

One person, one difference



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Maynard -

Karen Sparacio is on an extraordinary journey.

"I couldn't be happier with the way my life is going right now," she said at a reception Sunday for her photo exhibit, "Loka: Land Beyond the River," currently on display at Dunia Ecostore in Maynard.

The Malden resident's life has changed profoundly since she first traveled to Uganda in October 2005, as a vacation from her full-time job as a photographer for Community Newspaper Company.

Sparacio had visited Zaire in 1997, and "I was eager to get back to Africa, and to do something useful," she said. "I knew if I went on a vacation I'd be photographing anyway."

So she volunteered to do some photography at Ugandan orphanages for international relief organizations. From there, she went to Kampala, the capital city. She was photographing for a nonprofit group, when she met a woman named Grace, a member of the Acholi tribe. Grace took her to the Acholi Quarter, a small village on the outskirts of the city, founded by members of the tribe who had fled from the north of the country.

"Whenever I'm somewhere, I'm always trying to meet people and see more about what life is really like," said Sparacio.

She spent the next 2 1/2 weeks photographing life in the quarter. She would get to the village around 6 a.m. — "the best light for photographing" — and stay until dark.

She watched laborers — mostly women and children — work all day in the local quarry, pounding and carrying rocks.

"Nobody deserves to live like that," she said quietly.

"Grace took me around to meet different women," she recalled. "By the third woman, I was thinking, 'How can I help?'"

Admiring the brightly colored beads the women made, "I realized that would be an easy way to help them."

Sparacio brought back about 100 necklaces and bracelets from her first trip to Uganda, and she found it easy to sell them at fair trade bazaars in the Boston area.

By January 2006, she was ready to formalize her new project. Her initial goal was to help the women improve their lives with the proceeds from sales of their beads.

"The women are the ones who make everything happen," she said. "They're the heart of the community. Helping them, it's helping the entire community."

The Acholi women named the project "Have Hope."

"It's very important that they're making the decisions. It's their life, they know what they need," said Sparacio.

Her fundraising also expanded; as she began collecting and recycling used printer cartridges. She also sells her photographs of the Acholi Quarter, with all proceeds going to Project Have Hope.

Sparacio earns her own living doing freelance photography in the Boston area. Everything else she earns

goes back to Africa.

With the money from sales of the beads, her Ugandan photos, a few individual donations, and \$5,000 last year from printer cartridges, Sparacio returned to Uganda in January to take her project to a new level.

When she arrived, she found that her group had expanded from 50 to 100 members. The women get paid for the beads they make, and the rest of the proceeds go toward a growing list of projects.

Since January, Project Have Hope has given loans to six women to start new businesses or expand existing ones. Sparacio hopes to expand the small loan program and to help the women of the village develop their vocational and entrepreneurial skills.

Project Have Hope is also sending children to school. In January, 32 students were enrolled in high-quality, private day and boarding schools, with the foundation covering their school fees, books, uniforms and other expenses.

She's thinking "a generation ahead," she said.

Sparacio is currently back in Uganda for two weeks. She's considering setting up a health clinic in the Acholi Quarter, so she's going to assess existing clinics in the area.

Meanwhile, she continues to seek venues to sell the beads and show her photos, and solicit printer cartridges from businesses, colleges and other organizations.

Didi Chadran and Paige O'Brien, co-owners of Dunia Ecostore, are very happy to be showing Sparacio's work.

The store features unusual housewares, jewelry and accessories, bath and body products, toys and games, books and magazines, and assorted crafts from all over the world.

O'Brien said they look for artwork that's "local and matches the philosophy of our store."

Chadran said, "The most important thing is that there's some resonance between the works of art and our store values."

For Sparacio, the reward is to see the hope in the faces of the Acholi Quarter. Although she's been well rewarded already, "What you've done isn't enough — it's never enough," she said. "Regardless of what's been done, there's always so much more that needs to be done."