

In the summer of 2017, my family and I engaged in an eye-opening trip to Uganda in east-central Africa. Our journey was prompted by our involvement with a local charity organization "The Giving Circle", and its founder Mark Bertrand, through which we sponsor three children. Mark and his remarkable team contribute to Ugandan communities in countless ways, with their primary focus being education. My family has been involved with The Giving Circle for several years, with my mother on their board of directors, and my brother and I being on the teen board. Because of our participation in the organization, we are continuously reminded of the problems of people around the world, even when they are no longer in the headlines of today's media.

One of the points that was emphasized during our time in Uganda was the value of education, the difference it is capable of making in one's life, and its sustainability.

If someone in need were to approach you on the street and request a donation, you may think to give them something such as money or food. However, items such as these are not durable, as they will be gone as soon as they are spent or consumed and will last no longer than a day or two. But, have you ever considered giving someone, especially a young child, the gift of an education? Even a basic one, consisting of the ability to perform simple tasks? Probably not, because the United States has compulsory education laws that require students to enroll in and attend school until sixteen years of age, which even requires parental consent at such age. Many Americans therefore take this gift of education for granted, never mind a quality education. Unlike food or money, an education will last someone a lifetime, proving sustainable as it leads to new opportunities, expanding its uses and profitability. Predominantly in countries such as Uganda, where public schooling is absolutely deficient and quality education and private schooling are out of reach for most families, because they can barely provide food and shelter, or they cannot even do that much.

For youth citizens in countries such as here in the United States, a primary and secondary education is a guaranteed right from birth.

However, in countries such as Uganda, even though free public schooling is "available" it is of horrendous quality, with teachers who don't attend work, crowded classrooms beyond belief, causing chaos rather than an environment for thriving young minds. Many parents pull their children out to work instead. Americans who do not attend college are still equipped with standard reading and writing skills, and can therefore usually obtain jobs with at least a minimum wage salary. However, the majority of Ugandans can only work by intensive labor. For example, some that I saw work in fields that are inhabited with deadly animals, such as cobras. Or, they may sell crafts or food out of their shack, begging us tourists to make a purchase.

My visit to Uganda was most certainly my favorite trip that I have gone on. Not only was I surrounded by my family, but also got to meet amazing people including our three sponsored children, Tsubi (Age 16), Ester (Age 12), and Violet (Age 14). We have been sponsoring Tsubi and Ester since 2009, and have been exchanging letters twice a year since then. Violet, on the other hand, we just began sponsoring when we returned to the United States after meeting her in 2017. On our first day in Uganda we were taken to The Giving Circle's two schools, Kagoma Gate and Busoga Primary School, as well as their Wairaka Village farming property with a playground. When we arrived in Wairaka, just like the other locations, the children were crowded around our bus. They cheered with delight. As you stepped off, one or more children would grab your hand, and take you to play, walk, or talk. The young girl who took my hand that day was named "Nabirye" (Gift). The girl who took my mother's hand was named "Violet." Even though we all wanted to sponsor every child by the end of the day/visit, my mom chose Violet after hearing her story of how she had attended school, but then had to stay at home to care for her grandfather. My mother realized that if Violet did not restart school soon, she would most likely be pregnant and possibly married within a year's time. Having me, a daughter of about the same age as Violet, my mother was aware that it could have been myself pregnant, raising children on the streets, had I been born into that culture and those circumstances.

One of the most memorable and emotional moments of the trip for me was the second day in Wairaka village. When we arrived, I played with Nabirye and some other young girls on the playground. They began playing with my camera and my phone (I had taught her how to take pictures the previous visit.), taking thousands of pictures, while I chased them around to get my belongings back. Later in the afternoon, we sat and talked. Prior to arriving in Uganda, we had been instructed by Mark not to discuss religion or politics, for our reason and mission for being there was not to advocate for such things. However, the oldest girl in the group was wearing an "Obama 2008" campaign shirt. Once the other girls had run off to play, she continued asking questions about America. Suddenly, she asked me a question that took me off-guard. She asked "Why do you [Americans] not want people who look like me in your country?" At first, I was shocked at her inquiry and instantly felt awful that she felt that way. However, it is not as simple as denying such a claim, for it is unfortunately true for some Americans. Trying not to be political proved to be a challenge. While holding back my tears, I tried to explain to her that it is not what all Americans believe. It was dreadful to know that she had to live with the feeling of being unwanted, in addition to her many other struggles in life. Realizing that just as some Americans make generalizations about immigrants and specific races, this causes generalizations to be made about us as well. It groups people such as my family, who wish to help girls like her, with others who make crude, invalid assumptions, which go against the lessons and values I am growing up with. I wanted to reassure her that was not how all Americans felt about people with dark skin tones. Knowing she felt the way she did, it made me feel somewhat ashamed to be American who was grouped with people with such discomfoting principles, for the first time, although not in anti-patriotic spirit.

One of the most significant realizations that I was able to take away from my experience in Uganda was the utmost vitality of education in our world today. I was aware of its importance, through my family's sponsorship of children throughout the world, and providing all of them with an education. I have valued my own education for almost the entirety of my life. With that being said, it was not until my trip to Uganda last summer that I fully recognized the drastic change education is capable of making in people's lives.

