

Going the Distance

Student leaders lend a hand in Uganda

By Chelsea Greenwood, interim editor

Sure, we've all seen the commercials: African boys and girls standing in tattered rags with flies buzzing around them. Ramshackle huts in the background lean at impossible angles while filthy streams soak the villages. As these children peer at the camera, the only things larger than their imploring eyes seem to be their distended bellies. Sure, we've all seen these kids before. But have you ever heard them?

"Our voices are never heard," says James Omirambe, a 12-year-old from Zone B in Namuwongo, Uganda. "Nobody ever listens, because they don't dare come to Namuwongo. Nobody can stand the smell from the sewage and from the overflowing toilets."

True, scarcely did an outsider dare go to Namuwongo for years. That is, until July 2003 when a delegation of young leaders from the **University of Texas—Austin** and the **University of Michigan** trekked to the village.

The group's organizer and director, Jeremy Goldberg, had heard about the war waging in Uganda and knew that its people needed help. So, the group traveled to large cities and rural villages alike, surveying the status of sanitation and nutrition. Finally, they reached Namuwongo. The Americans interacted with the townspeople and learned that many were refugees from the north enduring deplorable conditions in their new homes.

After that first visit, Goldberg decided it was time for change. With the help of his friend Joseph Bagambaki Kaliisa, he created the Project Namuwongo: Zone B organization to bring relief to the village. "I wanted to provide an opportunity for tangible change to the Ugandan community," Goldberg says.

Now, the organization has sent more than 20 Student Global Ambassadors from nationwide colleges to lend a hand in Namuwongo. In addition to helping townspeople with their educational and medical needs, the students also conduct research, write theses, and produce films. Furthermore, many students help spread awareness through the vivid photographs and articles that they create to document the conditions in Namuwongo.

"I kept a journal of my thoughts about what we did each day," says Kara Smith, president of the PNZB Student Global Ambassadors chapter at the **University of Maryland—College Park**.

Because of a civil war in northern Uganda that has been waged since 1986, the majority of the people in the Zone B

sector of Namuwongo are considered "internally displaced people." More than half of the town's population is women and children. The widespread violence forced them to leave their families and homes, and they now live on the brink of starvation in unsanitary "wattle-houses."

"When strong rains or winds come through, these houses have difficulty standing still," Goldberg says. "So, they wattle, if they are able to remain standing at all."

Furthermore, as is the case throughout Africa, the town suffers under the weight of an AIDS epidemic. Through fund-raising efforts back in the United States, PNZB volunteers have been equipped with more than \$30,000 in medical supplies to treat victims.

Because of the widespread effects of AIDS, most Ugandan schools are in serious need of teachers. But, PNZB has recently provided a rare luxury for a lucky few in Namuwongo. Through its "Access to Education" program, 20 youths were sent to school in January 2005. Also, the "Bare Feet Shoe Collection Program" has distributed more than 2,000 pairs of shoes, 200 of which were donated by Nike.

"All we need are simple things: pens, pencils, paper, and books," says Betty Kemigisho, a 14-year-old Namuwongo native.

Back in the States, the fund raising, recruitment, and awareness campaigns carry on at a whirlwind pace. Organization members and former Student Global Ambassadors regularly team up to visit civic conferences and college campuses. "We've formed partnerships with several organizations and leaders on Capitol Hill and in the diplomatic community," Goldberg says.

One of the project's most touching campaigns is its photography exhibition, "One World, One Future: The Photography of Ugandan Youth." In 2004, student volunteers distributed 75 disposable cameras to the youth in Namuwongo. Once they had snapped away all the film, the children returned the cameras and Kodak created an exhibit using enlarged pictures. The SNAP Foundation program aims to raise awareness by showing exhibit onlookers a glimpse of life in Namuwongo through the eyes of a child. "We're looking to take this exhibit to as many locations across the country as possible," Goldberg says. "And that includes a display in town so that the community can view it."

Even while living in squalor and dealing with disease and malnutrition, the people of Namuwongo have hope. Their strong family bonds are evident throughout the town, as extended family members are treated as closely as brothers and sisters, Goldberg says. "Family is at the very core of their interest and life," he says. "The people want to tell you about their life and family."

Furthermore, the natives welcome the American volunteers into their homes as if they were family themselves. Most of the children would sing and dance to welcome the "mzungu" or "white people," Smith says. "The people in Uganda are the most welcoming and generous people I have ever met in my life," she says.

But, despite all the work that the students dedicate to the town, many claim that they invariably receive more from Namuwongo than they had ever imagined possible. "I met incredible people who taught me about appreciating life and how privileged I am," Smith says. "Seeing people every day who have nothing but are the first to offer you all they have was remarkable." 🐾

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A Welcome Visitor: University of Maryland-College Park student Kara Smith stands among the children of Namuwongo that she met as a Student Global Ambassador. The children sang and danced when volunteers arrived.



COURTESY KARA SMITH