

## POCKETS OF POVERTY

Matthew Ingersoll\*

Student, B.A. Program in English, Rivier University

In June of 2011, two ambitious young women set out on a mission to give young children in a poor community a decent education, attempting to eliminate the threat of a failing school system. With \$5,000 and four suitcases full of new clothing, toiletries, and school supplies each, eighteen-year old college students Ginelle Testa and Hillary Tarr embarked on a journey halfway around the world to Uganda, Africa, one of the most impoverished countries in the world. Although they were initially inspired by a 2005 documentary film called *Invisible Children: Rough Cut*, Testa and Tarr raised every penny themselves through various events that consisted of pasta dinners, car washes and donating Boston Celtics tickets. The Ugandan currency is in the form of shillings, and the equivalent of one American dollar is, according to Testa, about 2,600 shillings. This means that they started out with over 10 million shillings each, aside from all the personal belongings which they intended to donate.

On viewing the film in October 2010 as part of a first year seminar requirement for Rivier College, Testa said: "I always knew that I wanted to help people and I have always loved travelling, but I guess it wasn't until viewing *Invisible Children* that the two began to click." The point of the documentary film's release was to raise awareness of a militant group which the film claimed to be at-large called the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), under the rule of a man named Joseph Kony. Three college student filmmakers decided to make this documentary about Kony and his intentions, which involve abducting young children and forcing them to be soldiers in his army. It consists of real footage and interviews of children who were a part of Kony's army but were able to escape. Over 5 million people have viewed this documentary today. In 2004, the three students formed Invisible Children, Inc., a non-profit organization dedicated to raising awareness on Kony and the LRA as well as raising money to fund educational programs for those affected.

"I want to be a social worker," Testa said, "I wasn't even going to go to Uganda." A resident of Nashua and a sociology major with a minor in social work at Rivier College, Testa may seem at first glance like your average white-skinned, brown-haired American girl with a great sense of pride and adventure. However, her actions and senses of perseverance and dedication are the core principles that separate her from everyone else. This film served to motivate her to make a difference overseas in addition to her own home country. Her main goals when she travelled to Uganda included the education of young children on matters such as the empowerment of women and the education about the HIV virus, an epidemic in that country.

Upon arriving in Uganda, Testa described her initial reaction as a "culture shock at its perfect definition." She knew that she and Tarr would be in a foreign country full of language and culture barriers, and this experience was one they had to adjust to rather quickly. On several occasions, they encountered various orphanages as well as homeless children in city streets asking them for money. Testa and Tarr stayed in a volunteer house, where they paid the owner each night for a place to sleep. It was here where they were introduced to a non-profit organization called Hope Beyond Uganda, and also here where they obtained the opportunity to get to know ten young children at a nearby orphanage. These children ranged in age from about 2 to 12 years old, with various levels of reading and writing skills. Testa and Tarr intended to give away different school supplies such as notebooks and writing

utensils, and also help to fund schools for the Ugandan children so that they can have that opportunity to attend and learn. One child in particular whom Testa felt a strong personal connection with was an 11-year-old girl named Daisy. According to Testa, Daisy could speak English fluently and was “a genius,” given her high academic skills in comparison to other children her age.

The trip was originally planned to be over the course of a month, but the stay was shortened to sixteen days. Although Testa is disappointed that she and Tarr did not do as much as they would have liked, she still feels like she learned some life lessons and maintains the importance for having someone positive in one’s life, as she had left the ten children at the orphanage feeling this way. Marie Sullivan, the director of the Career Development Center at Rivier College, has received the opportunity to get to know Testa through frequent visits and appointments. “I knew she would come back after I met with her for the first time,” Sullivan said, “She was invested in herself. I admired her dedication to community.” Testa was originally considering entering the Nursing program at Rivier, taking various psychology courses to explore her interests and to see where they fit the best. “We talked about how she should gain experience. She wanted to work with kids and we were able to define her interest as one in counseling young people with mental health issues, specifically people that don’t have a fighting chance.” Sullivan said she believed Testa would have eventually come to this realization herself, and that her job was just for it to come sooner. What she said separates Testa from most other students, however, is that “not once was it all about money with her: it was all about her commitment to others.” On Testa and Tarr’s trip to Uganda, Sullivan said it was a great way for Testa to take the initiative and make a difference in the lives of impoverished children, even though her actual experiences turned out to be different than what she had hoped. “She never lost sight of why she was there,” she said.

When asked of her career plans in the future in more detail, Testa said, “I want to explore other pockets of poverty around the world that may have been similar to the one in Uganda, but those in the United States.” Not long after her journey overseas, she went to Camden, New Jersey as part of Rivier College’s Campus Ministry. There she learned of other “pockets” in our country that are so bad, they can be compared to Uganda.

Recently, she had arranged a meeting with City Year, a non-profit organization and branch of the AmeriCorps that is focused on strengthening the levels of education in different schools around the United States that need it most. She said she plans to join this organization following her graduation from Rivier in the spring of 2014, travelling around the country with plans similar to those she had for the young children of Uganda. One case she wants to look into in particular was of a high school in the Austin, Texas district. She knows the principal of this high school personally, but also knows that this school is among the highest in drop-out rates and teen-pregnancy rates in the entire country. Lessening these rates is a step in the right direction, and Testa certainly knows it can be possible given her previous experiences in Uganda.

One of the most interesting facts Testa found about her journey this past summer was that not once did she encounter a child soldier when meeting different children in the community. It makes the intentions of the very film that inspired her to travel there seem misleading because one would think that in sixteen days of staying in Uganda, she would have had to at least see one in passing at one occasion or another. When questioned of this, she replied that the film’s driving force seems to be raising awareness for issues that immediately should be tended to, such as the poverty and lack of education of young children.

Nearly a year later, she said: “If I went back there, I would have my own organization.” She also stresses the carefulness of how one approaches such an issue, saying “when you are dealing with a community that is so deep in poverty as the one I encountered in Uganda, it is important to focus all of

your energy and good intentions first on one or two people who have the most potential at succeeding from your hard work. Starting very small and gradually working your way up to bigger groups of people who have less and less hope of rising above poverty is crucial.”

Tarr would agree that Testa possesses strong leadership skills, since she has experienced them at work. “She’s the type of person who no matter what the stakes are, she’ll go for it and get the job done,” she said, “When we arrived to Uganda, she took the initiative to start teaching the children.” Like Sullivan, Tarr said she admired Testa’s qualities that isolate her from other students and aspiring social workers: her commitment to serve and her willingness to take risks while doing it. Tarr, a sociology and social work student herself, saw their trip to Uganda as a motivator for her and Testa to help out any pocket of poverty they possibly can.

Testa is a free-spirited and kind-hearted person who has demonstrated through various experiences her intentions to make the world a better place. Her primary focus on removing poverty from different communities around the world in countries like Uganda and the United States seems to be improving each educational system she involves herself with. If she can reduce the threats of poverty for communities she visits in this manner, then it sounds like it would be a life and career fulfilled. And more power to her if she can accomplish this. ■

---

\* **MATTHEW INGERSOLL** is a senior communications major with a minor in writing at Rivier University. He is currently pursuing a career in journalism, aspiring to attend either Emerson College or Northeastern University for graduate school in the fall of 2014. Matt has featured published works during two concurrent editorial internships with *New Hampshire Magazine* of Manchester, NH and *The Lowell Sun* of Lowell, MA. He is also a seeking freelance writer in the consumer and literary magazine industries, through the publishing of short stories and poetry. Matt currently resides in Hudson, NH with the career goal of becoming a music or entertainment journalist.