



Carrying street food in Kampala, Uganda.

# UGANDA

**IT MAY NOT RANK** in the top 10 list of study abroad destinations, but Uganda has become a veritable hot spot for students looking for a non-traditional education experience.

“The country is viewed as being stable and welcoming to foreigners,” says Mary Lou Forward, the director of African Studies for The School for International Training’s Study Abroad Programs. “It has an excellent university system, and an engaged population interested in its own country’s development and sharing it with other people.”

Forward says she has noticed increased demand for study abroad programs in the East African country, known for its stable economy, stunning visual landscapes, and development issues. Shifting politics in the region may have something to do with the increased student interest. After the United States issued travel warnings to Kenya in 2002, many students were re-directed to Uganda and other countries. Since the 1990s, the nation has long been praised for its

public health awareness programs, especially its AIDS prevention campaigns. Politically, Uganda is seen as a friend. And the armed conflict in the north, though largely neglected in the international political community, has become a champion cause for activist groups.

“There has been increasing media attention that has illuminated a tremendous need, and I think students are responding to that need,” says Alex Michel, the outreach director for the Foundation for Sustainable Development (FSD), a San Francisco-based organization that works with community partners in developing countries around the world, including Uganda.

He reminds students to get a reality check before they study abroad in a non-traditional location. “I think they’re in for a bit of a shock,” he says, pointing out development issues, such as threats of malaria, dysentery, violence, or oppression. “There’s no way to shield yourself 100 percent from those aspects.”

Despite the challenges U.S. students

face when studying abroad in non-traditional locations, FSD’s programs in East Africa, specifically in Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, filled up first this year, compared to other programs. “The promotion of awareness—no matter whom it comes from—at the least encourages a worldly perspective, and the U.S. needs that more than any other country in the world,” Michel says.

*Abroad View* would like to introduce you to several students who traveled to Uganda and came home with their own new perspectives. Aspiring journalist Merritt Watts researched AIDS prevention campaigns in Kampala and discovered a story about female empowerment; activists from the University of Notre Dame launched a worldwide campaign for peace; and a youth-led group from the University of Illinois at Chicago found power in pictures with their photography exhibit. Their stories serve as an inspiration to all who look to take study abroad a little farther.

—Erica Schlaikjer

# beads of hope

A journalism student researches a jewelry-making program that empowers women to change the face of AIDS in Uganda BY MERRITT WATTS

**RED IS EVERYWHERE** in Kampala. Not the red I see on a daily basis here in the United States—like Bono’s (Product) RED apparel lining the walls at Gap stores, or the ribbons pinned to the lapels of celebrities at award shows. The red in Kampala comes from the ground up. It starts in the relentless potholes that begin inches below Kampala’s roads. Women with homemade brooms bow at the roadsides to sweep the inevitable red dirt off the streets. The passing *boda bodas*, motorcycle “taxis,” that prefer to bypass traffic by swerving off the roads, stir up dirt, undoing the women’s hard work. The red dirt clouds hover and drift through doorways covered by thick blankets. The clouds pass under walls of rusting corrugated metal.

Months after ending my three-week stay in Kampala, I still couldn’t get the red out. It settled in rings around the tops of my socks and the necks of my shirts. The dust had become embedded in my clothes and shoes when I trekked across the region in August 2006.

After volunteering in Uganda, I became fascinated with the country. When an international research grant became available through my journalism school, I applied for funds to travel and research HIV prevention communication campaigns in Kampala. Four months, \$3,500, and lots of paperwork later, I found myself on my first night in Uganda reading the daily newspapers underneath a mosquito net until the electricity went out. I spent my days walking from my small room in a guest house at the top of Namirembe Hill to the Makerere University Library to research, driving to newspaper offices to interview editors, and hopping on the back of *bodas* to weave through traffic and make it to my appointments at NGOs.

Uganda was the first African country to reduce its HIV prevalence rate, and I explored the capital city in hopes of encountering a fairy tale ending to

this optimistic scenario in the fight against AIDS. The decrease in HIV/AIDS prevalence from **approximately 30 to 15 percent in 1991 to close to 6 percent in 2003** has earned Uganda the reputation of a “sub-Saharan success story.” When rates plummeted, the world noticed, and many pointed to Uganda’s unique approach to HIV/AIDS communication. The country’s leaders, including President Museveni, addressed the AIDS problem openly. Public information campaigns introduced the now much celebrated “ABC model” for prevention communication.

The alphabet letters stand for “Abstain, Be faithful, use Condoms,” a three-pronged approach to encouraging behaviors that protect against HIV. The campaigns were apparent as soon as I had arrived at Entebbe airport. A billboard on the two-lane paved highway between Entebbe and Kampala bore a picture of a young woman’s wholesome face: “She’s waiting for marriage—what about you?” the billboard read. A popular newspaper ad addressed “Something for Something love” by depicting a mini soap-opera in comic book form: an older man gave a young school girl a cell phone; the girl, later with a rounded belly and tears on her cheeks, stared at the cell phone with regret; and in the final scene, the man was led away in handcuffs as the young woman got scolded by her mother.

These ABC-type campaigns are termed “behavior change communication” by scholars who research such tactics, and “communication interventions” by the NGOs and government agencies that create them. Similar to the anti-smoking “truth” campaign in the United States, the ABC campaign uses statistics, information, and powerful stories to change attitudes about sexual behaviors, and improve the health of the country.

As a journalism student, I loved the idea that communication and mass media may have saved lives and made a

difference in Uganda’s future. I framed my research question around the disputes I read in American media and heard in our political discussions: how can the government balance these supposedly conflicting messages—abstain *and* use condoms? It’s a question first asked in America’s high school health classes and later by aid programs for HIV in Africa. The President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, a program launched by President Bush in 2003, requires that one-third of prevention funds must be used for abstinence-until-marriage programs. An article in *New Scientist* (May 6, 2006) asked, “Is campaigning for abstinence and fidelity, to the significant exclusion of condom promotion, the right way to tackle HIV in Africa?” An editorial in the *New York Times* (May 13, 2006) warned, “The elevation of ideology over both science and local needs is deadly in this case.”

However, as soon as I arrived in Uganda, I realized that debate within the country went far beyond the moralistic dilemma of abstinence “versus” condoms. Newly released data from the Uganda HIV/AIDS Sero-Behavioral Survey 2004 to 2005, indicates that although HIV rates are stagnating, it is becoming a “female disease.” While 3.4 percent of 20- to 24-year-old men have HIV, 7.3 percent of women the same age have the virus. For the first time in 20 years, the most affected age group is 24- to 35-year-olds, instead of 15- to 24-year-olds. These are not the kind of demographics that point to a young, uneducated, and sexually experimental population gambling with the threat of HIV. Instead, being a married, monogamous woman can be a risk factor for AIDS.

## CHALLENGING THE NORM

It is this type of data that has caused a shift in the debate, from sexual behavior of young adults to gender inequality and deeply ingrained beliefs about women in

African society. Monicah Amoding, media and advocacy officer for the Centre for Domestic Violence Prevention in Kampala, is a self-described “Ugandan feminist” in the debate about HIV prevention. She claims the “ABCs” won’t solve the problem of stagnating HIV/AIDS numbers in Uganda because they don’t address the underlying social and cultural contexts that are preventing another big drop in HIV prevalence rates—the fact that women, even married ones, depend on men for social power and economic resources and

is the only way to increase the effectiveness of A, B, and C. In a country where 90 percent of women believe that wife-beating is justifiable in certain situations and only 30 percent of women expect their husbands to be faithful, the HIV risk for women doesn’t stop with the ABCs. How can a woman abstain when sex is a “marital duty”? How can she reduce her risk by being faithful if her husband is not? And since the Ugandan government doesn’t subsidize female condoms, how can a woman make decisions about protection without relying on her husband?

On my way home from my afternoon with Amoding, I noticed a sign outside of a petrol station—two crested cranes, Uganda’s national bird, with their long graceful necks intertwined. “The Crested Crane sticks faithfully to one partner until death,” read the sign. “Coincidence? Abstinence and faithfulness: 100% guarantee.” I looked at this sign, sponsored by the Ugandan government, and almost laughed. *This? This poster, these billboards, those newspaper advertisements that I came here to study—is this it? Is this the future of eliminating AIDS in Uganda?*



Strings of beads made by Bead for Life.

that in order to survive a woman must forfeit control over her sexuality.

“How can you ask a girl or woman to abstain from sex, if that is the only way she can get school fees, feed her family or stay in her own home?” she asked me. “If women do not have social and economic power in marriage, the ABCs can do nothing for them.”

Amoding wrote an editorial in *The New Vision*, Uganda’s government-sponsored daily paper. “In addition to ABC,” she said, “power inequalities in sexual relationships must be addressed so that women are able to make choices regarding sexual matters.” She suggested subsidized female condoms and communication campaigns that go beyond ABC and educate women about their rights within a marriage.

For writing this, she received hate mail for days, some of it published in the next day’s letters to the editor. But, she explains, improving the status of women

through bracelets and necklaces. She examines the flawlessly twisted glossy rolls, draping long strands across her thigh and stacking her forearms with bracelets. Alice, a single mother, was going to be evicted from her home after her husband died. Without him she could not get the HIV treatment that she and her sons needed. Until she discovered Bead for Life.

“I did not have a way to make money,” she explains to me without losing her focus on sorting the ever-growing pile of beads. “Without my husband I could have nothing, until the beads.”

Under the shade of a tree a few feet away from the selling point, one woman has set up her own micro-business, selling colorful scrap paper to beaders, who use the paper to create their jewelry. Women examine the papers—many of them old advertisements or event posters—and scrutinize the colors, putting grey or black pieces back in the pile, and fingering the brightly colored shades to check for appropriate thickness and gloss.

One woman nods her head approvingly as she finds a cluster of bright red sheets with minimal text. The papers are copies of an old report cover from the United Nations about HIV and health communication services, a report I had used for my research before coming to Uganda. She paid a few shillings and tucked the red sheets into her plastic bag, along with a new can of varnish.

Now, as I bleach the tops of my t-shirts in a futile attempt to make them wearable after being saturated in Kampala’s red dust, the color no longer reminds me of red ribbons or red products. Instead, I think of a string of little red beads, tied into a necklace that, for Alice and the other women at Bead for Life, has proven to be the key to surviving independently and, for other women, could be the future of a truly effective type of HIV prevention. **AV**

► Merritt Watts graduated from Northwestern University last spring with a degree in journalism. She traveled to Uganda in the summer of 2006 through The Medill School of Journalism Eric Lund Gran. Contact her at m-watts-1@northwestern.edu.

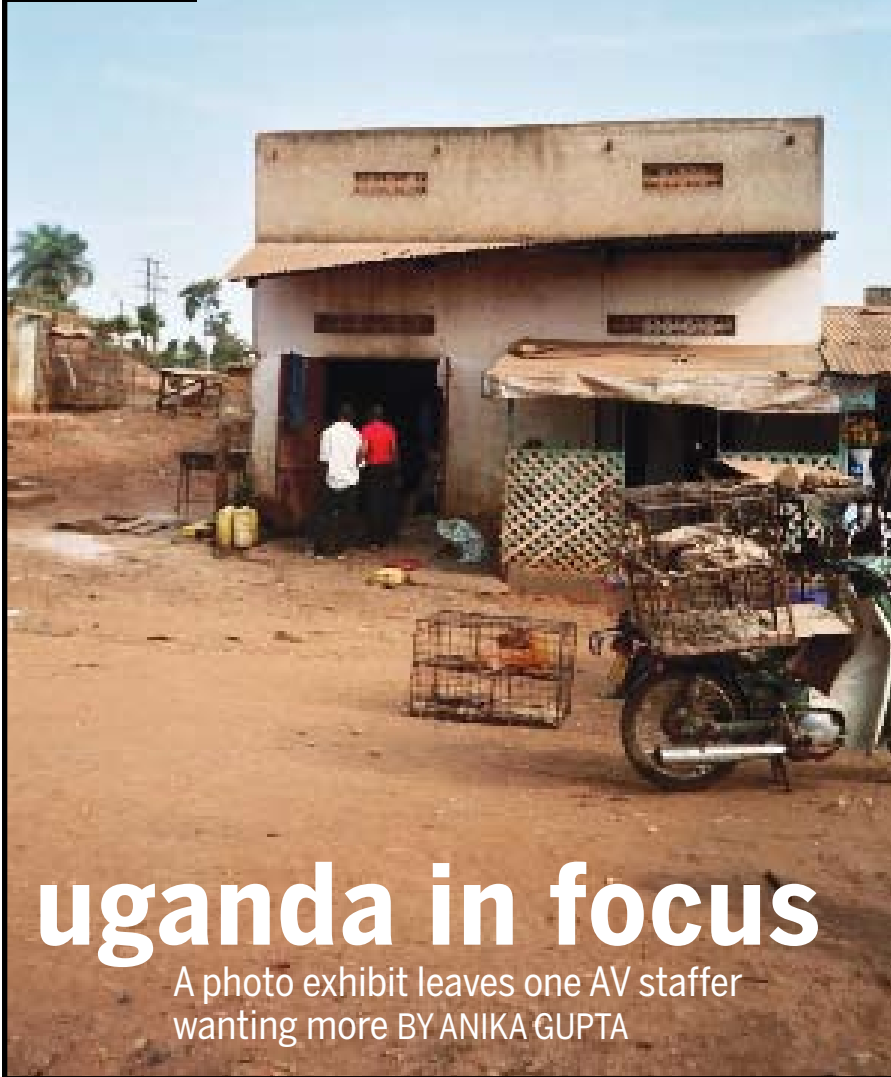
## A NEW SOLUTION

“Women are amazing! *Women are amazing!* Women are full of power! *Women are full of power!*”

Angela Mulinda, program director of Bead for Life, a U.S.-based not-for-profit community organization, leads a group of women gathered outside of Nsambya Hospital in a boisterous song. The 25 women have gathered under a straw hut to sell beads they crafted out of paper and varnish. The beads will later be exported to the United States. This particular week everyone is especially excited. Bead for Life has announced that it will buy up to 50,000 shillings (about \$27) worth of jewelry from each woman in order to prepare for the Christmas season in America.

As the beaders (a title for women who roll the paper beads) line up to sell their handmade jewelry, Alice, a former beader and current Bead for Life employee, sits cross-legged on a straw mat sorting

Mulago slums of Kampala, as seen by a photographer in Project FOCUS



# uganda in focus

A photo exhibit leaves one AV staffer wanting more BY ANIKA GUPTA

**IN AFRICA, THEY SAY,** “Seeing is different from being told.” In a new photography exhibit by the youth-led group Project FOCUS, we’re asked to see the reality of life in Uganda. It’s something many of us have already heard about through grim statistics—many of Uganda’s residents live below the international poverty line, earning less than \$365 a year.

But what does this number mean for Ugandan citizens? African wisdom also tells us, “He who asks questions cannot avoid the answers.” Project FOCUS aims to do more than just show us what we already know.

“People are sick of seeing dead babies, or statistics, or all the negative aspects of Ugandan life,” says Harish Patel, a senior at the University of Illinois at Chicago and one of the project’s founders. “We want

to show that Ugandans also eat, drink, laugh, and play. Their lives are as complicated as our lives.”

To illustrate the diverse nature of Ugandan daily life, Project FOCUS put cameras in the hands of 16 children, ages 12 to 21, who live in the Mulago slums of Kampala, Uganda. Their mission: “Describe life in Uganda through the lens of your camera.” The children’s photographs turned into an exhibit that appeared at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Patel credits the 2004 Academy Award-winning film, *Born Into Brothels*, for giving him and three other academics the idea for the project. “We decided to work in Uganda because they have a history of inequality and corruption,” Patel says.

The “Inequality” display struck me as the exhibit’s most powerful presentation.

In one photo, slum-dwellers walk alongside lakes of dirty water. In the photo beside it, a rich Ugandan boy dives into a clean blue swimming pool. The contrast between the images of decadence and poverty caught my attention. But in the absence of captions, I never fully understood the story being told.

A poster board mounted beside the “Inequality” display attempted an explanation. The curators posed two questions to each of the Ugandan children. “Why did you take these photos?” and “What did you learn from this project?” They taped the handwritten responses to a black bulletin board.

“My photo of the plantation was to show you that although we are poor we can also manufacture some things [sic] for ourselves,” wrote Nankanja Helen. Clearly, Helen doesn’t see poverty as a terminal condition.

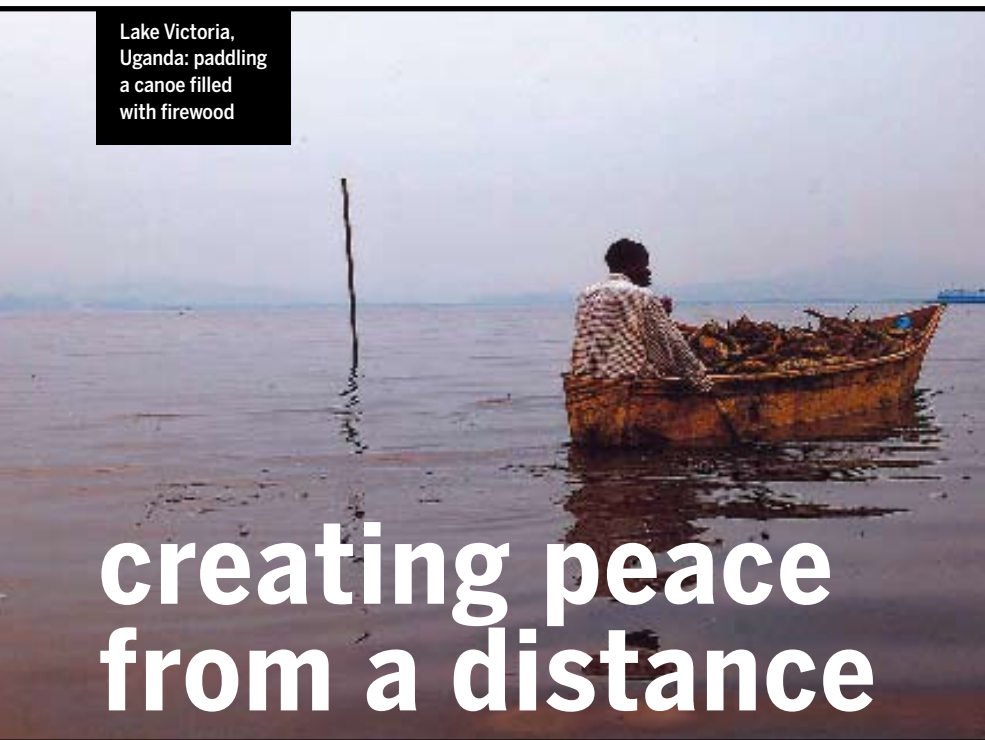
It’s a theme Project FOCUS founder Daniel Yang brought up in his statement about the exhibit, when he said, “Poverty, sickness, and death compose a grim reality [in Uganda], but by no means are they a way of life.” And faced with Helen’s writing, the Project FOCUS idea seems like nothing short of brilliance: who can capture what it means to be poor and Ugandan besides poor Ugandans? Could the Project FOCUS curators have trusted their cameras to anyone else?

One of the quotations in the exhibit stayed with me even after I had left. In response to the question, “What did you learn?” Kalue Enock wrote, “I came to know places I never knew before.”

I wish I could have known these places better. I wish I could have heard more from the Ugandan children, or even had captions to explain the links between the photos. But maybe I ask for too much certainty. Just because I ask questions, doesn’t mean I’ll get answers. In this way, seeing is different from being told. **AV**

► *The Project FOCUS exhibit ran at the University of Illinois at Chicago through February 16, 2007 and was also shown at Northwestern University as part of the International Youth Volunteerism Summit. Read more about the organization at <http://projectfocus.org>.*

Lake Victoria, Uganda: paddling a canoe filled with firewood



# creating peace from a distance

Two University of Notre Dame alums launch a worldwide campaign to end violence in Uganda BY ERICA SCHLAIKJER

**SOMETIMES YOU JUST** have to take matters into your own hands.

“We did it because no one else was doing it, and we understood how serious [the problem] was,” says 24-year-old Michael Poffenberger, co-founder of Resolve Uganda, an international advocacy group dedicated to ending the 20-year armed conflict in northern Uganda. “I’m committed to this until the war ends.”

Poffenberger and his classmate, Peter Quaranto, started the organization after studying abroad in Uganda with the School for International Training’s (S.I.T.) Development Studies program. While in Africa, they interviewed religious people, soldiers, and victims of war. It was the first time they encountered displaced persons, malnutrition, and other effects of genocide. Poffenberger says the experience altered his post-graduation plans.

As a student of anthropology and peace studies, Poffenberger expected to spend life after college traveling and doing “cultural immersion.” But instead he is leading a worldwide grassroots move-

ment. Resolve Uganda—originally known as the Uganda Conflict Action Network (Uganda-CAN)—has held briefings before Congress, met with U.S. State Department officials, and organized nationwide events. The group’s April 2007 “Displace Me” campaign involved more than 59,000 people in 15 U.S. cities who committed to sleeping outside to attract media attention and pay tribute to the 1.4 million internally displaced individuals in Uganda.

“It’s been an adventure, that’s for sure,” Poffenberger says.

## LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

Poffenberger’s adventure started in Kampala, where he lived with a middle-class family. His homestay mom was a banker; her husband was a politician. They had six children. Their time together gave him an opportunity to connect his academic skills to real-life situations.

“It provided the space to have really good and meaningful, constructive conversations,” Poffenberger says.

One such conversation about the par-

allels between the Rwandan genocide and the war in northern Uganda inspired Poffenberger and his classmate Quaranto to create Uganda-CAN. Poffenberger’s host family talked about dead bodies floating downstream from Rwanda into Ugandan lakes and rivers, and yet most southern Ugandans knew very little about the devastation.

“It spurred my curiosity and helped me want to learn more and explore more about what was going on in the north,” Poffenberger says.

The original Uganda-CAN online resource and blog compiled current events, news analysis, and policy recommendations. After Poffenberger graduated in 2005, he moved to Washington, D.C. to spend more time developing the website, with support from the Africa Faith and Justice Network, a social advocacy organization. Meanwhile, Quaranto worked from Notre Dame’s campus as he finished his senior year.

In April 2007, the organization beefed up its finances, organizational structure, and human resources, changing its name to Resolve Uganda. The group is now more focused on grassroots action, using a two-pronged approach of coalition-building and creating action toolkits to get people involved in ending the conflict. Other organizations, such as Oxfam and Invisible Children, have offered their support to develop policy analysis and tools for activism.

Meanwhile, Poffenberger and Quaranto continue to fight against “the legacy of international neglect that has allowed the war in northern Uganda to continue.”

As someone who was originally attracted to Uganda because of the positive stories he heard from fellow students, Poffenberger has this piece of advice for future visitors: “Listen as much as possible and use the experience to look at the world through somebody else’s eyes. Allow that to impact how you live your life and how you see the world.” **AV**

► *Erica Schlaikjer, editor-at-large of *Abroad View*, graduated from Northwestern University in March 2007 with a double-major in journalism and international studies.*

# interview :: an insider's perspective

*Abroad View* caught up with Stephen Okello, a Ugandan native and co-founder of Resolve Uganda, to get his perspective on the issues affecting his country and the role of study abroad programs. Okello says he joined Resolve Uganda to serve as a voice for victims who had no access to the media. "My ultimate goal is to improve my ability to influence events through well-informed and conceived social and political action," he says. Okello has traveled to Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya, Sudan, Congo, and the United States. He recently received a scholarship from the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame.

**Abroad View:** As a Ugandan native, how is your perspective different from those of your Western or American colleagues?

**Stephen Okello:** First, I am a direct

witness to the conflicts in my country. Having lived through two violent wars in Uganda—involving the Lord's Resistance Army in northern Uganda and later the Allied Democratic Forces in western Uganda, where my family resettled as internally displaced persons—I have experienced some of their worst consequences. One question that has often plagued me is, "Why is international will and attention so lacking?" In recent years there has been an influx of humanitarian aid to the region, but political understanding and will on the part of international actors have been absent.

**AV:** How do you feel about foreign students who visit Uganda to study, work, or volunteer for short-term periods? Are they helpful or harmful to the local communities?

**SO:** My answer is a mixed bag. Many foreign students are eager to learn and

test what they have learned about Africa in class. Others come with a mentality of fixing things in Africa. Some come with a very honest outlook on the basics that need urgent attention. I think there needs to be greater emphasis on efforts to address the long-term effects after the end of a conflict.

**AV:** Why is it important to study abroad?

**SO:** It enriches a student with reality. Study abroad provides an opportunity to engage with the practical dimensions of what is learned in class.

**AV:** What is the biggest lesson you learned from traveling abroad?

**SO:** The reality that culture is so diverse yet human beings are the same everywhere. Human disparity is an opportunity to celebrate life in a unique way that transcends artificial walls that societies build around them. —E.S.



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