

For 21 years now, a war has raged on. In Northern Uganda, a rebel army, the Lord's Resistance Army, led by Joseph Kony rampages through the country, attempting to topple the government. These men, with soldiers and supporters in short supply, have turned to kidnapping innocent children, often taking them from their beds, and forcing them to either kill and kidnap, or be killed. The result: thousands of premature deaths and brainwashed children who know nothing but violence, hatred, and constant fear. Millions live in internally displaced camps (IDP), unable to live on their own land for fear of abduction and death. Adults cannot farm the land they've inhabited their entire lives. Many children, known as night commuters, walk as many as 7 miles to shelter and protection from the LRA. Their parents have no choice but to send them away each evening, unable to tuck them in at night. Imagine an 8-year-old child never being tucked in by a parent, but instead looked after by older children, packed in like sardines in these safe havens. I am 17 and my dad still comes in right before I go to bed, to say he loves me and to extinguish my light. I treasure these precious moments, but at the same time, I know that there are people living in another world, a world without love, safety, or comfort. Despite all of this, the children are hopeful. They want nothing more than to get an education so they can aid the people of their country. They listen to American music, and are like any other kids. They have hope and faith, so we have no choice but to listen up and speak for them, who are so often tied down.

Last year, our school started an Invisible Children Club, named for the company and movie that started it all, <http://www.invisiblechildren.com>. The movie is called "The Rough Cut", and it's a documentary depicting life in Northern Uganda, the history of the war, and most of all, these children who were previously invisible, and still are, to much of the Western world. Our first priority was to get the entire school to see the movie. Using our advisory program, we achieved that goal, and the response was overwhelming. Our small group of 20 students soon grew to 40, then 50. We launched the bracelet campaign, selling bracelets that provide jobs in Northern Uganda and scholarships for Ugandan children, whom the different colored bracelets represent. Each bracelet comes with a DVD with the story of a child. I wear the bracelet for Innocent, a boy who lives in the IDP camps. In just a few weeks, we raised \$7,000, and these bracelets were all over the school. Our next mission was to spread the word even further, so we held a public screening of the film and a silent auction. We raised even more money, and gained the support of the community. We were really getting somewhere. We held a Miracle Minute at school, where students and staff raised as much money as possible in 60 seconds. The result: \$1,200. I was one of the people collecting, and I literally had people chasing me down the hall, looking to donate. That feeling was so powerful. People truly cared and knew they had to make a difference. Our biggest task yet was to run a mock IDP camp, called Displace Me. A group of 300 high school and college students walked 2 miles to a parking lot, where we slept overnight in cardboard boxes. It was cold, rainy, and uncomfortable, and at that instant we finally understood exactly what the Invisible Children go through every day of their lives.

This year, we've entered a competition called Schools for Schools. We partner with a school in Uganda, called Layibi, and try to raise the most money to help them out. If we're one of the top schools, we can send someone to Africa. Only a few weeks into school, we screened a new movie, "GO". This movie touched me in so many ways. It went in-depth on a few children, and it was incredible. One girl, named Lilian, is the head

girl at her school. She's a model student and leader. Her only surviving family member died just after the video was made, and she was able to go to college through the help of Invisible Children. As I apply to college, I have the support of my family and a world of opportunities. She has no support, and just one university available. I have everything, and she has nothing. She is content just to get an education, while I can pick and choose what I want. It doesn't seem fair, and her story hit me hard. Another girl my age, Gloria, is infected with the HIV virus. Because of this, she has no will to live. She thinks her family would be better off without her, and that she has no purpose in life. Treatment is difficult, and many families don't like the burden of raising a child with the disease. I had tears streaming down my face just listening to her story. This girl, who loves Mariah Carrie and other Western singers, could fit in easily in America. But she was born to Uganda, so she does not have as many opportunities. It is unjust that where we live determines what we experience, sometimes even whether we live.

By participating in this group, I have put myself out on a limb. At school, I am sometimes criticized and am the recipient of sarcastic and ignorant remarks. I have learned to stand up for my beliefs. I am usually quiet and passive, but this cause has taught me that when you are this passionate, it is your responsibility to raise your voice. I don't let any negative remarks get to me because in my heart, I know this is what I need to be doing. If I need to commit a weekend gathering donations, consider it done. Be at school by 6:30AM? I'm there. Come in for a planning meeting from 8-10pm on a Sunday evening? No problem. I feel this cause pulsing through my veins, and anything I can do, I will do. Everyone deserves the right to be safe in his or her home and to get an education. I am so overcome with emotion knowing that as I type this, there are kids my age who will never get the chance to even go to school, and I will do whatever it takes to change that.