Shawn Gunaratne

The non-governmental organization I worked for in Uganda was Rural-urban Initiatives to Support own Efforts (RISE). They were founded in 2003 on the basis that people could develop themselves through their own efforts. The own efforts model is implemented in RISE by mobilizing communities towards development. It starts with individual ability, talents and resources, building into a collective effort, involving all members of the community regardless of sex, age, and religion. Initially, the individual stands as a single unit that can thrive on its own but can be more efficient if put together with other units of interest, such as a family or community, creating a bottom-top process of mobilization. This approach seeks sustainability by training those mobilized to become leaders within their own communities and thereby becoming facilitators as well. Once people understand the specific development project in their own terms that project has a greater chance to succeed.

My work with RISE initially started with the idea of implementing afterschool, roundtable discussions, helping the youth to realize their ability to educate themselves. But eventually it transformed into something that was a middle ground of my idealistic, grand idea and the current situation I was working in. It became a free, counseling environment where a colleague and I would go to four schools once a week, each on a specific day and we would go with questions in our hand to ask the youth, in order to generate discussion. The discussions would revolve around social issues that directly affected the youth, such as HIV/AIDS or the importance of education.

Our project was a process and sometimes a very slow process. With every package we completed, we did a service project. Whereby helping the students realize that once they receive
this information they have a responsibility to also educate their peers and communities as well. Therefore after the education package we painted a mural on the local community centre, advocating that the greatest gift any parent could give their child was education. Also we held the first ever AIDS walk in Mayuge. The walk consisted of walking around the town, passing out condoms and singing AIDS awareness songs. Afterwards we gathered for speeches, dramas, songs, and poems. The walk empowered students more than the mural did and it gave them the opportunity to take a vocal stand against this epidemic. Hopefully the walk can continue in the coming years.

I grew with these children. Most of these teenagers have very humble backgrounds and their parents sacrifice a great deal to pay for their school fees. Most students do not understand the long term benefits of education and how essential it can be in lifting them out of the cycle of poverty. This project was born from the thought, that if students simply realize why they were being educated and how it benefits them in the long-term, they then can be much more successful in their studies and hopefully in their everyday lives. We are not sure if we helped them realize this overall goal but the students were very enthusiastic with the service projects and we do know that we expanded their knowledge on the importance of education and protecting themselves against HIV/AIDS.

My experience in Uganda helped to realize the heart of servant leadership: patience. I have learned more and more that development is process. With developmental work, to truly serve and see the fruits of one’s service can sometimes take decades. It takes commitment and patience. I was in Uganda for about 3 months and I can say confidently that I did not accomplish anything. I have been thinking lately of my collective experiences within my short lifespan and I continually realize that I am looking for something I know not of, but I do know that this journey
started in the summer of 2005. The morning I went for an early walk in Matara, Sri Lanka and came across a graveyard, almost hidden in the overgrown bushes, headstones with the names of children who died because they could not out swim a tsunami. And once I saw that, I now realize, that ever since, I have seen nothing else. Meaning, once you see something like that, something that punctures the protective layer that has been growing on you since the day of your birth, you understand that life does not begin and end with you, the individual, but it begins and ends with all of us, collectively. There is something so incredibly embedded within the individual that is not only connected to the whole human race, but a doorway to our own humble, humanity as well. This inner connection can sometimes be felt with the simple act of kindness to a stranger or even the smallest smile from friend, and sometimes it can move us to become better people, not for ourselves, but for those who desperately needs us. I realize at my age that I can really accomplish few things; accomplish in the sense of making a real sustainable change in another’s life. But I can start many things. And concerning my work in Uganda, I hope I started something.

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