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Independent Lifestyle

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Helping African Refugees Reclaim Their Lives (LEGENDmag 26)

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NEXT LEGENDS

KJERSTIN ERICKSON

At 24 years old, Kjerstin Erickson is making a huge difference in the world. She is a Student at Stanford University and she is also the Founder and Executive Director of FORGE, an organization that helps African refugees reclaim their lives. She started the organization when she was 20 years old, with little more than a dream and has since implemented over 60 community development projects that have served more than 70,000 refugees in four refugee camps in Zambia & Botswana. FORGE has become an official Operating Partner of the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) and works in Zambia, hand-in-hand with refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, Rwanda, Burundi and Sudan.

Where are you from?

I currently live in Oakland, which I consider to be San Francisco's better half.

How did you start?

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I was 20 years old and just completing my third trip to the African continent. It struck me that I had the power to contribute to alleviating the unnecessary suffering in refugee camps, and just possibly to play a role in reversing the destructive cycle of war and poverty in Africa. I was old enough to know it was important and possible, but too young to understand how hard it would be. I was just naive enough.

Where do you look for inspiration?

To survive in this world, you've got to be able to find inspiration everywhere you are and from everyone you meet. I'm particularly inspired by my colleagues, my city, and my parents. But most of all, I'm inspired by all the entrepreneurial people that FORGE works with in Africa. People that have experienced the worst of what humans can do to each other, and who emerge with a stronger conviction than ever in the power of humanity. What's more inspiring than that?

How or why is your generation different from any before it?

We are because we have to be. The challenges facing my generation are unlike any we've seen in millennia. Our entire existence on earth is at risk. And yet, we are concerned about what color iPod to buy. The hardest and most important thing for my generation will be to accept our own limits and our own imperfections.

What makes you good?

If anything, it's always asking myself what makes me not good. I try to be acutely aware of my own and FORGE's weaknesses. It's an organizational culture thing. We are always striving to find things that we can improve, however small. Then we improve them.

Why do you do what you do?

Everyone who has traveled to Africa has a story about their first trip and how it affected them. My first experience in Kenya in 2000 was no different: crippled beggars, distended bellies, children walking miles only to arrive at schools with no supplies. Realizing the extent to which everything I would ever achieve in life was just as much a product of my circumstances and society as it was any of my own doing, how could I ever be comfortable pursuing "success" for my own? In a world without equal opportunity, the achievements of the lucky become irrelevant.

Who influences you?

More than anything, I'm influenced by FORGE's staff (150 African refugees 10 Americans). They help me learn to be a better leader.

Why are you independent?

Ever since I was a little girl, I've had a strong rebellious streak in me. I've never been good at conforming to systems that I didn't understand and practices I didn't believe in. It's been a blessing and a curse.

Who is on your team?

FORGE's staff consists of 150 refugees and 10 Americans, only 3 of whom work in our Oakland office. The rest are on-the-ground in Africa, running our 23 projects day-to-day and empowering refugees to help themselves.

How many times have you wanted to quit?

Twice. Once at 2.5 years in, and once at 4 years in. I asked myself if it was all worth it. I realized that it was.

What is your end goal?

I envision a world in which post-conflict communities are empowered to come together to create bottom-up solutions to their greatest collective challenges. By actively uniting to restore economic and social stability in the aftermath of war, these communities take charge of their own destinies rather than waiting for ever-elusive top-down services. In this way, they play a central role in restoring peace and security to their regions and continents, proving that peace and collaboration is more socially and economically profitable than war and chaos.

Why should we care?

I certainly can't make you! For me, the most powerful "why?" is the fact that we, as humans, are all linked. My fate is your fate, ultimately. Selfishly, we must realize that we're all in this together and our destinies are all intertwined.

What do you see as the future of philanthropy?

My hope is that philanthropy will shift from focusing on the desires and passions of the donors to the desires and passions of the beneficiaries. I look forward to a day when bottom-up development is more celebrated than top-down philanthropy.