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Sandi Giver rebuilds lives, empowers victims of war in Africa

KOKOMO, Ind. — Sandi Giver’s heart for helping those in greatest need takes her to places most people fear to go.

She’s lived without electricity and water in war-torn Uganda, providing a mother’s love to teen girls rebuilding lives shattered by civil war. In the slums of India, she ministered to women forced into prostitution, helping them into dignified employment that allows them to escape poverty.

And she did all of this before her 28th birthday.

“I feel like my life sounds pretty intense to other people,” Giver said. “To me, it’s simple acts of kindness, and simple things nobody talks about, taking care of populations that are overlooked or people haven’t talked about. I have taken extra effort to find them, or it’s come across my path, and I’ve learned more. Anyone can do it, you just have to put the effort towards it.”

Her bachelor’s degree from Indiana University Kokomo made this possible, she says, teaching her the value of hard work, and providing leadership experiences in student government, Student Union Board, and speech and debate.

She was a full time student and held full time jobs, which let her pay her tuition and living expenses without student loans. After graduating, she was free to seek out the overseas volunteer experiences she dreamed of, rather than having to find a job to pay off college debt.

“I’ve always wanted to go overseas, and to experience something unlike America, where I could get to know the people, the issues, and how I could successfully empower them,” she said. “IU Kokomo made that possible, because I wasn’t financially in debt when I graduated.”

She's now using her knowledge to prepare future Peace Corps volunteers to be safe while serving overseas, working for the Peace Corps Office of Safety and Security in Washington D.C.

Giver, from Peru, earned a degree in general studies, with a concentration on social and behavioral sciences, in 2008. After graduation, she spent four months in India, with Word Made Flesh, a faith-based organization that helps women escape brothels and find jobs with dignity.

She then served 27 months with the Peace Corps in Uganda, living in a primitive refugee camp, with no electricity. Giver taught life skills, communications, and relationship skills to young women in the camp, and helped many of them cope with post-traumatic stress disorder, from being displaced or abducted during civil war.

"Going to a post conflict zone was so much different, when it came to building trust, and living in the camp," she said. "At the same time, I was able to build relationships with my girls, and with my teachers. I was able to learn more than someone who was in Uganda for two weeks. There were definitely some hardships, but I am thankful for the experience, and the work I was able to do in the community."

In her current job with the Peace Corps, Giver develops procedures, policies, and training to help volunteers reduce their risk of being sexually assaulted, or a crime victim. She also trains and equips staff to respond when a staff member is a crime victim.

"This is my first office job," she said. "Right now, it's good to be where I am, in a cube, outside of the chaos. Now I can step back and work on issues a little less directly. My heart has been, and is still, to work with marginalized people, when they don't have a voice. "

Giver plans to earn a master's degree in social work, preparing to work in community awareness and advocacy. She also would like to go overseas again at some point.

"I want to go when the moment is right," she said. "It might take a little time. I also see the value of working on issues at home, and in America."

Indiana University Kokomo serves north central Indiana.

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