Cultivated by a sense of social responsibility, student helps in global fight against HIV/AIDS

Tammy Kantor, who grew up in Israel and Texas and then traveled to Tanzania to help in the fight against HIV/AIDS — all the while learning Swahili — believes the world is indeed a village. The School of Social Work student says her multi-cultural background has afforded her a unique awareness and sensitivity to various cultural and social issues within different societies.

“I think we live in a global village, and it’s important for people to tolerate and accept cultural differences,” said Kantor, who worked in Tanzania for an organization providing services for people with HIV/AIDS. “Social workers especially need to provide culturally sensitive services to unique and diverse populations.”

Kantor was in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania for her final master’s program field internship. Her efforts with WAMATA (a Swahili acronym for People in the Fight Against HIV/AIDS) included education and prevention, counseling, home-based care for people living with HIV/AIDS, clinical care and working with AIDS orphans.

“The HIV/AIDS epidemic in Tanzania has a devastating impact on the children and youth,” said Kantor. “Many are orphans or lack familial and social support systems so it’s important that they meet people their own age from similar backgrounds and life circumstances.”

She also brought her guitar to the African country and volunteered for a group called the Tanzania House of Talents. The organization helps children and adolescents develop their musical and fine arts talents, then to use these skills to find employment in the art community.

“I was able to use my musical skills to help kids write songs and develop social skills,” she said. “Music and singing is huge in Tanzania because many learn to sing in church at an early age. Music is a universal language — and through it — I was able to connect with young people.”

Kantor helped facilitate a “girls empowerment” group focusing on increasing self-esteem, self-assertiveness and knowledge about HIV/AIDS and the consequences of risky sexual behaviors.

Gender norms contribute greatly to Tanzania’s social problems, including HIV/AIDS and poverty, she said. “Although there are emerging women’s empowerment movements and organizations, women are still encouraged to be submissive,” said Kantor. “Because of economic dependence, many young women are engaging in behaviors that put them at risk for HIV/AIDS.” In addition, condoms are generally unavailable and carrying condoms is considered promiscuous for women, she pointed out.

“Practicing social work within the Tanzanian culture was a powerful experience,” Kantor said. “Observing different cultural attitudes and beliefs towards human behavior has increased my self-awareness of my own values and beliefs. I have managed to grow on a personal as well as professional level.”

— Nancy Neff, University Office of Public Affairs