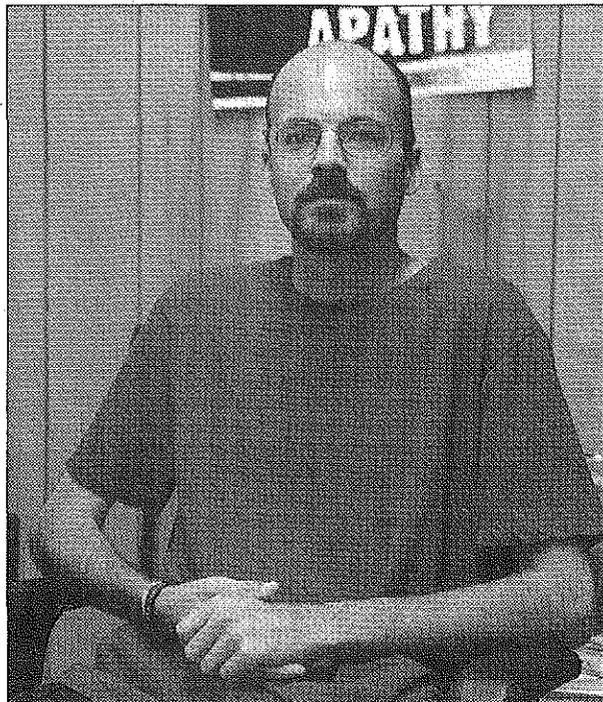


Uganda trip gives students new perspective on KONY 2012



Jed Barker | Collegian
David Westfall, graduate student in sociology, went with six other K-State students on a two month long trip to Uganda. Their mission was to develop relationships with and understand the way of life of native Ugandans and to investigate the truth behind the KONY 2012 video.

Charlie King-Hagen
staff writer

When international organization Invisible Children, Inc. released KONY 2012 on March 5, 2012, it sent a chilling shock around the world. The goal of the video was to raise awareness about the acts of Joseph Kony, a Ugandan warlord and leader of the Lord's Resistance Army, or LRA, which, for the last 20 years, has been accused of abducting tens of thousands of Ugandan children from their homes and turning them into child soldiers and sex slaves. Reaching 100 million views, KONY 2012 caught the attention of the world, brought in millions of dollars in donations and shined a spotlight on Uganda, an eastern African country.

Yet, questions loomed. How accurate was the video? In what manner was the donation money being used? Where, in all of this, was the collective voice of the Ugandan people?

It was questions like these that led David Westfall, graduate student in sociology, to take six students on a two-month long trip to Uganda this summer, intent on speaking to and devel-

oping relationships with native Ugandans, acquiring an understanding of the Uganda lifestyle and, first and foremost, seeking out the truth about the lives of people whose everyday lives are lived alongside unimaginable horrors.

"I remember thinking, 'This [KONY 2012] is amazing,'" said Westfall, who is currently working on his dissertation, which is centered around the impoverishment and social unrest in Uganda. "There are 100 million people who probably didn't know where Uganda was on a map before this. But it's such a complete oversimplification, a complete misrepresentation of what's happening in the country."

The intended message of KONY 2012 has sparked much controversy. As prevalent as the LRA influence in Uganda is made out to be in the video, Kony and his forces have not been in the country for seven years, having signed a truce in 2006 with the Ugandan government that removed them from Uganda altogether.

"I spoke to families who

had had three to four children who were abducted and never came back," Westfall said. "I asked them if they were afraid of Joseph Kony and their response was, 'No, not really.'"

For Cori Christopherson, senior in kinesiology, some of the Kony conversations were even more off-putting. Some of the Ugandans Christopherson spoke with didn't even believe that Kony existed. Others with knowledge of Kony believed that the government, alongside various international organizations, was so powerful that it could easily catch Kony.

"So why haven't they found him? They would ask me," Christopherson said.

According to Invisible Children's 2011 budget, of the \$8,676,614 that the organization spent throughout the year, only 32 percent went towards its services and programs, which directly contradicts the organization's explicitly stated goal of around 80 percent. From that \$8,676,614, around \$1,100,000 went towards travel and close to \$2,000,000 was allocated strictly for staff salary.

When Westfall and his group arrived in Friendship Village, their first stop and the headquarters of Bead for Life, a non-profit organization that helped them set up a portion of their trip, they saw a giant mansion in the village.

"It was, hands down, the biggest house we saw there," Christopherson said. "We had been having a five-minute conversation with some locals about what one would have to do in order to make that kind of money, when we came to realize it was Invisible Children's main office. It cost about 5 million schillings to rent it, and, from what I understand, they [Invisible Children] bought it."

So in the face of skewed media, poorly allocated funds and virtually no governmental assistance, what can help the Ugandan people? According to Westfall and his team, it takes an open mind, hard work, a willingness to communicate and build relationships and a desire to help out in whatever way possible, regardless of the size or



(Left to Right) Anna Nanner, K-State alum, Maggie Burger, senior in anthropology, Grant Kohlmeier, senior in history, Chase Fortune, junior in pre-journalism, Corinne Christopherson, senior in kinesiology, and Danielle Crossland, senior in social work, accompanied David Westfall on a two month long trip to Uganda this past summer.

courtesy photo

UGANDA | Group focuses on change through small projects

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scale of a project.

"When I came in, I had this grand vision of, 'Let's solve the biggest problem in the world and then everything else will fix itself,'" Westfall said. "But the further you go, the more complex things become, and you realize the complexities of the situation. You come to the true solution, which is working with small, local communities and programs. You need their input."

During their time in Friendship Village, the group stayed with host families and conducted a series of interviews.

They also spent time at an orphanage called M-Lisada, where children who have been victimized by the violent instability of the country are taught music and life skills.

Grant Kohlmeier, senior in history and criminology, made a few special connections while at the orphanage, befriending three boys named Jonathan, Frank and Twibe.

"Some people hear about my trip

and say 'Oh, well you didn't do anything. You only helped three kids,'" Kohlmeier said. "Spending time with those three kids is one of the most important things I've done in my life. It's one of my greatest achievements so far. Within just a couple days of talking to the people, I knew I'd have to go back."

All who went said they were affected by their experiences and look to keep moving forward.

"I saw bullet holes and missing body parts. I can't tell you how many times I sat in a remote hut and cried with a family," Westfall said. "But those aren't the stories they want us to hear. They want to move on. The people I spoke with are looking towards the future. They aren't looking for the big house, the white picket fence, the 2.4 kids, the car and the dog. They want their little piece of land, their culture and their traditions, and they want to be able to survive." ingness to communicate and build relationships and a desire to help out in whatever way possible, regardless of the size or scale of a project.