

INVISIBLE NO M



MORE



Meet new student from Uganda

By Julie Hahn

Ugandan student Acii Nancy's long journey to Boise State began with professor Phil Kelly's bout of insomnia.

Unable to sleep one night, the College of Education professor got out of bed and popped the documentary "Invisible Children" into the DVD player. "Invisible Children" follows young Ugandans who were forced to become refugees because of brutal attacks by a rebel group known as the Lord's Resistance Army. Kelly was transfixed by the images of the young people struggling just to stay alive.

A few short months later, during the summer of 2007, he was in Gulu, Uganda, teaching high school chemistry and physics to the "Invisible Children." His first lesson went over like a lead balloon, and Kelly was puzzled as to why.

A Ugandan teacher pulled him aside: Kelly was teaching as if the students had books, but in reality, their library had only a few World Book encyclopedias from the 1960s. Instead, Kelly would have to dictate the lesson — essentially, the textbook — so that the students could memorize it and then study. He would have to dictate every comma, every period.

Kelly was taken aback. He wasn't sure how he could help students who had so little. At the time he couldn't imagine that one of the students from Gulu — Acii Nancy — would make the long journey to Idaho, or that she would spend four years on scholarship at Boise State as part of a project that has the potential to change lives on two continents.

Nancy (according to Ugandan custom, her family name, Acii, pronounced ah-chee, comes before her given name) is soft-spoken. Her speech is formal and crisp compared to her American counterparts, and her enthusiasm for her friends bubbles out in conversation in the form of giggles.

ACII NANCY walks through a cornfield in her native Uganda — thousands of miles and a world away from Boise State, where she will study for the next four years.

Nancy is 19 years old. She has grown up around war in northern Uganda, and when asked about it — or about any hardships in her life — she downplays what she has seen.

Her mother died of AIDS in 1996, and her father died of the same disease in 2004. You can hear her love for her father in her voice when she talks about the importance he placed on education for Nancy and her six siblings.

He wanted his children to be in school no matter what, she says, and discouraged them from visiting him in the hospital. He told them to study instead.

Acii Nancy

“That was the real value of our lives; it didn’t matter that he was in pain,” she says. “He wanted assurance that we were actually studying.”

She followed her father’s instructions even when she contracted malaria during her final years of high school. In Uganda, the final high school exams are nationwide. Nancy sat for the exams despite her illness, not wanting to waste time.

“We could wait for the next year or just try to go through in our condition,” she says. “I looked at it as something I had worked for for a long time and I didn’t want to give up at the last moment even when I was ill — I guess I was just determined and I wanted to try.”

When she heard, through the Invisible Children organization, that a university called Boise State was offering a scholarship to study in America, she jumped at the chance.



Kelly knew that his family and work commitments would make it difficult to do another teaching stint in Uganda. He decided to try a different tack.

When he returned to Boise he wrote an e-mail to Boise State President Bob Kustra asking for permission to create a scholarship that would allow one of the Ugandan students to study at Boise State for four years. Kustra said yes.

Kelly joined forces with the Office of International Programs, which hammered out the labyrinthian visa process, and with the Department of Student Affairs. Invisible Children chose 13 finalists for the scholarship, and then Kelly, Sabine Klahr and Christina Babcock-Quintero from International Programs whittled the number down to a handful that Kelly would

interview in Uganda.

Kelly picked Nancy.

“She had strong academics, she is very serious, and — I don’t know how to say this — there’s something about her that makes you believe in her,” Kelly says.

For Kelly, bringing Nancy here is about more

than giving her an opportunity to finish her education. It’s about adding a new member to his family. Speaking on the phone with her about a month before her arrival, he said, “My daughters are very excited to have you as a sister.”

The Kelly family — including Kelly’s wife and his three teenage daughters — rearranged their living situation to give Nancy her own room. They asked her via e-mail about her favorite colors and spent a weekend painting her bedroom brown and cream and blue. They asked about her favorite foods. They talked about what it meant to add another person to their family.

“As far as my girls are concerned, that means shopping,” he says.



Nancy fainted when she heard that she had been selected for the Boise State scholarship. When she came to, she began to question whether she could undertake such a huge assignment. She didn’t know anything about Idaho. She would have to leave Uganda, whose borders she had never crossed, and travel to a university on another continent and live with people she had never met. She said she had to turn down the scholarship.

Her mentor, Okwir Joyce Patricia, stepped in.

“It was through my mentor’s encouragement, she actually believed so much in me,” Nancy says. “I actually thought I could not make it. I could not represent all of the student body. I thought, ‘Can I really be that example?’ I didn’t think I could, I didn’t have the focus. Through her encouragement and faith in me it made me realize I should take it.”

Patricia says that she knew in her heart that the scholarship was perfect for Nancy. “She’s very mature in her thinking and behavior — she is also very vulnerable because she doesn’t have a home where she belongs,” she says. Like so many of the Invisible Children, Patricia says, the ongoing violence left her without blood relatives on whom she could rely for support.

“This will give her a real home,” she says.

Nancy has become something of a hero in Gulu. A representative from Invisible Children told Kelly that Nancy spoke to several hundred of her fellow classmates. When prodded, Nancy said that she had, but downplayed the numbers.

“You speak to someone and the rest is in one’s heart,” she says. “I felt like I had to try to inspire them, but people react differently. Some of them were shocked, some were amazed ... it was a mixture of feelings.

“I spoke to them about my life, my background, my beliefs. I basically tried to encourage them and make them know that they have the ability to make it to their dreams and to do more than I do and to reach higher levels than I have.”





Patricia says that Nancy’s story has already been a boon to other students, especially other girls.

“It will give me a point of reference,” she says. “I can say, ‘Nancy has made it, so I know you can make it, too.’”



Nancy’s time in the United States may reach far beyond both Boise and Gulu. “My hopes are that she thrives and does well both culturally and academically, and that Boise State and other universities look at her success and devote further scholarships to that war-torn region of the world,” Kelly says.

In the past few months, Kelly has fielded phone calls from universities on the east coast that are interested in bringing Invisible Children to the United States to study.

“Hopefully we can have a snowball effect and help more kids,” he says.

Nancy’s plan is to study the health sciences, especially nursing, at Boise State. In her scholarship application, she says that her dream is to return to Gulu to start a health clinic in her village.

“I have always loved medicine and have always wanted to be a doctor — I love kids, children, and babies in particular,” she says. As she speaks about her future, her tone gets more serious.

“I want to work with a vulnerable group in our society,” she says. “I will be protecting them, housing them, healing them all of the time.”

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