

Final Report - Summer 2007

Title: Uganda Storytelling

School: Middlebury College, Middlebury, VT

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1. **Project Summary:**

We worked in three areas of Uganda. First we worked in Kampala, the capital city. We stayed there from July 6th to July 27th, and worked with children in two organizations - Focus, an after-school program for kids in the slums of Mulago; Cornerstone, a house for street children - and with children at Bishop's Secondary School in Mulago (an area right outside of Kampala). Then we worked in Lyantonde (down south) for about two weeks with an organization called PARDI, an orphanage/outreach program for AIDS orphans. Then we went up north to Gulu for the last three weeks of our project, staying at the Gulu Cornerstone house and working with the children there. We left Gulu on August 28th.

The children we worked with came from a variety of backgrounds - some of them were previous street children or child soldiers, some of them came from fairly wealthy families, some of them had spent years working for school fees, or out of school completely... we worked with kids from the city, kids from the slums, kids from rural areas, and kids who had grown up in IDP camps or war zones. In short, we worked with kids from many, many different areas, (and therefore, of course, kids of many different tribes) and with many different life experiences. We loved them all.

We received funding from Projects for Peace (covering our entire project excluding plane tickets), and then a further 5 thousand dollars from two Middlebury Alumni, Jack Kruesi and Starr Weekes.

From its conception, the goals of our project in terms of spreading peace were threefold. Firstly, through recording radio narratives, we hoped to provide an inspiring, empowering experience for the children that we worked with; Secondly, we hoped to assuage misconceptions proliferated by an historic North-South divide by contributing to a web of understanding between peoples in Uganda through the airing and sharing of stories; and third, we hoped to create international understanding through sharing those same stories in countries abroad.

2. **Project Results:**

Our goals transitioned as our project evolved in Uganda. As our project progressed, and as we discovered both the importance and the necessity of establishing a trust between the people we were working with, we found that it was the first goal which was the most tangible - where we could physically see the effects of our work.

Having little control over many aspects of these children's future, and having no guarantee that our national or international goals would ever tangibly affect them, it became very, very important to us that the story-telling process was an immensely rewarding experience for each and every child. Because of this new emphasis, we lengthened the period of getting to know children before we did recorded story-telling with them, and we tweaked certain aspects of our method of interview to insure that each child felt utterly empowered as the sole creator of their story, and to ensure that the child understood that no matter what the story content, no matter what the style or length of telling, their story is significant merely because it is their words, their experience, and their life.

As far as accomplishing the second goal, we had two radio airings, one in the south in Kampala and one up north in Gulu. Both were successful in that they shared several of the stories that we had collected and received positive feedback from listeners, but the ultimate impact of these shows was extremely difficult to gauge.

Upon arriving in Uganda, almost from the project's outset, we found ourselves questioning the effectiveness of our project in spreading peace at this second level. Who would listen to these stories? And if they did listen, would they retain anything? In addition, while there is an expanding initiative to promote citizen narratives in different areas of Uganda, the idea of citizen stories as we were promoting was in large part a foreign concept to Ugandans. Many people whom we worked with found the premise of our project compelling, but there were also several individuals who questioned the utility of our idea. Any misgivings we had regarding airing our stories only seemed to reconfirm the importance of our first tier of goals, that of the individual. If we make a difference in the lives of the 70-80 or so children we worked with over our two-month stay - that in itself is a feat.

The third level of our project, that of international promotion, is still underway. We are extremely excited about this phase of the project as it will be a chance to not only inform people internationally about the

situation in Northern Uganda but also provide listeners a glimpse into the lives of children and citizens from a different country, culture, background. We hope that listeners will recognize the differences between the lives of the Ugandans we interviewed and their own lives but also recognize similarities – similar values – be it in education, faith, or family.

3. Implications: What are the project's implications for peace? What are the future prospects for the project? What have you learned?

Thankfully, it looks like a lasting peace will be achieved in northern Uganda within the next years. But this peace is only a lack of conflict, an end to war. Our project looked at peace as not only a cessation of conflict, but also as a presence of understanding, love, and connection between peoples. And Uganda is still wracked by prejudice in so many ways. Did our project change this, in any measurable fashion?

Well, in southern Baganda still refer to the Acholi from the North, on occasion, as lazy alcoholics. Others asked us why we would ever consider venturing northward. Yet at the same time many Acholi still believe that the Baganda down south would sooner have them dead than alive –they feel betrayed by their government and marginalized by the world at large.

But we didn't really think we could change all that in one summer.

One night in Gulu, we took out our laptop to play the kids a few stories. We sat the laptop down on a bright blue plastic chair outside the house, and the Cornerstone kids crowded around, boys and girls, ages 5 to 19, interests varying from football to politics to American cars. We played them stories from Kampala and Lyantonde, and watched as the children in Gulu hovered in a hushed circle as they listened.

These kids had never been to Kampala or to Lyantonde. Innocent, up north, may not have had any idea what Joanita, in Kampala, looked like. Sam may not have had any idea where Evelyn lived, or how Brian dresses. But we could see, watching their faces, that these kids felt a connection to the kids in Kampala and Lyantonde, purely through hearing their voices, through their words and their experiences and their stories. Maybe one day Innocent, or Joanita, or Sam, or Jackie, will make different choices, or use different words, or take a different course of action when confronted with somebody radically different than themselves, because one day, surrounded by children and sky and red dirt and green maize, they connected to another human completely different than themselves, but also completely the same.

But this process of sharing stories is only just beginning. Our project is far from finished. While in Uganda we collected heaps of audio, and we still have a lot to work with. We will continue to promote stories through the fall. Aylie will be pursuing an independent study editing and promoting pieces with Vijay and Leah also contributing. Leah hopes to return to Uganda during January to promote more of our finished stories on additional radio stations, and, funding pending, there is talk of having a conference in the North of Uganda this coming summer in which all of the children we worked with can come together to participate in an educational, group-activity oriented retreat, as a culmination of our project.

At times we worried that the goals of our project were too sweeping, that our grant money could have been better spent on school fees, or constructing a well – providing something tangible for the communities we were working with. Yet ultimately, the impact we had on individuals, the relationships we developed and will continue to foster, are small acts of peace that will have lasting effects.

One of the most rewarding experiences of our project was recording a story with Joanita, a girl at the Cornerstone house in Kampala. Halfway through her story about her mother, she began to cry. Right away, we told her that she could stop – she didn't have to talk about anything sad if she didn't want to. But Joanita told us that no, it was important for her to tell this story. This story was so deep inside her, she said, that it was something she carried always, and rarely chose to speak about. But it was necessary to tell it sometimes – and through sharing, she said, she would learn to leave the pain behind, and other people could learn from her life, from her choices and experiences and trials and joys. She wanted to share her story because through sharing she would heal, but also because through sharing she could reach out to others, touch their lives without ever seeing their faces, and perhaps help them through their own trials, their own choices, their own pain.

Hearing Joanita tell us this, in her tilting Ugandan English, we realized we must be doing something right. If this girl, who has survived some much more than we have in my life, who has reached a level of wisdom so far beyond her sixteen years, and who understands herself and her trials and the trails of the people so much better than we ever could... if this girl believes it is important to share her story with the rest of this country and the rest of the world, then we must be on the right track. We might not be making headlines or saving lives or manipulating large-scale, international affairs. But if Joanita feels that it is important to tell her story,

not only as a healing process for herself but to share with the world at large, then this project has succeeded, and we have made a difference.

