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Texas Tribune Cover Letter

“Mzungu, you’re famous now,” the group of boda boda drivers shouted at me laughing and pointing to their radios. Mzungu, a Bantu term for foreigner, became my unofficial name the month I spent reporting on HIV for the Daily Monitor, Uganda’s largest independent newspaper.

The drivers finally had an answer to why three Americans were hiking across their island. I had just made my debut on Radio Ssesse talking about my time reporting on the island’s HIV medication shortage.

Despite thousands of people in HIV treatment on the island, the National Medical Store shipped the local clinic medicine weeks away from expiration. I was shocked with the lack of accountability securing drugs so many depended on to survive. I also felt compelled to act and help alleviate this injustice any way I could.

Alongside the few journalists I was traveling with, I went to the local clinic where we found piles unsecured trash bags holding nearly expired medicine. I used the photos I made of the piles later that day to confront the district health official who continued to claim shortages weren’t foreseeable.

Without being there ourselves we would have never discovered how the story was different from what it looked like on paper. Back home in school I was taught to be there and bear witness. This story cemented that value in me.

My first few days were spent tracking down researchers and government officials across the bustling capital. Many had no contact information, unhelpful public relations officers and offices across town. I found burning a little boot leather and leaving a note under their office door the most effective contact method. When I finally cornered them into an interview they warned me of the National Medical Store’s mistakes, but had no proof themselves. I felt compelled to find this evidence myself.

My first approach was to try to find some data. I am trained in quantitative analysis and visualization and thought this story lent itself well to those skills. However, the systematic problems with Ugandan records kept preventing me from doing so. Luckily, I entered university as a photographer and was still able to show this story visually. I also turned **the absence of data into the story itself**, reporting on how bad record keeping hurts Ugandans.

The Ssesse islands make up one of Uganda’s poorest and smallest district, allowing bureaucratic mistakes to go under reported. It was rewarding to cover a story I thought hadn’t been publicized enough. If I had remained in the capital with the other interns I could have never uncovered the proof I needed for my story or found the people most effected by it.

I try to never lose sight of this when covering stories back in the States. Many of the stories I work on are data driven and it could be easy to forget the value of getting up from behind my computer screen. Luckily I think back to confronting a lying bureaucrat with photographic proof of my question or being thanked by a patient for traveling so far out of my way to cover her story, and I realize burning a little boot leather is always worth it.