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From: Sarah Aldrich
Sent: Thursday, May 11, 2006 1:16 PM
To:
Subject: moving on...

Hi there Mates,

Yesterday I left Africa. I arrived in Fredonia, NY, USA, this afternoon to surprise my parents. The past seven months has been an incredible experience- an experience that I am slowly trying to process, and one that has certainly left an indelible mark on my heart. It was a blast, a high, a drag, a gutting time, an education, a time of celebration, a time of mourning, a time of change. It made me reevaluate my values, cry, laugh and think. From weddings to funerals, concerts to safaris, dirt to diamonds, Victoria Falls to shanty towns, it was everything.....except regrettable.

My time in the Congo and Zambia proved to be the highlight of my volunteer work with 'Hands @ Work in Africa' I left both countries stunned with admiration for the unremitting work that is conducted and the faithful lives of the people volunteering with these projects. The generous hospitality the Congolese and Zambians showed me was magical. The conditions there are so dire and are in desperate need of aid relief. There are tragic images in my head that will continue to haunt me, yet to forget such experiences would be, by far, an even greater tragedy. Many of my photos are online at photos.yahoo.com/kiwi_338

Most of you were well aware of the shocking statistic regarding the AIDS pandemic (If you don't, then go out and buy this weeks Newsweek!) It doesn't matter if you're black or white, rich or poor, straight or gay, a Christian or an Atheists, male or female, young or old... HIV/AIDS is affecting you. We must globally and uniformly fight this pandemic. The need for stronger infrastructure- roads, clinics, schools and trained personnel is crucial to successful fighting HIV/AIDS. Over 25 million people have died, while another 40 million are infected and there are over 10 million children orphaned in this world.....all because of AIDS. It's mega!

My perceptions of people have changed. I have, sadly, realized just how greatly our governments and institutions have failed the people of Africa. I will never quite understand how so many people can turn their backs to the sheer amount of suffering happening in this brilliant region. I know there is no simple answer, but really, neglect certainly isn't helping. It has most definitely taken me back to nature, to my roots, to those very basic values that my parents tried to teach me so long ago- creating strong relationships, taking time for people, living with nature- not the excessive materialized goods we quickly easily accumulate. It has undoubtedly inspired me to be free. From the brilliant- retina dazzling Namib Desert and the ever so powerful waters of the Zambezi, to the scores of emaciated AIDS patients waiting for food and medicine in Zambia, you never know what Africa will throw at you. It's the real world.

I knew going into Africa that I wouldn't be able to change the world, yet I did hope that I would be able to make some small change,

somewhere. As I sat on the plane, trying to put together the fragmented pieces composing my African experience puzzle, I realized that Africa has made a far greater change in me and given me far more than I could have possibly left in it. My goals in life have changed. And so my African journey will continue on, regardless of whether or not I'm on the African continent.

Through much of my time I fought through the feelings of helplessness, shock, apathy and indifference, but have left Africa firmly supporting and believing in the aid work that is being conducted. Realizing that these international aid programs are essential, and that hate, prejudice, misogyny and bigotry have no place in our world. There are three main lessons that Africa taught me- the power of education, the importance of a good family, and that life does go on.....but sometimes, we should not let it go just so easily.

At this stage, I am very uncertain of what my future holds. I will spend the next few weeks catching up with my friends here and will continue to put the pieces together. For all you in WNY, I am spending most of my time at my parent's new place- in exile up in Arkwright, feel free to stop by and visit. For those of you down under, don't be surprised if I end up there by the end of the year. For the rest of you....I'm sure our paths will cross again.

Journey well.

Much love,
Sarah