More than a Safari: Chasing the Solpugid

By Stephanie Jeter ’06

Kristie Reddick ’07 said she and Jessica Honaker ’07 plan to return to Africa.
Single-minded.

The entomology graduate student who made the deliberate, dangerous drive cross-country for the chance to be one step closer to her dream, who lived in an “over 55” RV campground, worked at a racecar-themed restaurant and called Bingo to pay the bills so she could volunteer her time in a research lab. This woman who later spent an entire week between classes outside the university president’s office waiting for permission for what some said would never happen.

She is single-minded.

Kristie Reddick ’07 doesn’t believe in floating through life. Adversity may not be her friend, but it is her cohort to the finish line. Only one thing mattered through all of it—going back to Africa to study the spider lookalike solpugid.

A Virginia native, Reddick spent some time in the wild parts of the continent before coming to Texas A&M for graduate work in entomology. She lived in rural Kenya, slept in a hut and worked for the National Museum of Kenya.

“I thought I wanted to join some all-female ranger group,” she said, tightening her fist like a mock fighter. “Defend the rhinos or something like that.” But then she was introduced to the insects of the area. One night from her hut, she heard a shriek. A solpugid—the fuzzy cousin of the spider and scorpion—skittered from the floor of her neighbor’s hut to the wall. “It was huge,” Reddick said, about the size of an orange. Reddick approached it from eye level, and “it reared back, opened its jaw and hissed,” she said. “And, at that moment, bugs were it for me,” she said. “I had seen the elephants, the zebras, the lions, but the bugs in Africa are amazing.”

She left Africa with a new plan: “I don’t care what I study, just let me go back to Kenya and the solpugid.” She was getting her second bachelor’s degree from a college in Pennsylvania at the time, but knew that if she was going to make it back, she’d have to strengthen her focus.

She canvassed the country working in bug labs for no pay. One job took her all the way from Florida to California. It was a long drive made a bit longer with a pit stop at Texas A&M. Reddick wanted to talk to an entomology professor about graduate school. She didn’t know details, just the professor’s name—Dr. Robert Wharton.

“Everyone I told about wanting to go to Africa wanted to list all the reasons why it wasn’t possible,” Reddick said. Africa had a travel warning and some areas experienced extreme, though infrequent, bouts of violence. So when she met with Wharton, she didn’t share her dream right off. And because of that they just weren’t clicking. Too much was at stake, so she came clean.

Reddick wanted to go to Africa, buy a truck and drive into the wild to turn over rocks and collect spiders—the top-ranked safety tips of what not to do in Africa, she said.

But Wharton didn’t discourage. “He just got so excited,” Reddick said. For decades Wharton had been the sole scientist to study the solpugid in Africa. She finally had an ally. Reddick applied to Texas A&M and was accepted.

One of her first classes was entomology photography—a class entomology graduate student Jessica Honaker ’07 was taking the same semester. They had the same camera, the same truck. “We just completely hit it off,” Reddick said.

With her piercings, photography talent and the unique way she looked the world, Reddick guessed Honaker wouldn’t be happy spending the rest of her life in a lab or doing paperwork. She guessed right.

Soon, Reddick’s passion for Africa was a shared one. They approached the goal together. They needed funding, “but it was like we had liability stamped on our foreheads,” Honaker said.

A financial break finally presented itself—but with a stipulation. Reddick applied for and won a Jordan Fellowship scholarship from Texas A&M’s L.T. Jordan Institute for International Awareness. The money was hers; her hard work earned it. But because of the danger Africa posed, she had to have permission from 15 administrators, including then university President Robert Gates. That last scribble was their ticket out of College Station. Honaker was going as a teammate.

The bank knew them as “Solpugid Productions.”

“I took out a small business loan,” Reddick laughed. The first vehicle she ever bought was a 1965 land cruiser off a used car lot in Nairobi. She and Honaker paid with a credit card over the phone. It cost them $7,000.

A man traveling by truck from South Africa to Sweden helped them outfit the vehicle for the wild, Honaker said, and it carried them everywhere. They...
traveled to a Kenyan museum that Honaker and Reddick helped revamp with help from five artistic African orphans and to the slums of Kenya where a single row of open-ground toilets serviced a village of thousands.

Solpugid Productions’ time in Africa was a shared mission between compassionate education and solpugid research. “We went to the schools in these villages in the middle of nowhere,” Reddick said. Students would just show up. “There were kids holding kids, there were kids in the window, kids outside,” she said. Honaker would man the video camera; Reddick would stand in front of the class.

“It all revolves around entomology as a way for us to teach about science and life,” Reddick said. By allowing kids to conquer their fear of holding a cockroach, you teach them they can overcome and conquer everything. And just like insects that are different, people who are different are not always scary either, Reddick said. Hate is abolished.

“One good teacher can really change your life forever,” Reddick said. “If we can hook these kids and show our passion, we can affect things.”

With them through it all was a Kenyan man named Joseph Mugambi. “He is 6’4”, quiet, polite and he has saved our lives so many times,” Reddick said.

They were together the night the hyenas attacked.

It was their eighth night camping in Lake Bogoria National Park. They set up camp like they always did, with Reddick and Honaker in one tent and Mugambi a distance away. High winds kept them from starting a fire, so there was very little light. But they could hear hyenas from a distance.

Around 11 p.m., Reddick and Honaker woke abruptly. “We heard a crash and a scream,” Reddick said. “And not just any scream, a blood-freezing scream. It was the single most terrifying moment of my life.”

Her first thought was “men have come into the camp. They found out that we have camera equipment. They have killed Mugambi and we are next.”

The screaming stopped. Silence. And a lamp clicked on. “By this time we’re sitting back-to-back in the tent. I’ve got the machete and Jess has a boot knife,” Reddick said.

Steps, and finally a shaky voice. It was Mugambi. He said he’d been hit in the head by an animal. While sleeping, he felt something on his chest, so he stood up and screamed to scare it away.

The tent was in shambles. The pole was broken and the fabric ripped, though Mugambi seemed to be in stable condition. Reddick and Honaker put him into the land cruiser and went back to bed.

It wasn’t but a couple of hours later that the girls woke again. “We heard something at 100 feet. Then 50 feet, then 25 feet,” Reddick said. “And then we heard snuffling.”

Reddick and Honaker quickly wrapped their sleeping bags around their arms to protect from any bites, and decided that at the count of three, they were going to fight their way to the truck. They had just heard the story of a hyena pulling a camper out of a tent by his head. Dangerous and bold, hyenas have very powerful jaws.

“We didn’t even get to three,” Reddick said, when two noses pressed in against the tent on opposite sides. Wielding their weapons, Reddick and Honaker forced their way to the truck. They closed the door just fast enough to hear the hyena’s cackle.

Adventure came easy in Africa, and it continues even today with both Honaker and Reddick back in College Station. They are still enjoying research findings from the more than 100 solpugids collected in Africa. Solpugid Productions even continues to grow.

They now are helping to bridge the science gap for American students. Both Honaker and Reddick plan on making Solpugid Productions their life’s work. Out of two Aggies’ adventure comes a life of continued meaning.

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