

The Lessons of Sister Rosemary



A Ugandan nun became an unlikely catalyst for OU students to engage communities rebuilding from the devastation of civil war.

BY ANNE BARAJAS HARP

Cecilia Herrera's life changed sometime during the three weeks she spent in Northern Uganda. Whether it was when a woman abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army confessed she'd been shunned by family for giving birth to her captor's child, or when another woman asked the University of Oklahoma senior if she also carried children on her back while walking miles to gather water, Herrera couldn't say.

OU alumnus Reggie Whitten can say exactly when his life changed – twice – and when he realized the potential for the OU Northern Uganda Collaborative Learning Partnership, which brings students from contrasting disciplines together to benefit communities half a world away.

Whitten was reeling from the 2002 death of his son, Brandon, when he traveled to Northern Uganda and met Sister Rosemary Nyirumbe. He became fascinated with the diminutive nun who openly defied guerilla leader Joseph Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army and saved hundreds of lives from civil war by providing sanctuary at her convent's practical training center, St. Monica's Tailoring School for Girls.

"There were gruesome atrocities in Uganda – we don't even know exactly how many were killed because they don't have records on it," says Whitten. "This little, short nun was standing up to Kony. It's a miracle he didn't kill her."

Whitten learned that Kony's army kidnapped at least 20,000 children to train as soldiers. Among the worst victims were girls forced to become "wives" to Kony's officers. When the war ended in 2005 the young women tried to return to their families, often with children borne during captivity. They were rejected as traitors and left homeless, their children considered outcasts.

Students and faculty experience the reality of walking miles to collect water by following a Ugandan woman during her daily routine.

Nyirumbe responded with free housing and training programs in sewing, cooking and hairdressing for



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OU students with members of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus at St. Monica's in Gulu, Northern Uganda.

any woman returning from captivity. "Sister Rosemary gave these girls hope. They were convinced they were trash," says Whitten, who later formed the Pros for Africa Foundation and co-wrote and produced both a book and documentary on Nyirumbe titled *Sewing Hope*. "She convinced them they were beautiful and sewed these shattered lives together."

Still, there was a nearly bottomless well of post-war issues in Northern Uganda. And whenever a need arose at St. Monica's, Whitten's thoughts turned to the creative power of his alma mater.

Rising from a packed crowd in OU's darkened Meacham Auditorium this past March, a woman faces Sister Rosemary Nyirumbe and asks sincerely, "How can we help you?"

Nyirumbe allows a brief, incandescent smile before leaning into the microphone with a serious question of her own: "Can you come to Uganda?" Laughter splits the room, then she shrugs and asks again simply, "Can you come to Uganda?"

Nyirumbe and Whitten have asked that question many times of OU faculty, staff and students. David Ross Boyd Professor of Medicine Dan O'Donoghue was the first to agree in 2012 and established yearly shadowing experiences for students at the Gulu University College of Medicine. The OU College of Law followed, with annual student trips to Uganda tackling such issues as post-war land disputes.



Pros for Africa

"Sister Rosemary and I have a vision of throwing out seeds and having them turn into beautiful trees," Reggie Whitten says of his work to bring the people of Northern Uganda together with OU.

Then, in 2014, Nyirumbe and Whitten were invited to present to a new group facilitated by OU College of International Studies Dean Suzette Grillo. Representatives of Business, Engineering, Architecture and Education were working to envision interdisciplinary collaboration and study-abroad opportunities for students. They had met their match in Whitten and Nyirumbe.

"What began as, 'How do we create a unique, interdisciplinary experience for study abroad?' morphed into, 'OU has a real opportunity to engage the communities of Northern Uganda in important ways,'" recalls John Harris, assistant professor of Regional and City Planning in OU's College of Architecture.

With support from Pros for Africa, representatives of the faculty group traveled to Gulu in June 2015 to discover how OU could help. They returned with a long wish list from Nyirumbe and a mission: form a cooperative learning partnership that brings interdisciplinary teams of students and faculty to work alongside and learn from Ugandans several times each

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Left - Jim Chamberlain, co-director of OU's WaTER Center, and student Zihao Chen (right) visit a water pump near St. Monica's. Ugandan women are known to stand in line for hours up to twice a day to gather water.

Below left - OU students and faculty help women once victimized by the Lord's Resistance Army to document their experiences. "They weren't crying, so we wouldn't," says OU Professor Lupe Davidson.

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learning to read and write in English, Uganda's official language. Faculty and graduate students from OU's Jeannine Rainbolt College of Education accepted the complex task of creating an accelerated primary-school curriculum for adult learners to be taught by volunteer teachers in Gulu and at a satellite campus an hour away in Atiak.

When Sally Beach, OU professor of Instructional Leadership and Academic Curriculum, heard what her colleagues had agreed to, she said her first response was stunned disbelief. "I thought, 'How can you do that? You can't!'"

But once Beach met the women at St. Monica's, she understood. She now heads the education curriculum project and returns to Gulu several times each year; like most OU faculty, she travels largely at her own expense.

"Ethically, how could you not help and support a group of people who have been marginalized, brutalized and disenfranchised?" she asks. "They have many of the same hopes and dreams as any other woman for their children's health and safety. I have the utmost respect for them. The fact that they are saying, 'I don't have enough education,' makes them the most important people in the whole equation and incredibly courageous."

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year. The first projects would focus on education, water, revenue and justice. Schooling for the 240 women at St. Monica's was the top priority.

"I began to see how important education was to liberating these women from mental slavery, from thinking that they are nobody," Nyirumbe explained to the OU audience in March. "I realized the importance of education was to give these women a voice, to let them tell the world exactly what they have been through, how they have suffered and how their suffering is leading them to the next step."

While St. Monica's teaches practical skills, many of the women are severely limited because captivity robbed them of



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OU students conducted a study of St. Monica’s Corner Restaurant that since has helped to increase customer traffic. Here, Maggie White (top row, left), Lucy Mahaffey, Ariana DePlaza, Heather Gallant and Zihao Chen (bottom row) take a moment to pose with the restaurant’s manager, Sandra (second from right).

Maggie White can’t turn on a faucet without thinking about Uganda.

“You ask a Ugandan how much water they use in a day and they can tell you off the tip of their tongue. I have no idea how much water I use,” says White, a McAlester, Okla., double major in entrepreneurship and letters.

White was one of two dozen Sooners who made the inaugural student trip to Gulu with OU’s Northern Uganda Collaborative Learning Partnership last June. They worked independently on projects directed by each college, including preparing number and alphabet charts for classrooms and conducting a rainwater-collection analysis to help St. Monica’s survive periods of drought. The group used money they had raised to buy textbooks for the women and proudly carried them from the village to St. Monica’s.

Jointly, the students formed an interdisciplinary team with OU’s WaTER Center to conduct in-person research with more than 200 residents about water usage across eight villages. Gathering water is considered a woman’s job in Uganda. The students discovered that fortunate women spend up to three hours each day walking to and from a clean borehole, or pump; some even sleep on the ground overnight to save their spot in line. Less fortunate families depend upon natural springs and rivers that might be contaminated by livestock or

human pollution. Such realities mean that Ugandan women have less time to raise their children and to earn money for their families. Girls tasked with the job miss school.

White says the 50-plus pages of data she and her fellow OU students collected will be used to start vital discussions in the communities they visited. But she wishes they could have done more. “The most challenging part of the trip was to take people’s time, interview them, get into all these issues and then leave,” White reflects. “Walking away was hard every time.”

One of OU’s projects had more immediate effects. Under the direction of the Price College of Business Center for Entrepreneurship, White and other business students assessed ways to generate customer traffic for a restaurant that provides job training for St. Monica’s women. The students researched international business models and their findings, which included adding signage and Wi-Fi, have significantly increased restaurant profits since last June.

But quick or temporary fixes are not the point of the OU-Uganda collaboration, John Harris explains. “We want to come in with a philosophical and practical humility where we have spent a great deal of time trying to understand local realities from the perspective of individual communities on the ground in Uganda.

“We want to engage people in these communities on the



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Jeannine Rainbolt College of Education Professor Sally Beach (left) teaches a primary school curriculum developed by OU for women who missed out on learning to read and write English while in captivity.

full spectrum of the human experience,” says Harris, who recently received an award alongside Beach for efforts in Uganda during OU’s “A Tribute to the Faculty” ceremony. “At no point do we want our students to think, ‘I came, I had all the answers, I solved something.’ It would be wonderful if we can be of some assistance, but at no point in any of this are we trying to simplify people’s lives to something that we can reduce and solve in a matter of weeks.”

After encountering the women of Northern Uganda – from the abducted young mother to the woman who carries her child miles to gather water – OU engineering senior Cecilia Herrera came to comprehend how few answers she truly had. She also realized that her plans for a lucrative career were no longer enough. “I became passionate about giving a voice to people who don’t have access to clean water and the basic necessities in life,” says the Mustang native, who hopes to join the Peace Corps or another non-governmental organization. “I feel like the more I travel, the less I know.”

June will bring a new group of OU students to Gulu with a fresh set of challenges. But the Northern Uganda Collaborative Learning Partnership’s commitment goes far beyond three weeks each year.

This past December, Harris and Lupe Davidson, director of OU Women’s and Gender Studies, took a small group to Gulu for a unique photo-voice project with the Women’s Advocacy Network, which seeks justice and accountability for those victimized by Uganda’s civil war. There, the OU students helped former abductees document their experiences for a website and future exhibition.

“I hoped that the students would have a global experience of ‘working with,’ not ‘for,’” Davidson says. “I also wanted the students to come back with a feeling that they didn’t have to be in Uganda to do impactful work. No matter what profession you’re in, you can do work that can be a help to others.”

Although the women’s stories often were difficult to hear, Davidson says she believes the experience filled her students with hope and purpose.

“I saw a group who was on fire to positively change their surroundings, with a new appreciation for the power of education and a clear sense that, as a world, we can take better care of one another.”

The same could be said of Kate Raymond, a Norman graduate student who spent the past two spring breaks traveling to Uganda with the Rainbolt College of Education to implement a math curriculum she designed. “It has been life-changing,” she says of working with the women at St. Monica’s. “It’s amazing to be able to see in a short time how much of a difference an education can make in their lives.”

During a break in teaching, a woman once victimized by the Lord’s Resistance Army approached Raymond and shared that she had begun taking the classes designed by OU because her children had progressed beyond her own education and she could no longer help them with schoolwork. What she said next helped Raymond understand the power behind OU’s Northern Uganda Collaborative Learning Partnership.

“I always thought that was okay, because my children are doing really well in school and God must have a plan for them,” the woman tearfully confessed. “And then I heard about this opportunity, and I thought, ‘Well, maybe God has a plan for me, too.’”

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