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Empowering Single Women in Uganda

What a year it has been! My time of Lumos in Uganda has flown by and turned out quite different than anticipated. When I first landed in Uganda in August of 2019, I had some basic knowledge and experience with HEAL and the Ugandan culture, but I also recognized that working full-time would bring lots of new experiences and deeper understandings. Uganda has seen its fair share of white saviors and was once a British colony. As a young white girl, therefore, I knew I had to always check myself and be extremely intentional in the way I built relationships and worked alongside Ugandans.

The collectivist culture of Uganda is my favorite part of living there. The community's well-being is upheld as more important than the lengthy to-do list on our desk. A neighbor in crisis means that we drop everything and show up to support and offer any resources we have. Relationships are valued more than business and productivity, and while the lack of efficiency can sometimes frustrate my American self, I have learned how to live out the golden rule of loving your neighbor as yourself.



HEAL Ministries is located in the small city of Jinja, located about 2 hours east of the capital city Kampala. Jinja is a growing city and therefore brings people from various parts of the country and world for business purposes. You will find Ugandans of all different tribes, not only the local tribe of Busoga. I have learned, over the last year, that each tribe is known for various things. The Acholi tribe is known to be hard-working, the Busoga tribe

is known to be deceitful, the Eteso tribe is known to be honest, and the Karamojong tribe is known to be less-developed. Tribalism still remains in Uganda, although it is not nearly as much of an issue as it was 50 years ago. I really enjoyed getting to learn more of the history of Uganda and see some of the biggest obstacles and challenges the country faces. It is very different from the United States, and it was so helpful to see both the pros and cons of a different country.

The mission of family preservation has been a huge passion of mine ever since my gap year in 2014. I saw so many children in orphanages that had family who cared and loved for them, and the only reason these children were placed in the orphanage was because the family didn't have the means and resources to keep their kids. Growing up in an orphanage has so many negative impacts on a child's development, and as a social worker I so badly



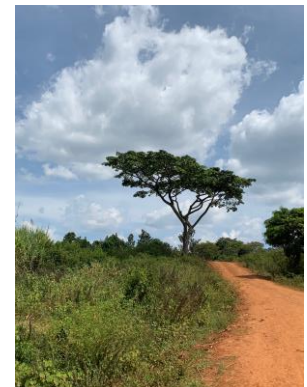
wanted a way to advocate for family preservation. This past year working at HEAL Ministries has given me just that, a way to help single parents gain skills and connect with resources that help them provide for their families. These single mothers love their children so much, and HEAL has been able to provide the help they need to care for their children.

When I began my Lumos year, I had so many expectations and ideas of what I could accomplish. I quickly had to face the reality that development takes time, and when a world pandemic hit, I had to be flexible and adapt. I was able to accomplish several of the things I had hoped: I scanned files and created an online system for updating and tracking client files, I taught counseling skills to our social workers, I created new policies and procedures



for the social work department, and I was able to teach the social workers about trauma. When I look back over the last year, I am proud of what I have done. I built established and trusting relationships with staff, and I helped develop our social work program so that it can continue to grow and provide resources for our families. In the next year as we open back up after COVID, I hope to start grief counseling groups for the widows in our artisan program. I also hope to start social emotional learning groups for our oldest preschool students. I know there will always be ways that we can improve and grow, and I am excited to have more time to be a small part of that growth.

There is very little understanding of trauma in Ugandan culture. The social workers learn a basic definition of what trauma is, but they are not taught the ways that trauma effects the body and signs to look for when working with clients. Throughout my year working in Jinja, I began thinking a lot about resiliency and the role it plays in combatting trauma. I discovered that the Ugandans I worked with appeared to have more resiliency than my neighbors back in Nashville. Why is that? Can a culture be more resilient than another? How much do traumas differ in different cultures? These questions started swirling around in my mind. I still do not know all the answers, but I want to continue to research and learn more about it.



Although I will never know the full impact I have had on the people at HEAL over the last year, I do know that I have played a small role in improving relationships and mindsets. Our head teacher now knows that the child acting out in class is struggling through his own trauma and needs healthy boundaries. A single mom whose children are in our program now

sees her kids as beloved and joyful instead of looking at them and only being reminded of their father abandoning her. Our social workers know that they work better as a team instead of trying to compete to be the best. Development and growth is a slow process, but when I look back on the last year, I can see glimpses of real change taking place. The area I see the most change, however, is within myself. My coworkers have taught me that there is beauty within messiness. The children in our programs have taught me that love is a healing balm we need on a daily basis. Working in a foreign culture has taught me to speak less and listen more. Social work has taught me that my voice matters and that standing up for equity is more important than keeping the peace.

For any Belmont student contemplating Lumos, I would not hesitate to say it is the best decision you could make. You will be challenged and pushed to grow in countless ways, and your worldview will be opened. You will learn how to work alongside humans who look and think differently than you. The experiences you gain will make you a better person and impact you for the rest of your life. I am beyond thankful for the opportunity Lumos gave me! I am leaving my year with Lumos as a much more confident human who sees the vital importance of surrounding myself with diverse people. I look forward to seeing the ways that my Lumos year will help me in my future.

