

« UGANDAN CHILD MOTHERS GET A SECOND CHANCE
“SAVE THE WORLD” CHALLENGE IMAGES »

HEALING INVISIBLE WOUNDS

Posted by Rachel Yuen on September 3rd 2009 in Organizations



GROUP SHOT OF CHILD REFUGEES.

When the people of a country experience a traumatic event, the aid that is needed usually consists of tangible items: food, water, shelter, health care and so forth. However, Elizabeth and Stephen Alderman believe that treating the psychological scars of war warrants the same attention as treating the physical ones. “The way we’re wired, people get over physical torture pretty quickly. But mental torture — unless they’ve got appropriate treatment — they don’t get over it,” says Stephen, co-founder of the Peter C. Alderman Foundation.



AMES, A CHILD SOLDIER, HOLDS PETER ALDERMAN'S PHOTO. JAMES WAS KIDNAPPED BY THE LORD'S RESISTANCE ARMY AND HELD IN THE BUSH FOR A NUMBER OF YEARS UNTIL HE WAS ABLE TO ESCAPE. THE PICTURE WAS TAKEN AT THE PCA CLINIC IN KITGUM, UGANDA.

Stephen and Elizabeth Alderman's son, Peter, was 25 years old when he was killed during the September 11 terrorist attacks. After his death, Peter's parents sought a way to do something in his memory that would help people. The idea of aiding those who had survived acts of terrorism dawned on Elizabeth when she saw a broadcast on "Nightline" about torture, terrorism and mass violence. "Peter was killed because of terrorism. If we could help people who had survived, it would be a perfect way to honor him," she says.

To put it in perspective, one billion people (one-sixth of the world's population) have experienced torture, terrorism or mass violence through civil war, ethnic cleansing or genocide. The psychological wounds of war are debilitating to entire populations. If left untreated, the mental trauma can prevent people from working, caring for their families, and leading productive lives. Stephen stresses that the cycle of traumatic depression has to be stopped because it can perpetuate for generations. "The abused becomes the abusers," he says.

The Peter C. Alderman Foundation consists of various initiatives. In one key program, doctors from post-conflict countries are trained in methods to treat victimized populations. Another component of the foundation are its nine clinics around the world, the first of which opened in Siem Reap, Cambodia in 2005.



IN FRONT OF THE PCAF CLINIC IN KITGUM. LEFT TO RIGHT: STEVE ALDERMAN, MEMBER OF PCAF STAFF KITGUM; MARY GRACE LANYERO, PCO (PSYCHIATRIC CLINICAL OFFICER), DIRECTOR OF KITGUM STAFF; JAMES (FORMER CHILD SOLDIER); DR. HENRY OBOKE, SENIOR PSYCHOLOGIST; MEMBER OF PCAF STAFF KITGUM; MEMBER OF PCAF STAFF KITGUM; ESTHER, PATIENT AT KITGUM CLINIC AND LIZ ALDERMAN.

The Aldermans believe that treating psychological health is fundamental for all other aid programs. "If people don't care whether they live or die, they're not going to bother putting down their mosquito netting at night. They're not going to walk that extra mile for potable water. They're not going to care for the children in the same way. Dealing with the mental health issues is primary. If people don't care whether or not they live or die, they're not going to care about microfinance. You can't rebuild society if that's the way you feel," says Elizabeth.

The Aldermans recently returned from the second annual Peter C. Alderman Foundation conference in Kampala, Uganda. The conference brought together mental health practitioners to share and learn best practices for treating psycho-trauma in their region. While in Africa, the Aldermans witnessed not only the improvement and growth in the clinics, but also how infectious their passion for this cause had become. Many enthusiastic young people attended the conference, including medical students, nursing students and young social workers who presented fresh data and country reports.



CONFERENCE IN KAMPALA WITH 210 ATTENDEES

Unlike at their first conference, the Aldermans had a chance to talk with many of the clinics' patients and observe their recovery processes. Elizabeth recalls her discussions with three child soldiers. "One child soldier in particular is expressing a lot of his emotions through art. He drew all the terrible things that happened to him. Then he drew arrows to our logo and the tree to see that this was his safe place sustaining him. I felt wonderful to be able to help them, but it broke my heart to see that children have to experience what these children have experienced."

To date, the Peter C. Alderman Foundation has trained 35 doctors from 12 countries on four continents. Building the capacity for countries to treat their own patients is the ultimate goal of the foundation. According to Stephen, "The real endpoint is for them to throw us out of the country — when they don't need us anymore."

ALDERMAN FOUNDATION

