

Notes From Africa #11

“Lacan pe buro gi mine” Just because you are poor does not mean you have to sleep with your mother.”
An Acholi proverb

“Have you heard the news?” A worried voice asked over the phone line. “Yes, about an hour ago” I answered, from another beader whose voice betrayed the same angst and alarm. They were calling to tell me that BeadforLife was being denied the use of the Seventh Day Adventist Church where we had been having our bead sales since September. (BeadforLife is an income generating project I started with my daughter, Devin, and Ginny Jordan, from Boulder, a year ago. It has about 150 families in its program, all rolling beads from recycled colorful paper, made into jewelry and sold in North America. All profits are returned to Uganda through community development projects.)

Not knowing where we would conduct our bead buying the following week I reassured those that called me. “We will have the sale outside if we have to. Don’t worry it will be alright.” And so we did the following Monday.

We set up our tables under the trees at 10.00am. By noon the shade was gone, the sun was blistering, the sale was going slowly, and a dry wind started to blow. Think of fine red dust blowing across your face, your hair a jumble, your eyeballs slowly desiccating. Exhaustion set in long before the last bead was bought. I knew that we could not have another sale outside. A new BeadforLife home had to be found, but I would have to think about it in another week after my return from a safari in Ngorogoro Crater. Crazy-making to live between the rich and poor worlds, but this is my lot.

5 days later:

“Mom! You’ll never guess what has happened! The beaders have built a new home for us!” “ What? In five days?”

It seems that the beaders had called a meeting to solve the problem of no home for BeadforLife. They agreed to tax themselves 7,500 Ugandan Schillings (about \$5.00 or three days work in the stone quarry) and to build their own building.

Immediately money was collected. Some women went off to buy the thirty poles, which they hand-carried the five miles from the lumberyard to the Acholi Quarter. Others began chopping down and pulling out a sizeable tree. Still others dug a deep pit to mine the red muram soil which compacts into a hard floor.

Six women went to find tin roofing. Having reached their destination they discovered that they were 50,000 Schillings short of what they needed for the tin roofing. Pleading their cause to the shopkeeper, another customer overheard their dilemma. He was an Acholi tribe member also. He would pay the missing amount.

Daily work parties began. Every beader participated. If someone was sick they sent a son or a cousin to work for them. Those too sick to do physical labor lent support by coming and collecting the money or cooking food. The women carried hundreds of baskets of red muram and packed it down to create a flat hard floor. Men dug the deep holes and set the poles. A neighbor was hired to build the roof.

On Sunday morning when we came to see the building a spontaneous party erupted. The beaders flung themselves into our arms, laughing and crying. An old cooking pot was turned upside down and become an improvised drum. There was singing, dancing and ululating. We admired the new building from every angle. We hugged and appreciated every single beader.

Then the speeches began. We begged to hear the whole story of how this home came to be in only 6 days. Acomo Alice spoke for the beaders.

“In Luo” she began, “There is a proverb. ‘Lacan pe buro gi mine’....“Just because we are poor we do not have to sleep with our mother.” Everyone roared approval. “This means” she explained to the muzungus, “that we poor people have ways of making our lives work. We have options and resources and creativity. We work together to accomplish our dreams. You have discovered that we are determined. This is how we survive.”

Left speechless with appreciation and astonishment, I felt the best thing to do was just let my tears flow. Certainly these impoverished people were not poor. They may not have money or things, their options are limited and life is hard. But they are rich in determination. They are supported by their family and community

circles which are intact and strong. They are clever at getting the things they need. They are not afraid of very hard work. The Acholi, and Ugandans in general, seem to lack self pity. Instead they have great resourcefulness and get on with the business of accomplishing their goals, of having their life, of not “having to sleep with their mothers.”

It was my turn to speak. I stood on a nearby porch, I looked at the beauty of the faces wishing me well, the faces of hope and faith that this building symbolized. I thought of another Acholi proverb. “Aboka Lam” I said, feeling the truth of this saying, which translates literally as “trying to describe light.” It means that although you can hear my words you can never know the depth of this feeling in my heart. I felt deeply happy, supported, and not alone in the effort to make BeadforLife a successful project. I knew that we were all committed and would not be stopped.

The new building is a wonderful meeting place, a beautiful space to gather, to buy beads, to have parties and to hold educational sessions. Our new home is our testimony to hard work and faith. Never could I have imagined the ownership and empowerment that this building symbolizes to the bead makers. Now every day they will work, play, dance and smile in the shade of their own strength and determination.

Truly “Aboka Lam.”

Sending each of you hopes of accomplishing your dreams. Torkin

