

Africa Notes #6 Gucci Is Not an Acholi Word

The first thing that I noticed about Carol was her fancy pointed high-heeled shoes as they sank into the red dust. Clearly she had not anticipated where she was going today when she got dressed, what the Acholi Quarter really was. I had been trying to arrange a meeting with her for the past month. Today as rag tag children crowded around her car chanting “Muzungu, muzungu, muzungu”, I saw a lovely woman in fitted designer jeans, a silk blouse, and Italian leather shoes hesitate to leave her car. I wondered if it had been a good idea to bring her to meet the beaders and to learn more about the Acholi Bead for Life project.

Carol works for the American Embassy. I had heard that she might be a source of high quality magazines for making the beads. I had hoped to enroll her on to the Bead Team. She seemed like a possible ally in finding the raw materials for the bead project.

As Carol alighted from her SUV children rushed forward to grab her hands, happy to accompany foreigners through their dirt village. In the total absence of toys, books, TV, radio, and snack food our arrival broke up the children’s routine. We strolled around the village, a small parade of white women and black children. We visited the rock quarry where Acholi refugees eek out a dollar a day in the hot sun breaking huge boulders into small pebbles. The high heels were struggling, scrambling up eroded hillsides, stepping through rock piles, and avoiding mud. The barefooted children scampered effortlessly.

Arriving at the meeting place of the beaders we were welcomed with bright smiles. All 80 beaders wanted to shake hands with Carol and hug me. “You are most welcome”...”So happy you are here with us” Welcome and please be at home”. As the greetings continued Carol’s cell phone rang. Annoyed by the interruption and the incongruity of cell phones in the poorest of conditions, she stepped outside. When she returned I asked the beaders how many of them had no magazines with which to make beads. About 70 % raise their hands. Ahha! Carol stands up and says she will be happy to get us magazines. The air is filled with clapping and hooting and ululating accompanied with smiles of appreciation.



A week later at the embassy cafeteria...

."Torkin, I need to tell you what happened to me in the Acholi Quarter last week." Carol looks down at her lunch of Malaysian salad and tumeric rice with raisins, trying to gather something inside of herself.

"As I drove up that horrid road and desolate hillside I started feeling very anxious, unsafe...afraid. Like something bad was going to happen to me. I did not really want to open the door. All I could think about was that I was going to ruin my new Italian shoes. The children were dirty and they wanted to hold hands with me. I knew I was going to get sick, some unknown lurking virus was on each little hand. I wanted to pull away but felt unable to and I just

kept holding all the dirty little hands clinging to mine. I began to think of the illnesses that can be passed from hand to hand. I walked through the village not daring to really look into any of the houses. I did not want to see. The whole time I kept smiling wishing I could get away. Then one of the small children with a huge belly and skinny arms smiled such a big smile up at me I reflexively caught my breath. "Oh dear! What is happening to me?" I thought as panic set in."

Carol's eyes are beginning to tear up. She bites her lip and takes a breath.

"As all of the women were greeting me with such warmth and obvious cheer I found myself disarmed, truly welcomed. I looked at the women as they came one by one to shake my hand and my panic began to subside. They had light in their eyes and a genuine feeling of being glad I was there. I did wish I was dressed more appropriately, but I was so glad I was in that mud hut with these women.

On the way back to my car I dared to really look squarely into one of the hovels no bigger than my closet. In my two years in Uganda that is the first time I had let myself see poverty. I saw nothing but a straw mat and some sheets or old clothes! I mean they had nothing. NOTHING.

I went home and bust into tears, weeping from such a deep exposed place of horror and confusion. I wept in the shower as I washed off the red dust. I wept in my closet looking at all of my fancy clothes. I wept as I dropped to my knees and looked at a row of shoes. I couldn't stop talking to my husband, Bill, about the beaders, about the poverty, about my tears. I called my mother in America. I called my daughter in West Virginia. I just had to keep the afternoon alive. What is happening to me I thought?

Since then Bill and I have been talking about our lives, how they have been about doing well, having an interesting career, enjoying life, being together. Now we are both wondering how we could have spent so many years just paying attention to our own small circles. We want to reorient our lives so that they can help others...something a little more direct. We have been talking about how focused America is on personal pleasures and on consumption. I mean people really think they need six or ten or 20 pairs of shoes. I don't know where all of this is taking us but it feels exciting, more alive, and more essentially valuable. I can't thank the Acholi women

enough for their open welcome to me...they can never know how they broke open my heart and set me free.”

Needless to say we now have a supply of high quality magazines! Torkin

They say money can't buy happiness. In Uganda here is what money can buy. Here is how we have spent some of the money you have so generously donated to our project. Thank you so much.

100 dollars to send a child to primary school for a year.

5 dollars to release the body of a dead child from the morgue.

5 dollars to call a brother in London who will send money to a sick relative.

10 dollars for a woman to have an ultrasound (they are free but you die waiting) to diagnose a tubal pregnancy

2 dollars to buy a hot water bottle for someone suffering from a serious leg infection.

15 cents to call the doctor in an emergency

700 dollars to send a promising student to the university for a year.

10 dollars for photos and finger prints so a man can get a job as a night watchman.

10 dollars to transport a body back to the village for burial.

50 dollars for a girl in secondary school to board at the school instead of walking each day for an hour both ways. She had been raped on her walk to school and was too frightened to continue.

50 cents to buy Tylenol.

15 dollars for a man needing surgery so he can urinate again normally instead of through a catheter.

4 dollars for a mother to pay for her transportation so she can return to the village where her 3 year old daughter is severely ill.

3 dollars for transportation to and from the hospital.

2 dollars for bribes once the patient gets to the hospital.

1 dollar to rent the wheel chair at the hospital.

5 dollars for a ream of paper and a bag of cement to give to the school as part of the school fee.

20 dollars for a high school girl to go on a school trip to see the wild life of her own country.

15 dollars for a college student to go on a four day research trip.

50 cents a day to buy a bowl full of goat stew for someone recovering from surgery.

25 dollars a month for an AIDS patient to purchase generic triple drug antiretroviral medicine and stay alive. 300 dollars a year.

200 dollars to sponsor the 100 members of the HIV positive teens club to spend Saturday at the local amusement park.

We welcome your donations, and promise you that 100% of your donations will be spent to help someone in Uganda living on less than a dollar a day survive, heal from their illnesses and begin to make a livelihood. Please earmark your donations (\$300 for a year's life saving AIDS drugs, for example) if you want, or leave it up to us. Giving money away is a challenging business. We prioritize education, emergency medical needs, and women's issues. We strive to impact systems as well as individuals. Tax deductible donations

can be made out to “All Seasons Chalice” with the phrase “Partners in AIDS Service” in the memo section, and mailed to

All Season’s Chalice
PO Box 2180
Boulder, CO, 80306

E mail us at torkin@charlesandtorkin.com and charles@charlesandtorkin.com. Previous newsletters and images are at www.charlesandtorkin.org. You can add someone to our mailing list or remove your name by e-mailing ben@dimensional.com.

Much Love, Torkin and Charles