

DU alumnus knows the ropes in new overseas youth project

By Elizabeth Fritzler

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In Gulu, Uganda, Ben Porter (BM '01) is a long way from his favorite instrument, the cello.

The Lamont School of Music grad left his home in Fort Collins, Colo., in 2002 to pursue rehabilitation projects around the globe, but he has never abandoned his love for music.

After developing a case of carpal tunnel syndrome that derailed a professional career in music, Porter enrolled at Denver Seminary and obtained a master's degree in community counseling. While there, he discovered a desire to help people. Now equipped with an extensive knowledge of music and psychology, Porter left the U.S. to work with countries in need. He helped rehabilitate drug-addicted and homeless teenagers in Hong Kong and he interned with nonprofits in poverty-stricken Azerbaijan and war-torn Bosnia.

He then traveled to Uganda, where he has focused his energy ever since.

When Porter arrived in Uganda, he trained psychosocial support groups with the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), an organization that provides disaster relief and builds sustainability in small communities.

Porter was helping some of the more than 66,000 children abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army, a group fighting against the Ugandan government. Some children managed to escape, but many of them only knew the world as a dangerous and violent place. In the LRA, the children were used as fighters, guards, porters and sex slaves.

Many of the children now suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). As a result, substance abuse and clinical depression rates are high. According to one study, 54 percent of northern Uganda's former abductees suffer from PTSD.

"Children and youth who came back from captivity were struggling with identity issues," Porter says. "There was rampant mistrust and shame, and parents did not know how to help them cope with these challenges."

After three years, Porter felt the children needed more individual attention — especially to rebuild trusting relationships with their estranged parents and peers.

The problem inspired Porter to create the Recreation Project, a ropes course and outdoor adventure program for 5,000 young people in Gulu. Porter believes ropes courses have high potential for building trust, and he was surprised more were not already in place.

In addition to a ropes course, Porter will use African drums and dancing as a means of healing. He believes music sometimes expresses emotion better than words. Music can give these youth a healthy outlet for their pain and suffering, he says.

"My journey as a musician during my years at DU prepared me to think outside of the box," Porter says. "I have used music therapy with survivors of gross human rights violations in several international contexts. In the aftermath of destruction, it takes the artist's methods to explore creative ways of recovery and healing."

Porter will hold a benefit concert for the Recreation Project at 7:30 p.m. April 15 at the Newman Center for the Performing Arts. A congregation of nuns — the Little Sisters of Mary Immaculate of Gulu — will host the project.

“It has been fun to work with a bunch of sisters,” Porter says. “They have been so generous, and so supportive of the idea. Their passion for working with children is unmistakable.”

DU alumni Kimbal Kurtz (BA '03) and his wife Kellen Kurtz (BA '03) have also joined the project staff.

Porter and the congregation plan to welcome their first group of children in June. He envisions the project as a long-term establishment and will co-direct the effort for at least two years.

Porter hopes the project will one day become a model for other post-conflict environments worldwide. He wants to expand the project to include other sports besides the ropes course, possibly even developing a sports training program with the help of professional athletes.