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ARTS

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## Images of courage inspire photographer



One of Karen Sparacio's images documenting life in the Acholi Quarter of Kampala, Uganda. (Karen Sparacio)

By Denise Taylor | April 19, 2007

As the soft syllables of the Acholi language filled the mud hut, the words spoken by **Oyella Margaret** sounded innocent enough -- as if she were just noting the day's weather in her Ugandan village. But the interpreter's translations were devastating. These were horror stories of war and loss. And hearing them would change the life of **Karen Sparacio**.

A news and wedding photographer from Malden, Sparacio traveled to Uganda in 2005 to volunteer at two orphanages. They needed fund-raising photos. She needed a break from her routine but wanted to do something productive. That was all. It was to have ended there.

But after a social worker took her to the hardscrabble Acholi Quarter, near the

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capital city of Kampala, she was so moved that she spent the final two weeks of her trip there, taking photographs and listening. And she made a vow. She would try to improve the lot of the 10,000 Acholi tribe members who had fled to the Quarter in the 1980s to escape the war-torn north.

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This week, "Loka: Land Beyond the River," an exhibition of her color-rich, sun-drenched photographs of life in the Quarter, opened at Dunia, an environmentally friendly gift shop and gallery in Maynard. Sparacio will discuss her work and her nonprofit group during an April 29 reception.

Recalling her first visit, Sparacio said, "During the two and a half weeks that I was there, not a single person asked me for anything. But while they asked for nothing, they were tremendously generous.

"People kept feeding me. They would give me gifts of the jewelry they make from paper beads. They would buy me Coca-Cola, which would be the equivalent of two days' salary for a warm bottle of Coke."

The Acholi also shared their stories. Sparacio listened to tales of beatings, rapes, and murders suffered in the north. She learned that many tribal members were looking after nine or 10 children, after taking in youngsters orphaned by AIDS or war. And over meals of cooked greens and mashed-potato-like posho, she learned about the pride and joy they have in their families, and she made friends.

"I had to become a part of the community to photograph it. I'm the only white person there, so my presence can cause a commotion. So I just spent enough time there until they got used to me," said Sparacio, who now visits the Quarter regularly.

Back home, Sparacio founded Project Have Hope, a name chosen by the women of the Quarter. Between photo shoots, she raises funds to pay school fees for Acholi children by selling the colorful lacquered beads they make. She also redeems used printer ink cartridges donated by local businesses.

In January, Project Have Hope enrolled 10 children in day schools with a yearly tuition of \$150 per child, and another 22 in boarding schools for \$400 per year. With most of the adults earning about \$1 per day in the local rock quarry, the fees are beyond their reach. Donations are also allowing Sparacio to help 100 women set up small businesses, such as raising chickens or making peanut butter.

"Most of these women have had their lives forced upon them through civil war and violence and horrible conditions," said Sparacio. "I want to help them regain control."

*"Loka: Land Beyond the River" runs through June 9 at Dunia, 43 Nason St., Maynard. Reception 2 to 5 p.m. April 29. Hours 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday and until 8 p.m. Thursdays. Admission free. Call 978-897-8850 or visit [projecthavehope.org](http://projecthavehope.org), [photosbykisp.com](http://photosbykisp.com), or [dunia-ecostore.com](http://dunia-ecostore.com).*

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