



MOELLER

MAGAZINE

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SECTION: FEATURE

Calling for Justice

Students Shine Light on ‘Invisible Children’

Although it’s been described as one of the biggest scandals of our time by the United Nations head of disaster relief, Jan Egeland, the world seems largely unaware of what is happening in northern Uganda. Even worse, it’s happening to children.

“I’ve been in 100 countries. I’ve been working with human rights, peace, and humanitarian problems for 25 years. I was shocked to my bones, seeing what happened in Uganda,” says Egeland. “For me, this is one of the biggest scandals of our time and generation.” (*Dateline NBC*, 8-22-05)

The word “scandal” is a mild characterization of this crisis. Civil war has raged in Uganda for two decades with little attention from the outside world. The government’s forces, known as the Ugandan People’s Defense Forces (UPDF), have been in constant conflict with a rebel paramilitary group called the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). This rebel army is led by Joseph Kony, a man who believes he is Christ reincarnated. Because Kony has no popular support, he kidnaps children to do the killing – or be killed. As a result, more than 30,000 children in northern Uganda under the age of 13 have been stolen from their families and forced to become soldiers, living a nightmare they cannot comprehend and seems to have no end. These child guerillas have been forced to torch villages, kill villagers, and steal other children. The cycle continues. And they become invisible. The LRA denies they exist, keeping no records of their numbers or ages and fighting this war out of the public’s eye. A recent U.N. report estimated that nearly 80% of the 30,000 LRA conscripts are children.

To avoid kidnapping, literally tens of thousands of children in northern Uganda also become invisible members of their villages, traveling barefoot miles to the nearest town, seeking a sanctuary where rebels are less likely to attack. They carry little and sleep under verandas or on the concrete floors of schools, hospitals, or in any other safe shelter they can find. They lie side by side, finding some comfort until the sun rises. Then they walk the long miles home.

But now there is hope. Recently, their story is being broadcast across the nation, especially thanks to three college students, Jason Russell, Bobby Bailey, and Laren Poole. These students traveled to Africa in 2003 to document the crisis in Sudan and found themselves stranded in northern Uganda. While there, after witnessing first hand the children’s plight, they redirected their crusade to record the children’s tragedy on film, then carried their voices back to America. The following year the students completed their work, entitling it *Invisible Children: Rough Cut*, aptly named for its raw and emotional expression of the children’s stories. They shared this film with friends, family, high schools, colleges, and religious institutions, initiating a strong grassroots effort to end this crisis. The media is slowly catching on, with CNN and Oprah recently featuring the film makers and their cause. “I’m telling you, there’s a holocaust going on right now,” said Oprah (April 21, 2006).

Several Moeller students learned about the Ugandan crisis last fall when they attended the Mayerson Leadership Conference and viewed the film. "After seeing the movie, how could you not feel compelled to do something for these children?" said Mark Motz '06.

Fellow classmate, Scott Wernery '06, agreed. "We live in the greatest country in the world and have more freedoms than anyone else. Why should we just sit back and watch the rest of the world try to survive on their own when we can help them?" he said. "After viewing this movie, I was so full of emotions and ideas that I wanted to share with others this unknown story."

So the Moeller crusade for the Ugandan children began. Under the passionate leadership of math teacher Connie Ring, the students formed a committee and have worked all year to help shine their light on the dark world of these "invisible children." To raise awareness, they've shown the movie to every student and hosted a community dinner and film screening. To put pressure on our government leaders, they organized a letter-writing campaign, which included a signed petition with ___ signatures urging our leaders in Washington to intervene for peace. To raise funds, they collected pocket change from the Moeller students, faculty, and staff after an Invisible Children (IC) assembly and the sold IC t-shirts and bracelets, raising over \$2000. On April 29, ten Moeller students, along with 130 other people from around Cincinnati, participated in IC's Global Night Commute, joining in solidarity with the children who walk miles every night to save their lives. And this is just the beginning...

Next year, the Moeller IC leaders plan to "hit the road," hosting film screenings at local high schools and colleges. "They want to help other (students) get involved," said Ring. "Then, with those contacts, they want to plan an IC overnight event at Moeller. They also want to get sponsorships from local companies to raise funds for a visit to Uganda next summer. My goals are to help the boys reach their goals. With their level of commitment, I don't think that will be hard to do!"

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SIDEBAR

Invisible Children Inc. (IC) is a non-profit organization dedicated to securing resources that will help provide health, safety, and education for the children of northern Uganda. IC is doing much to continue to raise awareness, such as sponsoring the Invisible Children RV Tour, which consists of groups of college students touring the country in RVs to highlight the plight of the Ugandan children. The organization is also working to release a new feature-length film in theaters world wide. However, the leaders of Invisible Children believe that their most important work is in the area of education. It takes about \$50 for one Ugandan child to stay in an IC boarding school (which gives the child an education, food, shelter, and medical attention) for one month. To help generate more funds, they have initiated a bracelet campaign. This campaign involves selling colorful, hand-made bracelets made by the Ugandan people from the country's reed and recycled wire, and with each bracelet the donor receives a short film told about one of Uganda's invisible children. All proceeds are funneled back to the country and the Invisible Children Education Program. So far, IC has raised half a million dollars. (To purchase a bracelet, contact CRing@Moeller.org or go directly to IC's website, www.invisiblechildren.org. The original movie, *Invisible Children: Rough Cut*, is also available.)

Note: Take picture of bracelet/videos...

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QUOTES

"Since Invisible Children is totally a grassroots organization, we who are involved know the hard work and funds go directly to the kids in Uganda. That's important to me. Mostly, though, watching the

transformation that has occurred in our boys is by far the best part of being involved. Honestly, this whole experience is probably one of the best I've ever had."
Connie Ring, Advisor

"I have changed from this experience. Who wouldn't? I know I am making a difference somewhere in the world."
Andy Lehn '08

"The difference between changing the world and not changing the world is choice. And you can make that choice today."
Darren Burrdett, College Student, Invisible Children RV Tour

"To make a difference, you have to be involved yourself. There's power in numbers. You can change what's going on."
Michelle Larson, College Student, Invisible Children RV Tour

"If you had known about the holocaust, would you have done something?"
Washington Congressman
(Name? Include?)

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CAPTIONS

CAPTION: Senior Mark Motz '06 extends an invitation to Congressman Boehner '68 to attend the community film screening of *Invisible Children: Rough Cut*.

CAPTION: Invisible Children Leadership (from left): On the floor – Scott Carroll '07, Brian Harmeyer '06, Will Tardio '07, Connie Ring (mentor), and Aaron Bushman '06; 1st row standing – Michelle Larson (age 24, IC RV Team), Joe Bello (age 18, IC RV Team), Scott Wernery '06, Scott Alexander '06, JP Atlhaus '06, Ben Merritt '06, and Sarah Shreves (age 19, RV Team); 2nd row standing – Zach Opatken '06, Michael Franchi '06, Brian Stiens '07, Andy Lehn '08, Mark Motz '06, and Darren Burrdett (age 20, IC RV Team). Members of the Moeller IC Committee not pictured: Chris Damon '08 and J. Paquette '08.

CAPTION: The Midwest Invisible Children RV Tour arrived at Moeller on April 21 for an all-school assembly. "The assembly was great, and it was a pleasure to work with the (college) students," said Will Tardio '07. Senior Zach Opatken said the college students helped with unanswered questions: "... (B)y having the whole school already see the film, (they) gave us a follow up and answered a lot of questions... about what we can do to help."

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