

Fashion Project in Gulu – Kelly McDonald Shares Her Story

My journey to Uganda started with a phone call and a crazy idea. As I was catching up with Karen Sugar, founder of Women's Global Empowerment Fund, she casually invited me to join her on her next trip to Gulu, Uganda. I'm still not sure if she was entirely serious when she threw out the idea, but I knew immediately that I needed to go. I had never been to Africa before, much less anywhere I needed a visa; I'm not exactly the adventurous type when it comes to traveling. Before I could talk myself out of it, I burst into our CEO Anna's office. She screamed, "Yes! Do it!" and all of a sudden, I was going to Uganda.

Why Gulu? For twenty years, northern Uganda was brutally terrorized by Joseph Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army. Men and boys were forced into becoming soldiers, women and girls were kidnapped and raped, and millions of others were forced out of their homes. The conflict left deep physical and mental scars, and recovery was not going to be easy. Karen recognized that a key element in rebuilding this war-torn region was offering support to women in the community, and out of this idea, WGEF was born.

Headquartered in Gulu, the largest city in the northern part of the country, WGEF offers a variety of programs including microfinance loans, health initiatives, literacy programs, and business and leadership training. The mission of WGEF is to provide women with the knowledge and means to create a better future for themselves. I couldn't wait to see these programs in action, but quickly learned that saying "yes" was easy. Planning a trip to a developing country is the hard part.

Over the summer, we took care of all the practical preparations: got my visa and my (six!) vaccines. The growing Ebola outbreak was quickly putting West Africa in a daunting humanitarian situation, and there was a moment in August when we seriously considered calling off the trip due to the rapid spread of the disease. Thankfully, Uganda remained unaffected.

We left Boston on a September evening, and after stops in Amsterdam and Rwanda, we touched down in Uganda's capital at 11 pm. Even through the darkness, it was clear that this was unlike anything I had ever experienced. Our noses filled with thick dust from red dirt roads, and the scent of burning trash and meat cooking at roadside stands permeated the air. It was hard to differentiate between exhaustion and excitement, but one thing was certain: we had finally made it.

As we made the six-hour drive from the capital to Gulu, everything felt like it was falling into place. I had never been somewhere so entirely different from home that still felt so comfortable. Before leaving, I had a pretty good idea of what I was getting myself into; I watched the news, did plenty of research, and chatted with friends who had volunteered elsewhere in Africa. I felt confident, knowledgeable, and prepared, but that couldn't have been further from the truth.

Every preconceived notion and first-world misconception I had of Africa was shattered. After living amidst conflict for so many years, I expected the survivors to be a broken and bitter people, but I have never felt so genuinely welcomed by a community. Irene, who worked at our hotel, hugged us every time we saw her. Joyce, a WGEF client and force to be reckoned with, invited us into her home and called us her daughters. The city I call home the

rest of the year is big and cold, and people hardly smile at each other. This was culture shock in the very best way.

Perhaps the biggest misunderstanding is the idea that a lack of education means you are incapable of learning and becoming a productive member of society. We sat in on a seminar that taught women how to make liquid soap and create a business from this product. I went to an amazing college to study entrepreneurship and have worked with startups for years, but there I was, all the way in northern Uganda, learning the same lessons I previously heard in lecture halls and conference rooms. They talked about how to get a business off the ground, create a brand, retain clients, and keep accurate records.

I'd estimate that Gulu has a higher percentage of entrepreneurs than Silicon Valley. This is a place where nothing comes easily, and you have to make your own luck. Take Florence: a WGEF client who received a microfinance loan of \$100, allowing her to grow ginger, cassava, and sim sim crops. Florence now makes her ginger into "wine" (in actuality, it's more like kombucha than vino) which she sells in the marketplace. This venture has attracted quite a following, and she's recently applied for another loan so she can invest in marketing and hire another employee. Florence is creating opportunities for herself and others in her community to take control of their own lives. Is there anything more empowering than that?

A phrase you hear frequently in Gulu is "It is not possible." Whether you need an extra pillow, want to head out of town an hour early, or just feel like washing off the ten layers of bug spray and sunscreen, sometimes it is simply not possible. After spending almost two weeks with Women's Global Empowerment Fund, it's clear that they are eradicating this phrase entirely. They are giving women the power to make their own decisions, to raise their children on their own terms, to make their community a better place to live. They are breaking the cycle of conflict and poverty one woman at a time, and with that, anything is possible.

- Kelly McDonald, Vice President of Human Resources and Culture, Fashion Project