



Refugees camp on the grounds of a hospital in northern Uganda.



Amid war, hunger, and despair, young Ugandans strive for better lives.

UGANDA: Children of War

by Jim Adams

It started as a quiet, relaxed evening for Akello “Betty” Openy. The 12-year-old was sitting by the fireplace in her home in the Gulu district of northern Uganda. Her mother was cooking dinner, and her father was telling stories to keep Betty and her sister awake as they waited for their food.

“Suddenly, we heard screaming outside, followed by gunshots,” Betty told *JS*. “Before we could run for our lives, rebels took over our family compound. They caught my father, tied his hands behind his

back, and told him to lead the way to the next village.”

Two weeks after her father was **abducted** (taken by force), Betty and the rest of her family—four brothers, three sisters, and her mother—fled their **ancestral** (family) home in fear.

When they reached a nearby town, Betty’s brothers built two small mud huts with thatched roofs. This is where the family still lives, seven years later.

“For my entire life, I have lived with war,” Betty says. “[Now] we are forced to live in wastelands of

poverty and disease.”

At least Betty’s father is home again. But repeated beatings by his captors have left him disabled. He cannot work to support his family.

Seventeen Years of Violence

Like many Ugandan children, Betty is a **refugee** (someone who flees) from violence. For 17 years, Uganda has been torn apart by a civil war.

In 1986, following a military **coup** (takeover), Yoweri Museveni became the President of Uganda. Soon afterward, a group of rebels

called the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) began fighting a civil war against Museveni's government. The LRA wanted to replace the **secular** (nonreligious) Ugandan government with their vision of a true Christian one.

To get supplies, food, and manpower, rebels launched raids on the people of northern Uganda. Members of the LRA destroyed schools and homes, and kidnapped more than 15,000 young people and adults, including Betty's father. These **captives** (prisoners) were forced to work for the LRA as cooks, porters, and soldiers. Most were treated like slaves.

Mary was 14 when the LRA kidnapped her. "A man came by our compound and asked us to show him the way to the next village,"

took us to a warehouse where there were heavy bags of rice that they made us carry," she said. "They were so heavy, but if you couldn't carry [them], they might kill you."

In the Camps

In 1996, the Ugandan government began to move people in northern parts of the country away from the rebels. Whole families were relocated to the center of Uganda and forced to live in displaced-persons camps called "protected villages."

About 600,000 people—more than half of the population of northern Uganda—now live in these villages.

But life there is not easy. Entire families are out of work and must grow whatever food they can on

A recent study estimated that 300,000 children in northern Uganda are now out of school. Many have nothing to do all day. **Idleness** (inactivity)—and the lack of schooling, jobs, and food—is a great source of frustration for children in the camps.

Child Prisoners

Such frustration, however, is dwarfed by the fear of being kidnapped. More than 11,000 young people have been abducted by the LRA. These children face great difficulties when they return to society.

Donald, 15, was a prisoner of the LRA for four months. He was lucky to escape from the rebels, but in running to freedom he only found more trouble.

"I was alone for days in the **bush** [countryside], weak and exhausted," he told relief workers. "Finally I found a village, and the first woman I saw ran away from me in fear."

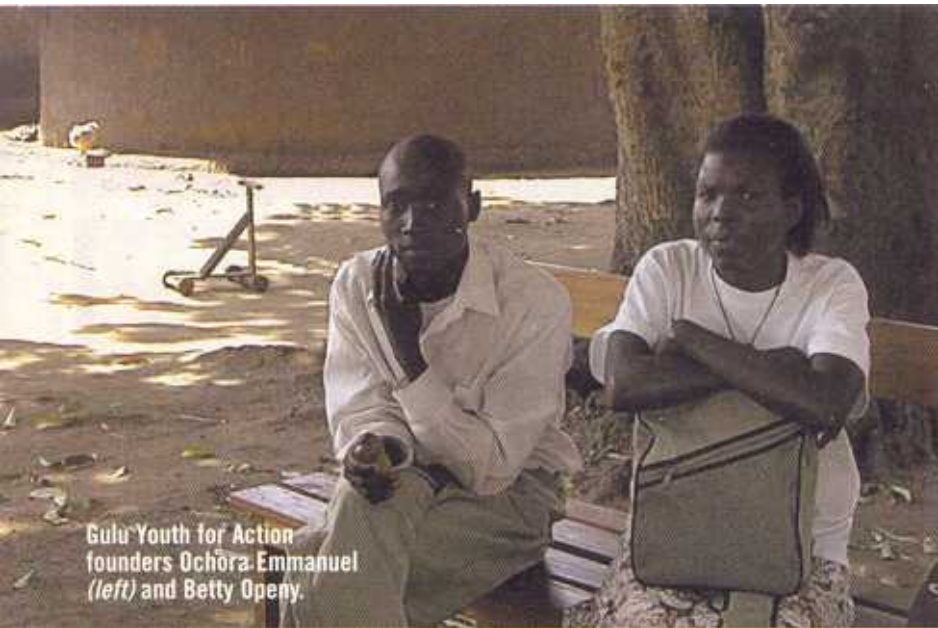
Eventually, Donald was taken to a displaced-persons camp where he returned to school. But he is still traumatized by his experiences.

"I dream about what happened to me, that they are killing me," he said. Despite his nightmares, Donald also dreams of becoming a doctor and of living in peace.

The Key to the Future

Young people in Uganda may be the biggest **casualties** (victims) of the ongoing civil war. Few children have been able to get a good education, and most have not learned skills that will help them earn a decent living.

Some young Ugandans are working to find solutions to these problems. Betty Openy, for example, started an organization called Gulu Youth for



Gulu Youth for Action founders Ochōra Emmanuel (left) and Betty Openy.

COURTESY OF WOMEN'S COMMISSION FOR REFUGEE WOMEN & CHILDREN

she told a relief agency. "Minutes later, five more men came. . . . Each of us was chained together with ropes like goats. I started crying for my grandmother [and] was hit very hard for crying."

The LRA forced Mary to work as a porter for months. "They

limited amounts of land. As a result, many Ugandans in the camps suffer from malnutrition.

The camps are crowded, and some lack clean water and sanitation facilities. Few people have **adequate** (satisfactory) access to health care or medicine.

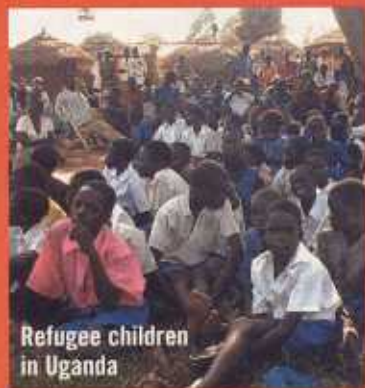
Action (see sidebar below). The group helps other young people get access to education.

"First and foremost we need peace," Betty told *JS*. "We [also] have a right to education, and we want to go to school."

Betty is lucky. After missing two years of school, she found someone to sponsor her education. Now she is back in class,

trying to fulfill her dream of becoming a doctor, or perhaps an international lawyer. Betty knows just how important school is in her life, and in the lives of all the children in Uganda.

"When someone is educated they can stand up for themselves, find a job, and make good decisions," she says. "A generation without education is doomed." **JS**



Refugee children in Uganda



Betty Openy smiles during a visit to Scholastic's offices in New York City.

Making a Difference

My mother never went to school, and she could not find a job [when we moved] to Gulu Town. Although she valued education, my mother could not raise money for any of us to go to school. One by one, my brothers and sisters were all forced to drop out. Finally, it was my turn.

December 6, 2000, marked the end of my education. I cried for two weeks. I failed to realize my dream, which was to become a doctor, and it was very difficult for me to accept this truth.

Access to school is nearly impossible for many children in Uganda. There are few schools, and most people cannot pay the school fees, which can be as high as \$500 a year. Only a small number of students attend university.

After thinking about these problems, Ochora Emmanuel and I formed an organization called Gulu Youth For Action. GYFA is calling for emergency support for education to send young people back to school. Only through education can we help save our communities from further poverty and ruin.

After missing almost two years, I am happy to be back in school. Although I am studying sciences and math and would still like to be a doctor, I now want to study international law, too. There are many children in Uganda and around the world who have had to flee their homes because of war and who have not returned to school. I want to help them.

—Betty Openy

How You Can Help

The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, a nonprofit organization that assists refugees in Uganda and around the world, suggests that you do the following things to help:

- Write letters to your Senators, Representatives, and Governor, asking them to help refugees. Ask other students in your school to write a letter, too!
- Host a benefit or car wash at your school and donate the profits to refugee children or to an organization of your choice.

Your Turn

WORD MATCH

- | | |
|---------------|----------------------|
| 1. abducted | A. inactivity |
| 2. casualties | B. taken by force |
| 3. refugee | C. satisfactory |
| 4. idleness | D. victims |
| 5. adequate | E. someone who flees |

THINK ABOUT IT

1. How would you feel if you were suddenly forced to leave school like children in Uganda?
2. What can you and your school do to help refugees around the world?