

## **A life in the day of Abwola Hellen Okwera told to me by Pat Wiles The forgotten war and the feeding of the 4000.**

Pat Wiles approaches me, a smiling, energetic, smartly dressed, middle aged executive. As requested she brings with her a photo of a friend whose story she wants to share... It is a picture of Hellen, a slim Ugandan lady, in startling white trainers, man- handling a cooking pot big enough to bath in!

Pat has recently returned to the Island, and is currently living with her mother Ann in Onchan. Pat has plans to set up her own business to “make her million!”. After 6 months of working in the field, her aim in coming home is to finance the building and running of a school in Uganda.

Like many of us Pat is widely travelled, visiting unusual and exotic places, excited by the differences in the world, ready to move onto that “new experience”. But in 2001 during a trip to Mali, she experienced the dawning realisation that “being welcomed almost as a celebrity amongst the poorest of the poor was in its own way another form of exploitation.” Her personal thrill, her thrill of adventure was someone else’s reality. She could always return to her own comfort zone, but for the people who lived there, it was a reality they couldn’t escape from.

Like many of us Pat came away determined to “do something”, she sponsored two children in Uganda, made a personal financial commitment, but found she was not satisfied with “just giving money”. In 2004 she volunteered to help Childcare International-Kitgum, sharing her marketing skills to help streamline their sponsorship management.

And there she met Abwola Hellen Okwera.

Hellen has chosen to return to her native home in Northern Uganda, to the ongoing 20 year old civil war that fails to hit our news headlines, but continues to take the lives of hundreds of thousands of people and has created millions of orphans. A well educated woman, trained as a patisserie chef in Kampala, Helen has come back to live and work amongst her own people. The only cooking she does now is to feed *four thousand* children with two hot meals a day, every day!

Her working day at Victory Centre Childcare school begins at 7am. Before this Hellen, with her baby daughter Eternity, and her eleven adopted children have walked the 6km. from their home, a traditional dwelling built on land with no title deeds. Helen has another child, a six year old boy Troy. Life in the Kitgum area is so dangerous for boys that she has sacrificed the intimacy of a mother’s relationship with her only son to safeguard his life from the ongoing attacks of the Lords Resistance Army.

Incongruously, it was on the very trip to take her son, to her sister in the safety of Kampala, that the rebels struck. The bus they were travelling on was overturned, and in the turmoil and the debris of the fighting she lost her son. Left as dead, when the LRA had gone, she searched the debris of the bus, to find him alive and protected by the slumped body of the driver. She has since seen many other boys her son’s age, violently abused, forced to commit atrocities against their own families, and abducted to become boy soldiers. Her eleven adopted children from her extended family have all lost their parents from the fighting and from AIDS and she houses, feeds and educates them.

Hellen heads a team of 23 cooks. Working over a wood fire in temperatures of 50c they produce breakfast of maize porridge, and lunch of rice and beans.... only once a year do they cook meat. There are 4000 children in this school, just some of the 95% of the overall population that live in the six displacement camps on the edge of Kitgum. These are orphans and children from destitute families, those who cannot live in their own homes, who cannot farm their own land, for fear of the rebel soldiers. The wood for the fire is brought by the children themselves, collected by the women who risk their lives to go

beyond the camps in search of fuel. Hellen's husband, an engineer, no longer works in the community for fear of rebel attack, but works their land, aware that any time he could be caught by rebel soldiers, or shot by the government troops for being beyond the "protected zone".

Assisted by the UN food distribution scheme, Hellen's job is a fine balancing act of practical help and endless administration. Accountability, evaluation and budgeting is now part of any aid package. All distributed food has to be weighed and recorded, evaluation has to be made of how many boys and girls receive food, extra clinics are run for malnourished children, extra hot meals are made in the evening for those children with no parents... and the teaching staff of the school receive yet a different meal. The whole schools time- tabling is based around the daily efficient running of the canteen. A job that sees no end, that receives no rewards.

I asked Pat why out of all the people she must have met she chose to speak about Hellen. Her answer says it all

"Because Hellen is someone who has chosen such a selfless life... She has great empathy for people, she has great love for her husband and children, in the face of all she deals with, she is always friendly and welcoming, generous and joyful"

In our society, how many people can we say that about?