

Article in Sacred Heart Academy (NY) Newsletter

Erin Lawless, Founder of Hope of the Generation Uganda (HOGU)

As Erin Lawless, Class of 1999, reflected on her over 10 years of experience in public service during her speech at the Sacred Heart Academy (SHA) Class of 2013 Commencement Ceremony this past summer, one of the greatest accomplishments she highlighted was the success of the nonprofit she founded and continues to run today called Hope of the Generation Uganda (HOGU). HOGU was created by Erin in 2005 when she was a Peace Corps Volunteer in rural Uganda for over 2.5 years. Uganda is a country you may know from the media showing pictures of child soldiers from the 30 year long civil war, where people live on less than a dollar a day, where more than 50% of the population is 15 years old or younger due to war, HIV and other diseases, and there are 2.5 million orphans that need support.

Erin was able to start HOGU with the help of a handful of community members that wanted to make a difference for the next generation in their village. They were committed to turning the tide of the HIV epidemic and they wanted to do this in the local language through song, dance and story. The group started out by walking for miles from village to village educating people by putting on performances and shows that creatively teach about staying safe and healthy, staying in school and the value of service in the community. When Erin left Uganda in 2007 she was able to leave behind a group of 30 community volunteers, the first local Ugandan volunteers to ever do anything for themselves in the ways of service in this particular village. The group continues to travel around doing HIV/AIDS education and in the 7 years since she has left the village, HOGU has created a scholarship program that now supports over 30 students a year. Those students volunteer with HOGU, delivering HIV/AIDS prevention education and earn the scholarships based on their volunteer hours.

In addition to this, HOGU has a soccer and volley ball league that uses sport to teach about life skills, they built a resource center with a library and computers in it that run on solar power, (the only structure like it for miles), they carry out HIV testing and counseling at their center, they implement an annual Life Skills Camp for over 100 kids a year and they started a school that now educates 250 students each year. These results sound simple but they have only come because of the hard work of dedicated people in Uganda and here in the U.S. We should mention that Erin now has the assistance of 3 other SHA alumnae on her Board of Directors: Suzanne Graziano, Kara Shine and Kathryn Stolz Gavagan.

Erin says there is still work to do. This year HOGU has taken on a major fundraising effort to construct a brick school to replace their school that is currently made out of scraps of wood and cardboard. HOGU's school is a place where caring teachers welcome orphans and vulnerable children into the classroom despite their family's hardships, where children get breakfast and lunch, and participate in extracurricular activities. The school not only provides education to nursery through 7th grade, but also works in partnership to provide employment to HOGU volunteers. When HOGU volunteers complete their education in the field of teaching they are guaranteed a teaching job at the school.

Erin is in constant communication with HOGU and returns to Uganda once a year. For her day job, Erin is the Program Specialist in the Office of Global Health and HIV at the United States Peace Corps, focusing on programming that will support Peace Corps Volunteers working with orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) affected by HIV/AIDS around the world. When asked what top three lessons Erin took away from her Sacred Heart education to help her overcome challenges and carry out the work of HOGU, she said: "Surround yourself with positive people, our capacity to do good will overcome the bad in the world, and always selflessly serve." You can learn more and/or contribute to HOGU at www.hogu.org or email Erin at development@hogu.org.