

Visit with "Mama Obama" in Kenya

June 23, 2010 11:00 AM Laura Horne
newwave@tulane.edu

Laura Murphy, associate professor of international health and development at Tulane, recently met with Sarah Obama, also known as “Mama Obama” or President Barack Obama's paternal grandmother, in her remote west Kenyan village of Kogelo.



Laura Murphy (left), associate professor of international health and development, discusses herbal medicine with Sarah Obama (center), President Barack Obama's paternal grandmother, and Mary Elias of the Trust for Indigenous Culture and Health. (Photo by Betsy Charron)

In the course of working with Kenyan nongovernment organizations on household use of traditional medicine, Murphy and her colleague Mary Elias paid a call to Obama to discuss herbalists and healers. Elias, program coordinator at the [Trust for Indigenous Culture and Health](#), serves as an advocate for natural treatment, using good nutrition and herbal medicine to treat infection.

The 87-year-old Obama is a patron of a community group, managing a small demonstration “kitchen garden” and collaborating with the local host nongovernment organization, [ACE-Africa](#), to support AIDS-affected families and

children. Her own children's organization aims to give hope to orphans and vulnerable children affected by HIV/AIDS and poverty.

Due to HIV/AIDS, droughts and unemployment, life expectancy in West Kenya dropped from 62 to 47 years over the last two decades. As adults of productive age die, in some villages grandparents become caretakers of the children.

Protected by a small military camp and security post, Obama's home receives thousands of visitors from across the world, and, according to Murphy, the villages around her are now known as “America.” In accordance with Kenyan tradition, Barack Obama's father, a government economist who died in 1992 in a car accident, is buried in a grave outside her home.

“It was an honor to meet with Mama Obama and to pay my respects to the grave of Barack Hussein Obama, President Obama's father,” said [Murphy](#).

Murphy's research looks at the implications of the African HIV/AIDS epidemic for rural livelihoods and the social shaping of technologies, such as mobile phones and kitchen gardens.

Laura Horne is communications coordinator in the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine.