



## Meet Holly Philpot, an International Human Rights major who is no longer a “munu” in Africa.

**Tell us a bit about yourself:** I grew up in Titusville, a small town on the east coast of Florida right next to Kennedy Space Center. I received my B.A. in History from the University of Florida. In the years between undergraduate and the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, I had a variety of jobs; I worked in an educational outreach office at Kennedy Space Center before spending a year in Uganda as a humanitarian aid worker. Upon returning from Uganda, I taught middle school in Florida for a short time before moving to Colorado to begin my studies at the Josef Korbel School.

**What brought you to the Josef Korbel School?** I am studying for my [M.A. in International Human Rights](#), but what drew me to the Josef Korbel School was the [Humanitarian Assistance certificate program](#), as well as the [school's location](#). The class that has been most relevant to my interests and to my studies thus far has been [Professor Peter Van Arsdale's](#) "Human Rights and the International Refugee System."

I believe we all have the capability to be "agents of change" in the world, and I am grateful and excited for what my studies at the Josef Korbel School are contributing to my effectiveness on the field. However, I also believe that we must go beyond academic and theoretical knowledge as we strive to bring about positive change in the world. My experiences in Uganda have led me to believe strongly that being an agent of change requires an approach to humanitarian assistance that equally employs both academic knowledge (reason) and emotional investment (compassion). Both are incredibly vital.

**Would you share some of your Ugandan experiences with us?** I worked with an education-oriented, faith-based project called ["Hope Alive!"](#) that aided at-risk youth through the provision of educational opportunities, leadership development, and basic provision. The majority of the students were either refugees (from Sudan) or internally displaced persons from Northern Uganda-- though we also aided a number of non-displaced children in Kampala and Southern Uganda as well. Around 400 students ranging in age from six to 22 were enrolled in the project.

I think my official job title was something along the lines of "At-Risk Youth Development Worker," but my responsibilities varied greatly based on the needs of the students and the project at the time. My most common roles were that of mentor, teacher, administrative assistant, driver, researcher, advocate and - above all - friend. By far the most valuable part of my year in Uganda was the relationships I developed with the students, with my co-workers, and with people from the communities in which we worked.

**As a humanitarian aid worker, what moments are most meaningful in the field?** For the first six months, whenever I walked through the Internally Displaced Persons' camp in Koro Abili, the children and adults were happy to see me, but they would always address me as "munu"-- which means "white person" in Acholi, the tribal language of the region. One day, while walking through the camp, I heard a lone small voice calling from behind a *tuccul*: "Holly!" (pronounced

in Uganda like the word "holy"). In surprise, I turned around to see a number of children who then began to shyly call my name. As these were not children participating in our project, I do not even know how they learned my name, but at that moment I knew that I had "arrived" in Koro Abili.

After months of "being present" and engaging in conversations within that IDP camp, the people began to see me as an individual who was a part of their community rather than just another 'white' worker; they began to call me by name. Their acceptance allowed me, as much as possible as an outsider, to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges, joys, fears, hopes, and motivations of the IDPs themselves as they became more willing to share their opinions and experiences with me. The more intimately I came to understand their perspectives and hardships, the more adequate I felt in my abilities to address their needs. My experiences in Uganda in general, and Koro Abili in particular, have convinced me more than ever of the necessity of long-term investment and relationship building in order to truly be effective in the field.

**What persuaded you to focus on African affairs?** I have been interested in other cultures and themes of injustice since I was young; a natural overlap of these themes can be seen in many locations throughout the world, but especially in Africa. As a teenager, I became fascinated with Holocaust studies and the concepts of good and evil; this led to a curiosity concerning the Rwandan genocide and, eventually, to a deep interest in Africa in general.

Africa suffers from a number of "big issues," from poverty to corruption to war. However, at the center of each of these issues is a deeply rooted legacy of injustice that is compounded by the relative indifference of the international community towards a region that has little strategic benefit. The international humanitarian community tends to focus on the most obvious needs (i.e. food, shelter, security) to combat the larger issues. Though these material provisions are vastly important, so is the provision of opportunity and empowerment that would allow communities to combat injustice and enact change for themselves. Though I do not have all the solutions, I see genuine and lasting change occurring primarily through long-term investment at the grassroots level, especially in the areas of education and leadership development.

- - *Nirvana Bhatia, Master's candidate International Human Rights,  
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