Our Conversation with Davis Muthoka

Davis Muthoka is a Duke senior studying Public Policy and Economics with the Markets and Management Certificate. He founded Friends of Progress, an organization that aims to empower primary school students in rural Kenya, specifically Kitui County, through mentorship and civic education. The mentors are university students in Kenya who work with one or two younger students from their home village to promote education and show these children that people who make it to universities come from similar backgrounds. Currently, Friends of Progress focuses on mentorship but would also like to incorporate tutoring and civic engagement.

**Duke I&E: How did Friends for Progress come about?**
**DM:** I lost my dad, unfortunately, so I was in Kenya for a month. Throughout that time, I found myself, day after day, thinking maybe I could just do something. I was talking to my friends about mentoring kids and being an inspiration to these kids. My friends thought it was a cool idea. That's how it was born. We went around Kenyan universities asking people if they would be willing to participate and assessed interest. We got 2,400 students who said they were willing to participate. After that amazing response from the people, we decided "Let's do this"!

**Duke I&E: How did you choose Duke?**
**DM:** In Kenya, after finishing school you have a gap year waiting to join college. And, within that one year, I was thinking maybe I should apply to college somewhere else. All along I've known I wanted to study abroad. I wanted to experience a different culture and see the way the rest of the world looks at issues. I started looking through the top colleges in the United States. I felt like Duke would offer me this good balance between academics and life outside class. Looking at everything, I thought, "Yeah, Duke is my space." I applied early decision to Duke; I didn't apply to any other college. And I got in.

**Duke I&E: Have you had any experiences or classes at Duke that helped shape Friends of Progress?**
**DM:** One thing was my focus class as a freshmen, Civic Engagement and Leadership with Tony Brown. Friends of Progress is mostly based on what I learned in that class. I learned that if you're going to try and enact change, you have to have a clear target area, a way to assess your progress and a plan to sustain what you are doing. We were required to do a civic engagement project in that class. And, even though my project in the class wasn't related to Friends of Progress, that class has been very helpful in starting Friends of Progress.

**Duke I&E: I hear you have plans to get other Duke students involved with Friends of Progress. Can you tell me about that?**
**DM:** Right now I'm looking for people who are willing to spend their summer in Kenya,
and I'm hoping to get a good number of Duke students who would be willing to come. Because it's still a new organization, there are lots of things to work on. We're also looking for new ideas, including ways we can improve, reach more people and find new resources. We don't have enough money to pay for flights and living costs, but I'm hopeful about finding students and additional funding for students who need it.

**Duke I&E: Besides getting more Duke students and more volunteers involved, what's next for Friends of Progress?**

**DM:** So far we've been able to work with 5 schools, about 1000 students, in Kitui County. We're looking to expand and reach all schools in Kitui County. There are about 380,000 primary school students, and the teacher to pupil ratio is 1:41. With more volunteers, we're hoping to expand to reach all of these 380,000 students. We're working on mentoring and tutoring the students, as well as donations of sanitary towels, books, and other educational materials. Also, we're looking for funding, expanding our network of donors, and building partnerships. We're very interested in partnering with the government of Kenya to address the teacher shortage.

**Duke I&E: Has Friends of Progress changed your plans for after Duke?**

**DM:** I know for sure Friends of Progress is something I want to do and that it will go on whether I'm in Kenya or not. I have three or four people in Kenya who do everything, and I keep up with them to make sure everything is running perfectly. In the short term, I have three options: go to graduate school, work at IBM, or concentrate on Friends of Progress. I've still got some time to decide, but I know in the long-term I will always be working on Friends of Progress in some capacity.

**Duke I&E: Do you have any advice for other undergraduate students who are interested in pursuing their own social ventures?**

**DM:** I wouldn't say it's easy. But, if you can make a difference, go ahead and do it. It's the best feeling to be doing something out there. And you don't have to have all the money to donate; you can donate your time and energy. That's enough to impact somebody's life in a positive way. So what I'm telling people- if you feel like you can make a change, we all have a way we can make a difference in a positive way.