

Kiboko Will Help AIDS Victims

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In Swahili language, Kiboko means hippopotamus. Mark Scheflen, the Art Director of a “Kiboko Projects” organization, was so amazed with intelligence and wit of this African animal, that he named his project after it. Kiboko Project began more than ten years ago. Among numerous participants, there were artists, immigrants, children with developmental problems and their parents, HIV-infected and drug-addicts, former military men and students. By creating their own plaster masks or writing books with bright covers about their lives, they would communicate their plan to others relieving their souls. The presentation of Kiboko Projects took place last year in the Saint Petersburg’s Institute of Regional Press. This year we provide the reader with the article of Kenyan journalist Agata Galeu about the new programs of the project, which are particularly intended to assist AIDS victims. This publication is dedicated to the worldwide AIDS Victims’ Day (the third Sunday of May).

The Kiboko Projects was initially carried out in the USA about a decade ago in order to establish new cultural bonds with the communities of America, Kenya, Russia, and South African Republic. Mark Scheflen, who has repeatedly visited Kenya prior to the project, wanted to give young people a chance to share their experience of dealing with the problems actual worldwide. Scheflen believes this can be effectively done by the means of masks, photo diaries, and documental films.

During their recent trip to Kenya, Mark Scheflen and Jill Raufman, the directors of the “Kiboko Project”, visited Nakuru, Kisumu, and Nairobi, where they worked on the AIDS-victims-assistance program in local communities. One of the main goals of their work is to abolish the ban on the discussing the disease in this part of the world. “We believe that the participants of our seminars do not feel embarrassed talking about HIV/AIDS anymore. The masks allow them to express their own feelings more confidently” – says Mark Scheflen. Jill Raufman indicates: “Such a way of self-expression was a great discovery, especially important for the kids whose parents died from HIV/AIDS and their guardians”.

The first step of the program was work in Kibera in 2004, where the project partakers, mostly those affected with the disease, were sharing their problems and the ways to cope with them using their own photo diaries. Such schools as Moi Forces Nakuru in Lanet and Saint Nicholas School in Nairobi were the pioneers of the program along with the members of KICOSHEP organization in Kibera. In addition, the project with the masks was represented in several schools of the province of Nyanza, and Nairobi’s Riaru Springs Academy joined this activity.

Kenyan program appears to be the most noticeable, probably due to the fact that well known sports figures were involved, such as a world steeplechase record holder Wilson Boit Kipketer and several best sportsmen from the Department of Administration of Kenyan Prisons. They will become the leaders of the action that deals with such social issues as

HIV/AIDS, barbarian tradition to circumcise girls, and drug addiction amongst youth. The project is also planning to extend its work with Sudan refugees. “We want to join them with the Russian participants of the project, who can share what was happening to them in Chechnya, and with Americans, who came back from Iraq” - said Jill Raufman.

Many of the young partakers of the project expressed their hopes for the better future and were discussing the fact that social problems of their society greatly affected their lives. Angela Marrinka, the student of Moi Forces Academy in Nakuru, noted “It was interesting to find out that such thing as poverty exists in the United States, because this is a country from which most of the social difficulties come from, especially HIV/AIDS problem”. She also added that many young women in Kenya find themselves in a situation when they are left without the support of their community. Gaining a social status through education has become extremely important.

Schoolchildren from Nyanza Province complained that they, along with their grandmothers, are the victims of the issue, consequences of which can not even be predicted. The schools of this part of the country contain 80% of orphans who are being supported by their grandparents. “At this moment, the situation is so tense that many children, along with their guardians, do not wish to discuss their problems openly. They need a certain form of a free discussion where they will be able to open up,” says Mark Scheflen.

From Kenya, Kiboko Projects came with numerous bright and expressive pieces. The exhibits of the hand-painted masks, photo diaries, and videos from New York, Baltimore, Kenya, and St. Petersburg are a traditional part of the project.

The number of participating organizations increases as the geographical span of the project grows. In the USA, Kiboko Projects teamed up with Eleanor Roosevelt High School and St. Mark’s Church in-the-Bowery. In Russia, it found support among the St. Petersburg art society and a project named “Hope”. Kiboko Projects activity was praised by two USA congressmen, Charles Rangel and Jerrold Nadler: “Cultural program initiated by the Kiboko Projects gives many possibilities to the youth of Kenya and other countries. You can always count on us”.