

One Person Making a Difference: Lies Rosema*

By Jennifer B. Kaufman
2006.07

Meet Lies Rosema. Many of you who post at Interference.com's busy forums know her better as LivLuvAndBootlegMusic. She loves gymnastics, designing websites, and of course, U2. She recently graduated from Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where she obtained a degree in business communications, with a minor in Third World development studies. Calvin College is a school fully enriched in the Christian tradition of justice, compassion and discipline and inspires its students to make this world a better place.

It was because of her studies that Rosema was able to visit the African nation of Tanzania in January 2005. This came about through a course she took in college called "The Church's Influence on Development in Tanzania." The main objective of the course was to learn how development within Tanzania was being facilitated through the church, also known as Christian non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Students who take this course broaden the scope of their learning by visiting rural villages in Tanzania and maintaining a journal reflecting on their learning objectives and experiences from different perspectives including historical, economical, societal and political.

Unlike other countries, there's no separation of church and state in Tanzania. It is important to study NGOs because they're funded by the Tanzanian government and church-based groups have been very effective in distributing aid, especially in rural areas. Therefore, Tanzania's government will give money and resources to Christian social organizations.

Rosema's college course and experience in Tanzania was life-changing and has given her some interesting and thought-provoking ideas on key issues facing Africa and what we can do to work on these issues. Rosema recently shared her perspective with Interference.com.

How did you get involved in Africa and what have you done? Where and when did you do your work?

I first got involved my freshman year of college. I wouldn't actually call it involved because it was more of a time when I was learning and my interest was growing. I became a huge U2 fan in high school so I was honestly introduced to these issues through Bono. In December, 2002, I traveled with some friends to see Bono speak twice during the Heart of America Tour. For those who may not know, it was a speaking tour organized by DATA and included Bono, Chris Tucker, Ashley Judd, Agnes, a Ugandan HIV-positive nurse, and a few other celebs that made appearances at various stops.

The first one I went to was on World AIDS Day in Lincoln, Nebraska. I got to meet Bono that day and even got a smile from Lance Armstrong but what impacted me the most was the story of the nurse Agnes.

A week later, we went down to a small church in Louisville, Kentucky to hear the same spiel. That time, someone from DATA gave us boxes of postcards that had facts about how many people die from AIDS and how many African children are orphaned.

In January, 2003, I took a class called The Politics of AIDS in Africa. The class was helpful because it went over all the facts you need to know and approached the topic from many angles. The following year, for World AIDS Day, my roommate and I decorated our dorm room door with our DATA postcards and several form letters demanding action from our politicians. We organized an event where students would come to the dorm basement and sign various form letters, find the addresses of their politicians, and we'd mail them off. I also asked the professor with the most experience in these issues come and speak to our dorm. It was hard to really make an impact at school because there are so many social justice clubs at our college already. I

began to feel like I was just competing with people who had already established their involvement in the same cause, so I ended up turning over all of my form letters and DATA materials to them. They were able to use our stuff at their existing tables in the school's cafe/coffee house area.

At the end of my sophomore year, I learned about the opportunity to go to Tanzania to visit NGOs and study development. I pretty much decided immediately that I was going. We left on January 3, 2005 and stayed for a month. We basically moved west to east across northern Tanzania, visiting cities, villages, and rural areas along the way. Some of the programs we visited included rural hospitals with HIV/AIDS programs, schools, homes for unwanted or abused street children, orphanages, and social services organizations. We also met with politicians, religious leaders, leaders of the various organizations, and health experts. And of course, you can't go to Africa for a month without visiting a Masaai village and going on an animal safari.

Since I've been back, I've kind of been in limbo. The hardest part about the trip was that while we were there we saw a lot of poverty, pain, and suffering. Once we got back, we were thrown into our normal lives, starting classes almost immediately. To this day, I feel like I've never completely processed the trip and have yet to sort things out emotionally. There is some culture shock when you first arrive, not near as much as I'd anticipated, but returning is really the hardest part.

How has your personal experiences with Africa altered your perspective?

My personal experience affected me a lot. It didn't happen so much while I was there, but looking back, still trying to make sense of it all, a lot of my perspectives have changed. I think before I went, I sort of had that attitude that was prevalent during the 1980s, like I was all excited to go and help poor, hopeless, suffering people and stuff like that. I was much more focused on people. I think it was an emotional—maybe even uninformed—reaction to what I'd learn and seen on TV and such. Now, I've come to realize that the people there are so strong and beautiful. If anything, we in the west could learn a lot from them.

They should be sending their missionaries over here. My focus has shifted away from giving aid to considering ways that would allow for people to help themselves. Donating money and aid is very honorable and genuinely compassionate, but in the long-term, that's not what East Africa wants or needs. Business investment, being involved in global trade markets, debt relief and addressing these types of issues, starting at a grassroots level, are really what I feel is most important at this time.

What are the key issues facing Africa and what are the stumbling blocks in solving them?

What do you believe should be done to get these problems solved or at least alleviated?

I'm going to answer this question based on my experience in Africa, mainly because I did horrible in my economics classes and found very little of it was actually relevant to their organizations anyway. If I had to use a few words to describe the main problems we saw in East Africa, they would be a lack of health care, education, and infrastructure. We spent some time at a Lutheran conference center in Moshi listening to lectures from health experts. The most significant thing I remember is a doctor telling us that in Tanzania, there is one doctor for every 200,000 people. Think of Richmond, Virginia, or Birmingham, Alabama, with roughly one doctor for everyone in the entire city. We also made a stop a Bukumbi Hospital, a hospital in a rural area with a higher rate of HIV infection. The entire hospital consisted of a few nurses and a surgeon. Can you even imagine a hospital without a general physician, anesthesiologist, oncologist, etc.? Our doctor-lecturer explained that most of the young Tanzanian doctors leave the country because of a lack of a health care system and better employment opportunities in Europe or the States. It creates a vicious cycle because no doctors want to work understaffed with no funding and no medical equipment, but the situation can hardly improve unless the government can find a way to keep doctors from going to practice elsewhere.

As for education, we did not spend as much time studying this issue, but for me it's an obvious one. Say you live in America and when you're five, in school they teach you the academic materials, but also things like how to call 911, what your phone number is, stuff that doesn't seem

relevant to a five year old but it can save someone's life.

In East Africa, a young child going to school and learning that boiling water is good, sleeping with a mosquito net is good, and not using grass full of harmful parasites as sitting mats is good has the potential to save many lives. Stats show that education decreased the likelihood of HIV infection. Beyond saving lives, education opens up business and trade opportunities so that African economies can strengthen from within, rather than be dependent on First World aid. Lastly, I'd like to mention infrastructure because this was an issue that never crossed my mind until I was in Africa. I suppose it is indicative of the economy as a whole, but a lack of infrastructure specifically creates enormous problems with effective distribution of aid.

I've told this story several times, but I'll use it again hear because this is where I really learned a lot. Halfway through our trip we visited individuals living in very rural areas who were either suffering from HIV or who were orphaned because of HIV. We met one man, Peter, who has had HIV since 1991. For 10 years his condition deteriorated because he did not have access to medication. In 2001, Bukumbi Hospital organized an HIV/AIDS program in this rural area and was finally able to reach Peter. The saddest part is Peter was eligible for free medications provided by the government the entire time. However, he did not own a car or a bicycle, the road near his hut is virtually impassable (not an enjoyable bus ride, let me tell you) and his condition left him unable to walk miles and miles for treatment. It wasn't until a group of religious volunteers spread into his region that he was able to receive what was accessible to him all along.

I think this story illustrates the large, but often unnoticed gap that exists between donating aid and actually helping people. Bags of grain and food have literally rotted because they are dropped without consideration for how people will actually access the food. I could've given all of my pocket money to Peter but there was no store nearby and even if there was, he had no way to get there.

I don't think there's one big fat solution to all of these problems, but I think in order to appropriately take them into account, there needs to be a grassroots movement that is based on the perspective of the local people, not how people in the west would have things done. For example, going back to Peter, like I said I could've given him all my money. My friends would probably say that was a very nice thing to do to help out. But like I said, Peter can't even use money because there's nowhere to buy things. Instead, the religious group that began assisting Peter with treatment also provided him with one goat. From this one goat he is able to get milk and breed his goat with a neighbor's goat. Together, they can sell or trade their goats, thus supporting themselves and contributing to the local economy at the most basic level.

Education is a good example, too. Some people and organizations insist on supporting abstinence-only sex education in African schools. Not only is this detrimental because it creates a lack of proper sex and hygiene education, it completely ignores even simpler, less controversial practices that could be taught, like substituting one type of grass for another when making mattresses, because grass A contains parasites that carry diseases. As for health care, I've found several examples of the amazing benefits of providing resources so that Africans can start by educating themselves about health and hygiene. For example, there is a women's group whose members walk into beer houses and ride on buses of working men passing out condoms. It's much more effective when the men hear, "My husband and I uses these now and don't have HIV. Please take several," than when a westerner comes over and starts preaching about abstinence and how they should be doing this and this and are terrible people for doing this and that.

I don't feel like I've adequately answered this question but it's something I still think about on a daily basis. Overall, I hope to see more consideration for using the communicative styles and appealing to cultural norms of whichever local culture one is dealing with.

You've mentioned before that celebrities don't always know what's happening "on the ground" when it comes to Africa. What do you suggest people do to find out what's

happening "on the ground"?

Well, the best way would be to spend 48 hours with a local household. Swatting cockroaches, showering with a liter of bad water, sitting in a hut built with cow dung barely able to breath because it's 100 degrees outside and inside there is a fire and no smoke hole, thinning the soup so there's enough for each child, etc. —just one or two days like that will shake you forever.

Of course, not everyone has the luxury of experiencing this life firsthand. One thing that has helped me is reading smaller publications of organizations that are involved in grassroots programs. There are plenty of articles and reports put out by or about the major government organizations, but it gets so overwhelming [that] it's almost desensitizing. People become statistics, statistics that are actually quite arbitrary when you have no first-hand experience to relate them to. Recently, I was sitting in our economics department between classes and found a newsletter on the floor. It was published by an organization where people from First World countries go as individuals to Third World countries and establish small but profitable businesses.

One example was a man went to somewhere in Central American and started a bakery that uses only locally grown ingredients. I recently realized that I've learned a lot more from reading stories like these than, say, studying the latest edition of the Human Development Index. Not just because you can see how issues relate to names and faces, but also because a lot of time there is a surprising amount of uplifting information. I like to read through the news section on the African Well Fund site or look at the Oxfam picture gallery. It kind of recharges you to see that small things are actually saving lives and putting smiles on kids' faces.

Besides getting educated about the issues regarding Africa, what else can we do concretely to help Africa?

As you said, getting educated is the first step. There are so many myths and misinformation that still circulates even among people we elect as political, spiritual and intellectual leaders. After that, you've got to find ways to really make these issues a priority in your life, especially when it comes to political decisions and voting. I think it's important to personalize these issues because otherwise people are nothing more than numbers and statistics and we become apathetic or desensitized.

I don't want to get too into detail, because the level of involvement and commitment depends entirely on each individual. Not everyone has the opportunity or the financial resources to actually spend time in Africa. Also, I don't think it's fair to say one rich person who gives \$10,000 to Africa but never goes there or gets any more involved as an activist, and another rich person who never gives any money but does go there and is an activist are not genuinely committed to these issues.

Try to think about what you have, what you're good at, and what you enjoy doing and how that can factor in. For example, I have a degree in business communications and I enjoy making websites so I'm offering my services to non-profit organizations and hope to start gathering donated computers and parts to donate to schools and organizations in East Africa. My experience in Tanzania also brought me to realize that even though people have perfectly good intentions going on volunteer or mission trips to Africa isn't always the best way to help. Often, these trips are short. I consider anything less than six months short because it takes one to two years to truly become acclimated to a new culture and resources are wasted by continually having to start over with training new volunteers. I was originally planning to go to Uganda for a month and volunteer at an AIDS clinic but when the Tanzania opportunity came up, I felt it would be better because our purpose was studying development and we were able to learn a lot hands-on instead of spending the entire month in one place and then having to leave just as we get settled in.

I encourage people to do some research on existing organizations that have grassroots programs and find ways to support them. For example, I think the African Well Fund is an amazing organization. I mean, who doesn't deserve clean water? Also, if instead of donating money, you'd

like to give an actual gift and know where it's going, the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee has an online gift catalog where you can select items to give to certain countries. You can donate drought resistant seed for only 45 cents. It's a great way to get young kids involved because there are things affordable even to a child with some pocket money.

Do you have any future plans regarding Africa? What else would you like to do?

Yes, I can't wait to go back. I'm interested in going back long-term, at least a year. I'm not interested in missions, but I'd love to live and work there, either for a well-established NGO or a local business. I've looked into a few programs and the one my fiancé and I are most interested in requires that you be married for at least 12 months before you apply, so we're going to keep this possibility open.

As far things I can do here in the States, I mentioned earlier I'd like to start accumulating computers and other technology since I currently work as a computer technician and come across unwanted equipment that is usable. While we were in Tanzania, we visited a brand new school that had several donated computers but the computers were probably 10-15 years old and, in my mind, hardly worth using. I remember thinking that I throw better computers in the trash on a daily basis, so there's got to be a simple way to put these to use. I'd also like to setup a program where students can donate used textbooks. Many of the schools and universities have no books and even if the students have to share, they expressed great appreciation for these resources we often take for granted (or complain about having to purchase) here in the west. The professors that lead my trip to Tanzania are native Africans and have many, many connections in every country in Africa, so they are already bringing computers and books over every few years and I think it would be really cool to expand on this and get more people involved.

You mentioned you recently finished up school. What was your major and what do you want to do now that you've graduated?

I just graduated in May with a BA in business communications. I also took several classes that applied towards a Third World development studies minor but I don't officially have this minor since I actually took a more difficult set of economics courses required for the business degree. This summer, I will continue to work my job of the past four years as a help desk computer technician. In September I'm getting married and hopefully moving to Florida. I'm interested in jobs that involved working with computers and people, like training employees how to use a certain piece of company software. I would love to work for a non-profit but it's hard to find a job like that which will support a young family. Like I said earlier, we are also interested in moving to Africa. My real passion in life is animals and my dream job is to work at the cheetah sanctuary in Namibia.

To learn more about Lies Rosema's experiences in Africa, please click [here](#).

Many thanks to Rosema for taking the time to answer our questions.

Inspired by the good U2 has done in the world, Interference.com is looking to profile people within the U2 fan community who are doing their part to make the world a better place. If you know someone whose work and cause deserve a little attention, please e-mail carrie@interference.com or devlin@interference.com.