

# Life changing leaves

NYU grad student helps Tanzanian women make a brighter future

By MARY ANN MCGANN  
SPECIAL TO THE DAILY RECORD

Erika Freund knows how to carry bananas on her head and say "you're as cool as a banana" in Swahili.

"It goes something like this: poa kichizi kama ndizi," she writes in a June 18 blog entry (<http://mikutiproject.blogspot.com>). "I've decided that I dig this phrase."

And while volunteering over the summer in the Tanzanian village of Meru — where overabundant banana trees provide canopies of shade — the 30-year-old graduate student learned how a simple banana tree leaf could be used to better the lives of the village women.

With some free time and a deep commitment and passion for women's issues, Freund had traveled across the globe to work with a small nongovernmental organization, or NGO, called EDU-Care in Meru. There, she was introduced to a group of six women in another village, Machumba, with whom she began the process — with the aid of a translator — of helping them start their own business.

"Women's empowerment, in terms of business, is a very hot topic," says Freund, who is pursuing a master's degree in social work at New York University. "One of the things that's been proven is when you invest in women, the return is very substantial and sustainable for many reasons. Women have these fundamental qualities already because they've been running households — really, there's a management skill for running families and households. So they actually have the skills already; it's just about tweaking (those skills)."

The women — who call themselves Mama Machumba — first began making tortillas, fresh bread and banana lemon jam, with guidance from Freund as to how best to display their products at a local market. As they discussed the idea of using dried banana leaves for decorative purposes, Freund had one of those "ah ha" moments.

"In the process of talking about what it's like to make something presentable, I was sitting there looking at the banana leaves, and I thought, 'Why haven't we been doing anything with these?'" she says.

From that moment, Freund and Mama Machumba

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF ERIKA FREUND

Above: Freund stands with women she worked with while in Tanzania. Below: One of the women begins to sew dried banana leaves to form the foundation of a basket.



STAFF PHOTO: SARAH SIMONIS

Erika Freund spent her summer volunteering in Tanzania, teaching women to create a sustainable business. The women made the bracelet she wears from banana leaves. She is photographed Sept. 27 at Bryan's Luncheonette in Succasna, her uncle's diner, where she has worked off and on for about 15 years.



## Leaves

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took the idea and ran with it. They hired a woman "eight villages down" who taught them how to weave baskets, mats, coasters and bowls out of dried banana leaves. And Mama Machumba was contracted to make banana leaf mats for all the bathrooms in a local tourist lodge.

"Working with these women was an amazing experience — the transformation in their eyes everyday as they learned more, gained more confidence and started to realize they had the power to change their lives," Freund says. "When you are able to witness what hope looks like, it's amazing."

Now back at NYU, Freund, who has worked on and off at her uncle's restaurant, Bryan's Luncheonette in Succasunna, where her grandparents live, has launched a non-profit organization and a for-profit venture.

The nonprofit, The Machumba Foundation, is "committed to promoting and supporting the innovation and creativity of social entrepreneurship for women everywhere," she writes on her LinkedIn profile. She describes her retail business — Mikuti (Swahili for "dried banana leaves") — as a "socially active company" that will handle the sales and marketing of various products made by women's groups around the world. Her company, she says, believes "that women need to support one another, re-



PHOTO COURTESY OF ERIKA FREUND

Freund (left) and Mama Hanz, one of the Mama Machumba women, collect banana leaves.

gardless of geographic location."

"There has been a gradual increase in the social awareness of women's issues, and Mikuti is on board," she continues. "Wherever you go in the world, women are carrying things — whether it be bags, bananas or babies. Mikuti wants to help start

shifting the weight and working toward a more aware, just and equal world."

Freund returned from Tanzania with 100 banana leaf bracelets, woven by Mama Machumba, which she plans to sell for the group. She says she is in touch weekly with the women of Machumba, with

whom she has formed a lasting bond.

"I really thought I'd spend the summer there, and that was it," Freund says. "I had no idea of the relations (that would form) between me and these women. I became deeply attached and deeply inspired."

"I really like the

women," she writes on May 24, one of her first blogs from Africa. "They have been very kind and welcoming. I spent all this past week with them — engaging them, meeting their children, learning about the land they live on and the agriculture products they crop. You would not believe how red the

chili peppers are, or how the rosemary and thyme smells. But my favorite thing is the walk up the last hill, before I reach the women's houses. The banana leaves cover me and the children yell 'mzungu,' which means 'white person' in these sweet, high-pitched voices."