

East Side

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Out of AFRICA

(and into Providence)

A VILLAGE OF ONE

A FOX POINT RESIDENT REMEMBERS WHAT SHE LEARNED IN UGANDA

by Gigi Edward • Photograph by Stacey Doyle

Racheal Adriko-Spillberg finally has what her father back home in Uganda always exhorted her to get: a purpose. A mission. Not just a vague goal to do good, but a plan for exactly how to make life better for specific people in need.

You expect her to be a veritable whirlwind of energy when you learn all that this Fox Point resident has been doing over the past few years — from teaching school to launching a major transatlantic philanthropic initiative, to producing a film about it, to authoring science books commissioned by the American Association of University Women, in addition to writing her own memoirs... and that's just a partial list! But in reality this solidly built young woman radiates calm and inner peace, whether she's talking (in her fluent English with just a hint of a British accent) to a reporter or to a group of schoolchildren.

She appears as comfortable in a drab American sweater as in colorful, traditional African dress. When you see footage of her thanking a Ugandan boy for handing her another book, you hear a note of reverence in her voice, as if she feels she is touching a precious, sacred object. Yet she employs self-deprecating humor in discussing herself, even while publicizing the important, serious work she is doing in the world.

For her recent campaign to collect large numbers of books and deliver them to Uganda, Adriko-Spillberg has been featured on Channel 10 and in the *Boston Globe* and the *Cambridge Chronicle*. But no amount of American media attention confers more honor than the praise of the elders back in her native village of Arua: "Our daughter Racheal is returning with valuable gifts." "This girl of ours has not forgotten us." Though her daily life currently spans two American cities — Providence, where she lives, and Cambridge, where she works — the mentality of the African village remains deeply ingrained in her. Fond of the saying, "It takes a village to raise a child," she sprinkles this theme throughout her stories about herself: "The whole village did not know how to cure my loneliness" (when her exiled parents temporarily left her in the care of her grandmother); "The whole village was aware of what I'd done" (when she got expelled from boarding school for sneaking out to visit a night club). "Everyone trying to correct you and mold you."

Born into a family with four sons, Adriko-Spillberg was highly valued as the only girl — and thus the only potential dowry-bringer. "As much as they sometimes fought me", she recalls, "my parents always listened to what I had to say." Apparently the listening was mutual. The importance of "making a difference" was a constant theme of Adriko-Spillberg's father, a university professor who ran afoul of the reigning Idi Amin and fled with his family to Kenya, his wife's country of origin, when she was a year and a half old. They stayed there more than ten years, until her father felt it was not only possible but also his family's duty to return to Uganda and support the country's new regime. To their amazement, everyone in Arua (whom they'd been unable to contact) was still alive and well. Adriko-Spillberg's father was soon elected to local office.

After her peaceful Kenyan childhood, she had trouble adjusting to life back in her war-torn birthplace. There she encountered not only a different native language (though English is spoken both places) but also a different outlook on the world. "War changes people," she says. "With years and years of war, you don't know what tomorrow brings. People thought minute to minute. I felt like I had been uprooted and replanted in the wrong soil and climate." Her determination to come to America for college was one of many issues she and her father clashed over during her teen years. But she's never forgotten his teachings, especially the ones he utilized in his efforts to talk her into staying in Uganda: "Everyone has a purpose! You're here to do some good for the world!" At the time, her response was, "If I don't leave here, I'll never find my purpose!" When he refused his financial support, Adriko-Spillberg's sympathetic mother threatened to sell all the cows in Kenya to pay for her daughter's education. Finally her father backed down and allowed her to fly to Boston and enroll at Fisher College, one of three all-female institutions she'd applied to without



her parents' knowledge by borrowing the application fee from an older brother.

A decade later — after graduation from Suffolk University; marriage to a man she describes as "a white Jewish boy from the South Shore" whom she worried about introducing to her parents; and a grueling daily commute from Fox Point to her teaching job at Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. School in Cambridge, Racheal Adriko-Spillberg began to see what her purpose is: "to inspire education, working with books and children."

The Ugandan book-donating venture started in late 2004 with a box of unclaimed books Adriko-Spillberg kept seeing on the floor in a hallway of her school. Upon learning they were slated for the trash, and anticipating a holiday trip back home to Arua, she thought, Why not take them with me?

A few years before, the Ugandan government had started offering free education in grades one through six. With the resulting influx of new students whose families weren't previously in a position to pay tuition, the schools have become woefully understaffed and undersupplied. It is not unusual, Adriko-Spillberg, says, for a Ugandan school to have one teacher for two hundred children, and "no tools for learning — no books, no pencils, no paper ... To write, they wet the ground and form letters in the mud with sticks."

Adriko-Spillberg wanted to convey to her American kindergartners what this might feel like. As part of a unit on Africa, they went beyond building model villages and cities. Saying, "Pretend we're in Africa right now," she got rid of all the books in the classroom, along with all the paper, pens, colored pencils, etc. Soon, she reports, "They were fighting and complaining. It really drove home to my students what it's like not to have." They became enthusiastic about giving the children in her home village not only the box of discarded books but also as many additional books as they could collect. "These kids became my mouth — they spread the word."

Meanwhile, back on the East Side, Adriko-Spillberg enlisted the help of her husband. As his day job, musician and music producer Richard Spillberg is a computer programmer for LighthouseMD, a Providence company specializing in medical management software. Spillberg asked and got permission to put out a box at Lighthouse for book donations. The response from Lighthouse employees was so overwhelming that before long, recalls company president Steve Tortolani, "The venture went from good to 'Omigosh, how do we get all these books to Africa?'" Adriko-Spielberg original notion had been to carry them in her suitcase. Now, with books coming in from both Cambridge and Providence, the number easily reached a thousand. In the words of Tortolani, "We had created a problem. And we were more than happy to help solve it." LighthouseMD funded the shipment of more than half of the books. They took care of the rest in their luggage.

But just getting the books across an ocean and a continent (Uganda is in East Africa) solved only part of the problem. The final challenge was to find a way to start and keep the books circulating. That's where the Village Council members stepped in. When she tells the story, it sounds like a folk tale she might be reading aloud to her schoolchildren: "One person contributed his bicycle to the cause. Another said, 'My contribution will be a brown box to hold the books.' Another said, 'My contribution will be a little black rope to tie the box onto the bicycle.'" And another said, 'I shall donate my time, to ride the bike around and deliver the books.'"

And so began a mobile bicycle library, with weekly visits to five villages and two schools.

"With years and years of war, you don't know what tomorrow brings. I felt like I had been uprooted and replanted in the wrong, soil and climate"

Adriko-Spillberg admits she wondered whether books would even be a priority for the war-ravaged villagers; but her doubts were put to rest when she saw children hungrily grabbing the books and sneaking off into the shade to devour them. Just like American children, they were full of curiosity about the unfamiliar images, especially snow, hats, and mittens! And one of the biggest hurdles was teaching them how a library works. "They were running for the hills with these books!" she recalls. "The following week, they didn't want to give them back." The children had to learn about book exchange, and had to be reassured that the supply would not run out.

Their reaction was "part of the war turmoil — living moment to moment," Adriko-Spillberg explains. Her resolve to continue and expand the program is strengthened by the knowledge that her homeland is still being terrorized by local war lords subjecting villagers to rape, kidnappings, and arson. "These rebels tell our children to take a gun and fight a war. Now, our children can look at them and say, 'No, give me a book instead.'"

She brings up another realization: "In order to establish a literate community, we need to provide books to adults as well — tell them, 'You're their mentors; the children need to see you reading.' The idea [of a mobile bicycle library] may be small, the immediate impact small, but the ripples are big." For example, she has high hopes that her efforts will improve AIDS education. "If you can read about how it spreads, you can learn how to avoid it." She tells potential donors to her cause, "You're not donating — you're investing."

Investor Steve Tortolani, president of LighthouseMD, agrees. "This is such an amazing venture: potentially taking a young generation and empowering them, through education, on so many different levels — to read, to write, to pass on traditions from generation to generation. We're thrilled to have been involved, and anxious to continue." While acknowledging "problems with infrastructure" that make it impossible at the moment, he envisions — in perhaps a few years, funding the shipment to Africa of personal computers containing thousands of volumes of text. Meanwhile, Adriko-Spillberg, who has continued to collect books in her basement, talks about a plan to build a "House of Knowledge" in Aura, a library that will be open late to serve the adult community as well as children, offering "Continuing education" classes such as professional development workshops for teachers. She even mentions internet access. (This is indeed an ambitious plan, considering that Aura currently has no electricity.)

Since her December 2004 trip, she has collected six thousand more books and needs to find more funders besides LighthouseMD to help transport them again. Fortunately or unfortunately, she's gained time in which to do this, since a travel advisory issued for Uganda postponed her plans to go there this past holiday season. "It was sad for me; I'm their Christmas Santa," she says, but with presidential elections coming up — and thirty-four candidates vying with the incumbent — the situation has been too dangerous. At least one contender is inciting rapes and riots, and aid workers have been killed. "As Africans, we can't handle democracy!" Adriko-Spillberg points out. "Everybody wants to lead! Everyone wants to be President!" She hopes the travel advisory would be lifted after the election in March.

When asked about the role of books in her own upbringing, she recalls a book-poor childhood that has clearly been the inspiration for her current passion. Some books were imported from London; photocopying books was common. Adriko-Spillberg can recall no Ugandan or Kenyan publishing house, and no libraries. Even in the 'posh!' girls' boarding school she attended in Kampala (appropriate for the daughter of a minister), there'd be just one book for the class. "Our main texts were stories that I wrote!" she says of her childhood home. "My parents read newspapers, and my dad would say, 'Go write a story that we can read later tonight.' He taught me that stories could be anything. I published my own little books — I got a lot of attention from that." Later, in discussing her teaching career, she muses, "In the early elementary years, a lot of education is through stories."

Adriko-Spillberg remains an adept and entertaining storyteller, but in telling me

the story of her life (which has included excerpts read aloud from work she did for a UMass class in memoir-writing), she never loses sight of her audience. She frequently inserts my name, to let me know she remember it's me she's telling about the time, when she first got to Boston, a fancy boutique on Newbury Street convinced her she absolutely needed sheets and shams and a featherbed totaling over a thousand dollars — or the time she rode to a baby-sitting job in red cab #69 driven by a singer/guitar player who toured in a band called "Wargasm," and with whom she later eloped — or the time her father insisted her new husband come to Uganda, where he had to "go through our cultural heritage, formally ask for your hand in marriage, and pay your dowry... Do not question tradition!" despite all her objections: "Rich and I now have our bank accounts together, so... technically you're charging me for myself ... How can you put a price on my life? I know I'm worth a lot more than this!" (ten bulls, five chickens, twenty goats, and a sack of corn).

Adriko-Spillberg was initially nervous about settling in Providence, a city she didn't know, but she now says she loves its diversity, affordability, charm and uniqueness. She and her husband own a multifamily house near Wickenden Street, and she has just been elected to the board of the Fox Point Neighborhood Association. "It can't just be the mayor making changes," she says of proposed zoning changes that residents fear will result in hi-rises and chain stores. "My voice needs to be heard." She also serves on the board of Providence's Looking Glass Children's Theater. And as an inner city schoolteacher aware that many children lack any concept of home ownership, Adriko-Spillberg has plans to work with Domain Properties, the Providence real estate company, to publish a childfriendly book about mortgages and other aspects of real estate investment. Meanwhile, a number of Rhode Island schools have expressed interest in having her organize an "Africa Day" and book drive on their premises.

Wherever she goes and whomever she contacts, Racheal Adriko-Spillberg seems able to impart the African village mentality of all taking responsibility for each. At the end of our interview, she inspires me with these parting words "It was really wonderful talking to you and meeting the village of Gigi today. You're now a part of Africa, where our goal is leaving the world a better place."