walking to the wrong sides of the cars. On the other hand, the public transport system is not very big with few buses moving around and boy do I miss "matatus" and "boda bodas". The foods are different, with most people drinking coffee, piling so many uncooked salads on their plates, varieties of berries to choose from, and in this spirit I got to eat a blueberry pancake that was delicious. The weather is great at this time of the year which makes the transition very easy for me. Today is Gold Cup and Saucer day in PEI, and I am looking forward to watching the parade and getting to know more about the Canadian culture and the people. With so much to see and experience I leave it at that until next time.

First Anniversary thoughts

By Dennis Makau

As I mark my one year anniversary in the QES scholarship for my Ph.D. I can't help but reminisce how far I have come. It's been a journey worth noting and remembering and could most probably rank highly among my most memorable moment in life so far. This is accentuated by the many miles I had to travel across continents to get to UPEI for my coursework in the fall and winter semesters and back to Kenya for my research. Although UPEI was a long way away from home, the many friends I made from very different nationalities made it a very homey environment for me. As a matter of fact, I could almost joke that we made a small United Nations congress during the many lunch hour breaks we shared. Although over the years I had heard of Canadian hospitality irrespective of peoples' nationality, I always thought that this was a pretty story from a fairy tale or a very well-publicized PR story. But experiencing what I experienced, the many welcomes to 'strangers homes' for parties and other celebrations and witnessing how the Syrian refugee situation was promptly handled was proof enough that what I had heard was not just a story.

As would be expected, one of the most difficult moments for me or should I say the 'bittersweet' experience was the purportedly mild winter of 2015-2016. In my entire life, I never thought I would be walking to school in a -20°C windchill and smiling about it. Short days, however, were never fun since the sun barely stayed out. However, the most interesting part was getting to meet many professors considered legends in my field of study; whose names I had only ever heard or seen on books. Getting to interact with those great minds truthfully transformed my life and general perspective of it both academically and otherwise. Various seminar sessions organized on different subjects allowed me to understand Canadian culture at a different level as well as providing me with much-needed practice in public speaking and presentation of ideas in a logical interesting manner. The practically oriented assignments additionally aided in facilitating open-mindedness in solving various problems (academic and life).

Well, the 8 months went by at a fairly good pace and soon enough home was beckoning. While this was a great moment I looked forward to, it generated happy sad feelings. Having to say goodbye to the many friends I had made, and keeping in mind that some of those who had just graduated might never cross my life's path again was one of the most difficult things. Back in Kenya, family and friends were happy to see me and eagerly waited to hear many untold 'white' stories to confirm or disabuse of the many stereotypes they had heard. The farmers in Meru (research area) were also eagerly waiting. Not for stories and untold experiences but for the knowledge acquired during my stay in Canada and visits to the big dairy farms on Prince Edward Island. The last 3 months has proven quite a challenge for me, having to rationalize and tailor the many dairy practices I observed in Canada into the context of a smallholder dairy farmer in rural Kenya who has little if any education and access to basic infrastructure. However, with time, I guess we will contribute to the writing of a great story for the average smallholder dairy farmer in Kenya who relies on 1 or 2 cows for livelihood.

The structure of this scholarship, which allows for integration of Canadian undergraduate and Kenyan graduate students, has again been very interesting this summer. Living in a full house made life a bit interesting and provided avenues for different individual capacity building and leadership training in different areas. Spending most evenings around a fire sharing experiences of the veterinary and nutrition teams was one of the major highlights of the day. The nutrition team in the project handled: human nutrition, education, and horticultural training of women groups while we handled the veterinary aspect of life in this community. This 'one health' approach to problem-solving deeply appeals to my sagacity of undertaking research that positively impacts on human life. That said, I must say it's a life-changing experience altogether.

Working and learning with the Canadians at PEI and Kenya

By Joan Muraya

The first year of my PhD programme has successfully come to an end. Each day has been capped with new learning experiences, both classroom and life lessons, that have changed me enormously. In May of 2015, I got accepted to the University of Prince Edward Island as a Queen Elizabeth II scholar, an opportunity that am truly grateful for. The scholarship required me to travel to PEI Canada for postgraduate courses and there after conduct research in Kenya before travelling back to Canada to write up and defend my thesis in 2018. The other component of the scholarship involved working and living with Canadian scholars who would travel to Kenya for 3 month summer internships. At this point, we have just successfully completed the second round of Canadian internships with two vet students just returning to Canada from Kenya.

It has been exciting meeting and working with Canadian vet students in Meru area of Kenya. Both batches of students (Krista and Emily, 2015 interns) and (Ali and Kelsey, 2016 interns) have been amazing team mates, roommates, students, friends and family for the time we have been together. Arriving in Kenya for their first time in May, they did not know what to expect from a new continent and culture. When I met them the first time, they struck me as pleasant and happy people to be around. Although they went by the name Mzungus in the local Naari area, they soon got new names befitting them in the kimeru community, like Kendi (meaning lovely for Emily), Mukiri (meaning the quiet one for Krista), and Makena (meaning the always jovial one for Kelsey), while Ali could not decide on a name to pick. Even when we worked long days in the farms, the girls always kept it lively and soon enough they learnt how to survive in the harsh Naari roads sometimes with a broken gypsy door. Soon enough, sunburns became a thing of the past and they took to loving some of the Kenyan dishes (I remember Ali eating ugali every day and loving every bit of it, while Catherine and Kira learnt how to make chapatis). It's not been easy though with the girls missing home, a thing I experienced in Canada, but they had lots to explore and experience in beautiful Kenya.

Moving forward, we hope the few more years to come of this partnership with Kenyans and Canadians; students and researchers will bring more learning and integration, enriching both the Meru and PEI communities. More human livelihoods will be improved through UPEI and FHF, and Nairobi and Kenyatta universities, and there will be a part of Canada planted and growing in Kenya for a long time to come. I would like to see more fellow Kenyan youth emulating the virtues laid down by the Canadian students of hard work, resilience, determination and focus. "Everything can be achieved as long as we put our mind into it" this is a great lesson that will be instilled in the Naari community. Young or old, they all have a part to play in making the community a better place in the future.

## **A "joyful" experience with the Joy Women's Group and Sarah's reflections**

Posted on [July 31, 2016](#)

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Keep reading on below for Sarah Wangeci's post! She's on her way to Prince Edward Island very soon.



Hello everyone, this is UPEI nutrition student Kira again. I have an exciting blog and some beautiful pictures to share with you! The nutrition team has just finished working with yet another women's group, the 'Joy' Women's Group. Just like Upendo Women's Group, we worked with six women leaders in this group, called our Champs, and educated them on our seven nutritional messages. With the leadership of our Champs, we held two cooking sessions where all members were invited and taught nutritional messages and cooking tips.

On our first day, we arrived early morning to begin preparing the food for lunch with the Champs. All hands were needed as we had plenty of vegetables to peel! I love this part of our sessions as this is where we really bond with the women. The women always find it amusing to watch Catherine and I try peeling and dicing the vegetables without the help of a cutting board! It amazes me how fast these women can peel all by hand!

The sessions for both days were held at Zipporah's, one of the six Champs household. The women worked together to construct a very hot fire for both the pot of Mukimo and Githeri.

Mukimo is one of my favourite Kenyan dishes, yet challenging to make since it takes a lot of pounding with large wooden spoons to achieve a smooth texture! Stephen Mwenda was giving us a 'strong' hand on this day to quickly finish the Mukimo while it was still hot.

The women lining up to try what we had been teaching about: Carrot Githeri and Mukimo with added green leafy vegetables.

All the women of the Joy Women's Group lined up with their matching aprons. I was very impressed with the questions the women had to ask, such as whether beans and maize could be soaked separately (they can). Some were even writing down their own notes!

On our second day, we prepared pumpkin Chapatis, Beef Stew and Uji with the women.



*Uji; millet flour, whole maize flour, and milk.*

On this cold day, I was very grateful for my cup of Uji! Uji, is a traditional Kenyan porridge typically made with just maize flour and water. At this session, we encourage the use of two cereals (whole maize and millet flours) for a balanced variety of nutrients, and milk if available. Many of the women had two or three cups of Uji while listening to the teachings of the Champs.

Orange fleshed sweet potato (OSP) is a big part of our nutritional messages and a crop that Farmers Helping Farmers is gradually introducing to women in the area. Most of the 'Joy' women had not seen an orange sweet potato before since they are not yet working with FHF. Our translator Mary, was so kind to bring some orange sweet potato cuttings from her garden, for each member to take back to their shamba (garden) and plant. Luckily, Mwenda from Farmers Helping Farmers had joined us, and was able to explain to the group how to grow and care for OSP.

We learned that seven of the women from this group had tried soaking their maize and beans overnight. This is one of our nutritional messages and is a very efficient way of saving firewood and cooking time of Githeri (stewed maize and beans). Of these seven, one woman commented that she was actually able to eat Githeri for the first time without getting sick (gastrointestinal discomfort)! We were very impressed and hoped that this encouraged the rest of the group to giving soaking of maize and beans in water overnight a chance. Once again, the women had lots of questions, such as "Why do you need clean water to cook maize and beans in after soaking?"

(to avoid consuming substances which cause gas). After another successful session, we all enjoyed our Pumpkin Chapatis and Beef and Carrot Stew.

We really had so much fun with this women's group, and plan to meet with them one more time before we leave for Canada. I love giving this opportunity to the group members to learn something new to improve their health through simple changes to their everyday cooking practices- and have fun while doing it! Asante Sana Joy Women's Group!

### **Sarah's Post**

## **LIGHTING THE AFRICAN FIRE**

My name is Sarah Wangeci; I am a Foods, Nutrition AND Dietetics Graduate and an awardee of the Queen Elizabeth II Scholarship from UPEI. I have been in Naari for the past two months working with Kira Stratton and Catherine Williams, nutrition students from UPEI. We have been assessing food security status, food availability and food diversity of families in the Naari area in Meru and working with women's groups to improve the nutritional quality of family meals.

Spending time with the women leaves me energized and eager to empower the next woman that Mother Nature brings my way. Indeed empowering a woman is empowering the world which is a symbol of growth in society and consequently healthy families. This practice is now taking root in Naari through sustainable food security empowerment programs, an initiative of Farmers Helping Farmers and University of Prince Edward Island. In the African Culture, a woman is a major determinant of what is cultivated in the farm and fed to her family in the midst of the limited access to land ownership by women. They are therefore ideal participants in this programming.

It is amazing how the Joy Women's group is so passionate about family and growth. The group was formed three years ago and it is the second group that we are training this summer. The group constitutes of twenty four members all of whom are women. Our first meeting with the group executive was held outdoors while we sat on the green and beautifully cut grass at Muruguma Primary School playground. The group is registered with the Ministry of Labour, Social and Security Services.

It was all excitement for the women when they saw young Mzungu (foreigner) ladies (Catherine and Kira) shake their hands. They could not help but express their joy through laughter and a sharp gaze. It was their first time to sit with Mzungus and have a conversation or even have a hand shake. As a group they are involved in several income generating activities such as merry-go-round, small scale dairy farming and table banking amongst themselves.

Training our new champs (champions) was fun and very fulfilling. They were very responsive during the nutrition education training session and alert too. I enjoyed every stroke of surprise expressed on their faces when they heard Kira and Catherine speak in Kimeru. At last we had our new champs armed with the right information and the seven nutritional messages.

The next in line was planning and budgeting for the cooking sessions that the champs were to hold at Zipporah's home (Group Treasurer). During the planning, we divided the cooking sessions into two. Three champs in each of the two sessions were to teach their fellow group members what they had learnt (the seven nutritional messages mentioned in our previous blog). The climax in teaching the champs and planning was when they served us with tea and mouthwatering and thoughtfully prepared crunchy brown mandazi (donuts) when we first met.

Au revoir for now.....

## [Nutritionist for a day](#)

Posted on [July 1, 2016](#)

*By Sarah Wangeci*

\*Sarah is a QE II 2016 scholar who is starting her Masters of Science (nutrition) at UPEI in September. She will be writing blog posts regularly.

Talk of a jovial soul and the whole house lights up. Her name is Kelsey Goodick, a young hearted lady full of life and a beautiful voice that leaves one mellow and astonished that she is also training to be a veterinarian. This was her first day with the Nutrition Team where she had to act "Nutritionist" for a day and experience the exemplary work the QE II 2016 Nutritionist Scholars having been doing at different schools in Naari Community.



As the day went by at Mitoone Primary, we got busy taking measurements of every ingredient that was being used to make Githeri. The addition of Orange Fleshed Sweet Potatoes (O.S.P) into the Githeri gave it a twist. So far, this is the only school that has had O.S.P ready when we

visited due to its favorable warmer climate compared to other schools where it has been cool and misty. The addition of the green leafy vegetables and deep yellow orange vegetables into the Githeri immensely improves its nutritional value. The drought resistant crops, pumpkin and O.S.P., are a perfect source of Vitamin A (Beta-carotene) which is well accepted by children and a good immune booster. These crops need very little water to thrive and mature very fast. Through the initiative of Farmers Helping Farmers, schools can now include these vegetables in the Githeri.

The relationship between good nutritional and health status is both synergistic and inseparable: optimal nutritional status helps fight disease and hence helps achieve good health status. When children eat foods that are higher in nutrients like beta carotene, they are less likely to become ill, particularly from infections.



It is impressive to note that the screen houses at the schools have incredibly transformed the school feeding programs in this area. A combination of immune boosting vegetables in the githeri with appropriate food preparation techniques (such as using whole grain (mpempe) maize, soaking maize and beans to increase digestibility, adding greens close to serving time and avoiding taking tea (chai) with meals to protect iron) gives the pupils a much better chance of meeting their recommended daily nutrient intakes.

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## [Guacamole Lover and Vet Student for a Day!](#)

Posted on [July 1, 2016](#)

*By Sarah Wangeci*

\*Sarah is a QE II 2016 scholar who is starting her Masters of Science (nutrition) at UPEI in September. She will be writing blog posts regularly.

## Guacamole Lover

Talk of Avocados and immediately the bell rings: “My New Found Love”.

Guacamole, the dish they commonly prepare from avocados in Canada is my new found lover all thanks to an amazing woman Mama Ben (Jennifer Taylor). This is the first Canadian dish that she taught me how to make. It is simple to make and can accompany any meal – its creamy and zingy taste leaves you asking for more and more. My Kenyan rendition of guacamole with a Canadian twist is very easy to make: all you need is to put on your lucky apron and head to the house of magic (kitchen) and follow this simple recipe if you want to experience my new found love. Clean the avocados properly and peel the skin, put in a bowl and gently make a paste. When smooth, squeeze lemon or lime juice in, add bit of salt to taste, coriander (dahnia) and chopped tomatoes. Now enjoy with any accompaniments of your choice- tortilla chips, chapatis, vegetables, or whatever you like.

## Vet Student for a Day



***(From left Emily, Joan, Dennis, Kelsey and Sarah)***

I have always loved low-fat milk and, of course, a good cup of Kenyan tea but I had little exposure to its source. For weeks I have been contemplating on the day I will spend with the vet students and experience their day to day life with my favorite animal Mrs. Cow. The baptism day finally arrived on the 14th of June, accompanied by the most talented jovial team of young professionals: Joan, Emily, Kelsey and Dennis. I was initiated into the clan by name “ndakitar” a Kimeru name for doctor.

I was astonished to find out that just like a nutritionist conducts anthropometric assessments on humans a vet also does physical examinations on a cow. A tape calibrated is used to take the

weight of the cows, body condition score is given on a scale of 1-5. A stethoscope is used to listen to the heart rate, lungs as well as the gurgling sounds of the rumen. Body temperature is taken, udder and leg hygiene is examined as well.

There are incredible similarities between humans and livestock nutrition. For instance, both need to replenish regularly to maintain good nutritional and health status with protein for body building, carbohydrates for energy and vitamins and minerals as immune boosters. This was the day I came to appreciate veterinary medicine as a profession and had to salute the team for the wonderful work they were doing in the community.

A healthy cow means better milk production hence a happy farmer and a stable family income which is a key determinant of food security and dietary diversity for the family.

## **The dream team – a great combination of people, fun and vet stuff**

By Emily Kathambi

It's been a bit more than a week since we arrived in Naari to work on the project and the experiences never stop. As the veterinary team, some days are crazier than others with events ranging from guys going crazy over the Canadian ladies, especially Ali, to John pulling off a Chuck Norris stunt and kids actually buying it. On one particular day, we visited a farm that had two geese guarding the home and two calves that were loose outside in the front yard. The geese started making ferocious noises as soon as we entered the compound, but Ali thought that she could go and examine one of the calves without consulting the avian guards. The geese got so furious and chased her away from the calves. The rest of us backed away from the geese, but John took charge of the tricky situation and confronted the pair of angry geese, albeit at a safe distance, and eventually John and the geese came to some sort of understanding, allowing us to examine the calves.



John negotiating with the pair of guard geese

As the day progressed, John decided that the geese stand-off wasn't enough for one day and he swapped footwear with Anne who was accompanying our team that day so she could put on his rubber boots for a few minutes and get a closer look at the cattle. As a patriotic Kenyan, I say that we allow and accept all kinds of styles, and this specific style was hilarious, with the major shift from Chuck Norris to a guy in women's shoes and a cowboy hat. The team was cracked up for the rest of the day, with everyone dishing out all kinds of funny sentiments to our esteemed professor - the guy in women's shoes.



John showing off the nice red women shoes and later doing an internal exam on a cow

Aside from the many light moments, the vet team most importantly is actively involved in assessment and saving of planted calliandra and sesbania shrubs used for cattle feed, clinical examination of cows on study farms, and treatment and prevention of diseases. The chemistry, co-operation and respect that are experienced between the team members are admirable. The senior vet in the group, John, is great with training everyone on large animal practice, research, farm work and non-vet virtues of life. Dennis and Joan, the PhD graduates, are amazing at working with people in the community and complementing the training that is offered by John. And there is Ali and Kelsey, who are so enthusiastic and passionate about learning all there is about Kenya, smallholder dairy farms, large animal farm practice and management of diseases. They are simply the best. I am doing my best to help Ali and Kelsey with the cattle exams and treatments, keeping everyone chatty and laughing, and acquiring additional training from the senior vets. The vet team all fits together like pieces of one puzzle and we enjoy our work as well as each other's company. It is going to be an enjoyable, interesting and worthwhile 3 months together.



Ali examining a calf with me, while Joan and Dennis administer a questionnaire



The vet team stopping to take in the scenery after working on a farm and “enjoying” their lunch