

Voices that Need to Be Heard and Stories that Need to be Told

San Domenico students travel to Uganda to collect oral histories

By Rita Hu '13

KONY 2012, Idi Amin, and Lake Victoria are probably almost all that the most of us know about Uganda, the country known as the “Pearl of Africa”. Even though the news often emphasizes conflicts between tribes in Uganda, through the process of collecting oral histories the San Domenico students who travelled to the country found that the Uganda Rural Development Training (URDT) program focuses more on peace education and women’s empowerment.

One of the main objectives of the service-learning trip to Uganda was to collect oral histories from the local Ugandans. Oral history is different from written history—generally through recorded interviews—gives voice to people who are struggling in the center of social issues.

Kristen Levine, Social Justice teacher and co-coordinator of the service-learning trip to Uganda, emphasized the importance of documenting the stories of the girls at URDT. “What they are doing at URDT is social justice,” said Levine. “They are educating the leaders and peacemakers for the future. This is also why we need to collect oral history because what the local people are experiencing is so different than the outside assumes—it is the people’s history.”

During our meeting with the school’s Cultural Club, the teacher



Seniors Rita Hu and Hannah Hermansen conducting interviews with Mukamutara and Muteli for their oral history collection project.

and students shared Ugandan traditional food, clothes, dances and tribes. The club’s director, Ms. Kayesu, emphasized the importance of coexistence and tolerance. “There are no bad tribes,” Kayesu explained. “We should respect their unique traditions.”

Two 17-year-old girls were eager to share their experience, as the daughters of refugees who had fled the genocide in Rwanda in the mid-1990s. Both girls—Mukamutara, whose name means “born in time of war” and Muteteli, whose name means “Dainty”—shared their memories of how their families started all over in Uganda. They recalled the difficulty of establishing a “real” home, because their parents had no money to even find materials to build a hut. Yet they expressed no hatred, no resentment. Both

expressed goals of becoming college professors and a readiness to move forward.

Later that evening, senior Hannah Hermansen explained how the process of collecting oral histories had inspired and informed her. “I am really impressed by what all the girls are learning here,” said Hermansen. “It is so different than what I have heard from the news because before I came here all I knew was KONY 2012.”



“I am so glad that we heard the voices of the local people so we can go back and share with others,” she added.

Overall, the service-learning trip to Uganda provided so much more than a simple service-learning experience. The Cultural Club’s emphasis in respect of various cultures proves the URDT’s critical approach toward peace education, and the collection of oral histories—empowering those in need to tell their stories—is reflective of San Domenico’s mission.

Olivia Ayanruoh Reflects on Identity and her Journey to Africa

By Olivia Ayanruoh '13

African culture and customs have been constantly present in my life since I was born. My dad was born and raised in Nigeria and he has always shared stories and traditions with me, using mythology and wisdom to teach manners and hospitality. In recent years, I have volunteered regularly at the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco learning how African cultures have spread into North America. So when the San Domenico service-learning trip to Uganda presented itself last fall, I knew that it would be a great opportunity for me to learn more.

Before the trip, however, I had my own reservations about travelling to Africa. It wasn't the prospect of witnessing extreme poverty or an undeveloped healthcare system that were most concerning, but rather how the girls at the Uganda Rural Development Training (URDT) school would receive me—an African-American young woman from the United States.



Olivia Ayanruoh (right) with Oliver Tuhairwe, Student Body President and Head Prefect at URDT.

Some of the most personally touching and rewarding moments came during a workshop about oral history and the sharing of stories. When the students from San Domenico and URDT had the opportunity to conduct cross-cultural interviews, the interactions proved beneficial to everyone involved. In a way, I felt honored that the girls who I interviewed—and who had just met me—trusted me enough to document and share stories and experiences from their childhood and the personal aspects of their lives. I spoke with another girl who had lost both of her parents when she was a young child, when rebels had come into her village and killed them. Many of girls who study at URDT had experienced similarly horrific tragedies, but I would not have known from their kindness.

The school's focus on female entrepreneurship not only taught me about business, but the importance of leadership in the African community. These girls act as change agents not only in their country, but role models for women around the world. They are the poorest of the poor in Uganda, and they usually come from otherwise repressive environments like villages with no schools, where they could be married off when they hit puberty. A lot of young women contract AIDS, and, without education, they don't know how to stand up for themselves. The school teaches them independence and skills like how to get up in front of people, and say what they believe. They become comfortable in themselves and go back to their villages and say what's wrong.

When I returned home after two weeks and settled back into my normal routine, I began feeling discouraged, almost ashamed. I felt that I hadn't fully taken advantage of my opportunities and circumstances. I am a young woman—African-American *and* Nigerian-American—who has been blessed growing up with resources in a country that paved the way for women to be successful. My dad's upbringing in Nigeria was so similar to the lives of these girls in Uganda that I have realized the importance of talking to him more, and I want to learn more stories.

Sometimes, I wonder why I am allowed to live a much more privileged life in comparison. It wasn't until reflecting back on my summer that I realized that maybe we aren't so different after all. Although in dissimilar locations, the Ugandan girls and I are working to achieve the same goal. If we are educated, then we are able to educate. Now, I have a whole different community in another part of the world who motivate and inspire me to be the best I can. I want to go back and maybe help out another school, in whatever way I can. They have helped me to gain a better understanding of my identity, and I hope to return the love.

Olivia Ayanruoh is a senior at San Domenico, where she serves as Student Body President and is active in several other activities. She received the Julie Davis Butler service award during the 2011-2012 school year, and she plans to study International Relations in college.



Olivia Ayanruoh on the bank of the Nile River at Murchison Falls National Park and Wildlife Preserve in Uganda.

My worries were soon put to rest, as I was welcomed with open arms and pleasantly surprised and curious smiles. Throughout my time in Uganda, there were many interesting encounters with people from different tribes, classes, and towns. In several cases, some Ugandans didn't understand how I *looked* like them, yet lived in America. I came face-to-face with the reality and complexity of my identity, and how it made me feel connected to the Ugandans I met. I felt connected in an African sense. I am American, but my African heritage allowed me to have a deeper connection. I recognized their experiences as similar to those of my father and a sense of pride came over me.

KONY 2012: Seeking Truth and Understanding Beyond the Legacy

By Sasha Nagler '13

Last spring, a thirty-minute viral video by the San Diego-based NGO *Invisible Children* stunned the world. The *KONY 2012* film campaign hit a nerve in viewers, especially youth, causing their inner humanitarian spirit to come alive. But, were they fed factual material? Traveling to Uganda and speaking to civilians who were directly affected by the violence gave eight San Domenico students and their teachers the truth behind the complexity of warlord and fugitive Joseph Kony—and his lingering legacy.



Vanessa Luna and Sasha Nagler with Beatrice Arach, a survivor of the Lord's Resistance Army led by the infamous fugitive warlord Joseph Kony.

Toward the end of the two-week journey through Uganda, the group met with Beatrice Arach, coordinator of the Northern Uganda Agricultural Livelihoods Recovery Programme, and a survivor of abduction by Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).

As we ate a lavish dinner on a terrace overlooking the bustling capital, Kampala, it was difficult to imagine any sort of atrocity occurring in this country. However, not too far away, in war-torn northern Uganda, people have scarcely known peace for twenty years. Instead, suffering while they watch the security, economy, and morality of their homeland erode year after year.



Thatched huts like these still house thousands of Ugandan civilians displaced by violence from all sides in the regional conflict.

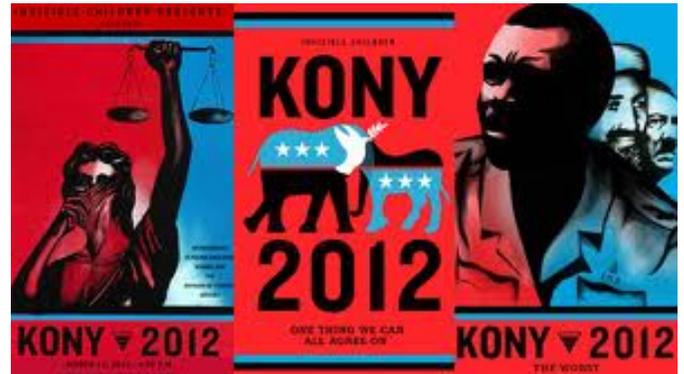
As we ate together, Arach explained the psychological reason Kony was able to carry out his spiritual war. Kony guided the LRA—abducting child soldiers into its forces—with a kind of apocalyptic mysticism grounded in the Bible. She told stories of how Kony promised the boys that they were protected by invisible bulletproof vests given by God. Ultimately, if the boys were killed, it was not the bullet that did them in, but rather their own carelessness. Kony was able to convince his followers that his intentions were for the good of the country, and Arach even compared him to Hitler.

Then, we reached the topic of the film, *KONY 2012*. We had both seen the video and agreed it failed to include the shocking reality that 1.7 million northern Ugandans were

internally displaced by the war and forced to live in harsh and often desperate conditions in camps, and that Joseph Kony himself is no longer in Uganda.

Arach explained that many, if not all, of those living in these camps were forcibly removed from their villages by the official Ugandan army in order to distinguish the civilians from Joseph Kony's rebel righters. I imagined elders, mothers, and children, stripped from their

villages and farms, and then taken to camps where hundreds of identical huts were squeezed together. For almost fifteen years, thousands of Ugandan civilians languished in these camps. The new generation—born and raised in these conditions—knows no life outside of the grass huts and dirt borders protected by soldiers. Arach emphasized how the culture of Uganda was threatened, and how these civilians had been dehumanized, stripped of their human dignity.



Last spring's *KONY 2012* campaign compared warlord Joseph Kony to Osama bin Laden and Adolf Hitler. The effort has been accused of oversimplifying and even misrepresenting the conflict in northern Uganda.

Ultimately, what my peers and I took away from this experience with Arach was a better understanding of the root causes of the conflict and the context of Joseph Kony and the LRA's legacy. "I felt like there was so much more that we didn't see," said senior Vanessa Luna. "For example, the IDP camps and what Uganda was doing to recover from Kony's atrocities—the video didn't show a developing, strong country; it made Ugandans appear weak and helpless."

The *KONY 2012* video gave viewers a generic run-down; it could not begin to present the indescribable damage that the livelihood, culture, and future of the northerners have suffered. I, along with my fellow peers, have learned to not immediately jump on the bandwagon and do what the social "norm" says. Instead, research and learn the facts before making pre-conceived judgments on other cultures, people, and world events.

San Domenico Students bring the 'Painting Party' to rural Uganda

By Lily Marks '13

On the fifth day of service at Uganda Rural Development Training (URDT) School—a girls' educational institute committed to improving the lives of Ugandans through empowerment of women and girls—our group ventured outside the Kibaale District of western Uganda to a URDT sister school Kanywamiyaga two hours away.

Accompanied by a half-dozen URDT students our own age, we first introduced ourselves to the teachers and students of the school

and then broke open the buckets of paint, rollers, and paintbrushes. The school consisted of four classrooms, but there was only enough funding to paint three. The walls had actually *never* been painted, and aside from the blackboard in each room, they were just bare cement or even mud.

For those of us used to American schools, in which almost every classroom is brightly painted and colorfully decorated, this was surprising and unsettling. As paint is much more expensive and rare in



Students from San Domenico and Uganda Rural Development Training school gearing up to paint the village school in Kanywamiyaga, Uganda.

Uganda, vibrant classrooms are a luxury, certainly not an expectation. This further shaped our appreciation for what we have, and reminded us not to take *anything* for granted.

We all began in the first classroom, but it wasn't long before the young local students of the sister school picked up paintbrushes and joined us in our efforts throughout the school. And, as soon as Biology teacher and co-coordinator Hilary Staples blasted dance music from her portable iPad speakers, the "painting

party" truly began.

Students crowded around the speakers, paintbrushes in hand, to show off their best dance moves and watch others. One of the most memorable moments was watching teachers and students—young and old—as they all danced the "Macarena".

Painting the classrooms was unlike anything we had previously done on the trip, and we all agreed that it was certainly a fun note at the end of our week of service at URDT. "I feel I got much more from that day than they will ever have gotten from me," said senior Amber Garfinkle. "For kids who have so little, they really have more than most people, because they have spirit."

"That is a day that will forever stand out in my memory," Garfinkle added.

Senior Vanessa Luna was especially impressed by the hard work and enthusiasm of the girls from URDT. "The girls were happy to be giving back to their community, and spread that happiness to us," said Luna. "I've never met people so eager to help out, and have fun as they do it."



San Domenico students and teachers with the administrators and faculty of the Uganda Rural Development Training (URDT) school.

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