

## Half the Sky

### *'Study Abroad' – in the Congo*

In the cauldron of violence and misogyny that is eastern Congo, the HEAL Africa hospital where Dina was treated is a sanctuary of dignity. It is a large compound of low white buildings where patients are respected. It's an example of an aid project that makes an extraordinary difference in people's lives. And one of those helping patients like Dina is a young American woman named Harper McConnell.

Harper has long, dirty-blond hair and very white skin that seems to redden more than tan under the tropical sun. She dresses casually, and with the exception of African necklaces dangling on her collar, she looks as if she could be on an American university campus. Yet here she is in war-torn Congo, speaking excellent Swahili and bantering with her new friends who grew up in the Congolese bush. She has taken a path that more young Americans should consider – traveling to the developing world to 'give back' to people who desperately need the assistance.

Young people often ask us how they can help address issues like sex trafficking or international poverty. Our first recommendation to them is to get out and see the world. If you can't do that, it's great to raise money or attention at home. But to tackle an issue effectively, you need to understand it – and it's impossible to understand an issue by simply reading about it. You need to see it firsthand, even live in its midst.

One of the great failings of the American education system, in

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our view, is that young people can graduate from university without any understanding of poverty at home or abroad. Study-abroad programs tend to consist of herds of students visiting Oxford or Florence or Paris. We believe that universities should make it a requirement that all graduates spend at least some time in the developing world, either by taking a 'gap year' or by studying abroad. If more Americans worked for a summer teaching English at a school like Mukhtar's in Pakistan, or working at a hospital like HEAL Africa in Congo, our entire society would have a richer understanding of the world around us. And the rest of the world might also hold a more positive view of Americans.



*Harper McConnell with a friend at the HEAL Africa hospital in Congo*



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*(Nicholas D. Kristof)*

Young people, women especially, often worry about the safety of volunteering abroad. There are, of course, legitimate concerns about disease and violence, but mostly there is the exaggerated fear of the unknown – the mirror image of the nervousness that Africans or Indians feel when they travel to America for their studies. In reality, Americans and Europeans are usually treated hospitably in the developing world, and are much less likely to be robbed in an African village than in Paris or Rome. The most dangerous part of living in a poor country is often the driving, since no one wears seat belts, and red lights – if they exist – tend to be regarded as mere suggestions.

American women sometimes do get unwanted notice, particularly if they are blond, but it's rarely threatening. Once women have settled in at their destination, they usually find it safer than they had imagined. Western women are often exempt from local indignities and harassment, partly because local men find them intimidating. Women volunteers often have more options than men do. For example, in conservative cultures, it may be inappropriate for an American man to teach female students or even talk to women, while an American woman may well be able to teach either boys or girls and to mix with local men and women alike.

There are countless opportunities to volunteer at the grass-roots. Most of the aid programs we refer to in this book welcome volunteers, as long as they stay for a few months to make the visit worth the trouble. We've noted contact information for

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these organizations in the appendix. Time spent in Congo and Cambodia might not be as pleasant as in Paris, but it will be life-changing.

Harper, who grew up in Michigan and Kansas, was studying political science and English at the University of Minnesota, not sure what she would do afterward. She had studied poverty and development and was feeling restless and pressured with graduation looming. Then, in May of her senior year, she heard that her church was exploring a relationship with a hospital in Congo. The church, Upper Room, in Edina, Minnesota, understood something important: The congregation should not just be writing checks but also getting actively involved. So Harper talked to her pastor about the Congo arrangement, and by the end of the meeting Harper had agreed to go live in Goma to oversee the relationship with the HEAL Africa hospital.

‘We want to educate our congregation about eastern Congo and give them the chance to come and see life here,’ she says. ‘I also provide the church with the reality on the ground to make sure that projects which are dreamed up in offices in the United States actually meet the needs in the field.’

Harper stays in a nice Western-style house in Goma, with the couple who founded the HEAL Africa hospital: a Congolese doctor, Jo Lusi, and his wife, Lyn, from England. Jo and Lyn take up one room in the house, which is always crowded with visitors and guests. And while it provides a sanctuary from the chaos of Congo, the generator still goes off at 10 p.m. – and don’t count on a hot shower. Then there’s the countryside, which often feels



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as if it's a century or two behind Goma. One day Harper was bubbling with news: 'One of our teams just went to a village that hadn't seen a car since the 1980s. They called it "a walking house."'"

HEAL Africa is a major hospital. Officially it has 150 beds, but there are usually 250 patients, and it manages to accommodate them. There are 14 doctors and a total staff of 210, all of whom are Congolese except for Lyn, Harper, and one other person. The hospital manages to have clean sheets, but there are still just two gynecologists in an area with 5 million people. Getting electricity, water, and bandages for the hospital is a nightmare, and corruption is overwhelming. In 2002, a nearby volcano erupted, and when the lava reached the building the hospital burst into flames. Most of the hospital grounds were covered in eight feet of lava, but with support from American donors, the hospital was rebuilt as soon as the lava had cooled.

For a young, single person, living in a place like Goma can be tedious and confining. Harper broke up with her boyfriend of two years when she moved to Congo, and although she regularly gets marriage proposals from drivers, there isn't any dating scene. Once she contracted malaria and ended up in her own hospital. But she felt a measure of pride at finally enduring the standard African ailment. As she was lying feverishly in her hospital bed, nourished by an IV drip, she awoke thinking that she saw Ben Affleck looming over her hospital bed. She soon realized it was not a figment of her delirium: Affleck was visiting Congo and had come by to wish her well.



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There are also compensations for the lack of shopping malls and Netflix movies. Harper has undertaken two major projects that make her excited to get out of bed each morning. First, she started a school at the hospital for children awaiting medical treatment. It can take several months before children with orthopedic problems receive care, and they often come from rural areas with no decent schools. So Harper found teachers and put together a classroom. The children now can go to school six days a week. At the age of twenty-three, Harper became the principal of her own school.

Second, Harper started a skills-training program for women awaiting surgery. Many of the patients, like Dina, spend months at the hospital, and they can now use the time to learn to sew, read, weave baskets, make soap, and bake bread. Typically a woman chooses one of the skills and then works with a trainer until she is confident that she can make a living at it. When the woman leaves, HEAL Africa gives her the raw materials she needs – even a pedal sewing machine, if she has learned tailoring – so that she can generate income for her family afterward. Those who have trouble absorbing vocational skills are at least given a big block of salt so that they can break it up and sell little bags of salt in the market to survive. The ability to earn a living transforms the women's lives.

'The women are so excited about Harper's program,' said Dada Byamungu, whom Harper hired to teach sewing. As we talked, a raucous group of women surrounded Harper, teasing her and thanking her in Swahili, all at the same time – and she was laughing and retorting in rapid-fire Swahili. Dada translated



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what the women were saying: 'They say that they will lift Harper up and make her their queen!'

If you were to come to dinner at our home, you would see lovely woven reed placemats made by women at HEAL Africa. Harper has set up a little shop at the hospital to sell goods like these that the women are making, and she's trying to sell them on the Internet and in American department stores as well. If you're an American university student, there's something else that Harper did that may be more relevant: She is setting up a study-abroad program for Americans who want to spend a month at ULPGL, a university in Goma. The Americans will take courses with Congolese students, spend time in the classroom and the field, and write research papers together in small groups. Harper also tries to encourage donors in the United States. The hospital has an annual budget of \$1.4 million, more than one third of which is contributed by individual Americans (more information is at [www.healafrika.org](http://www.healafrika.org)). Only 2 percent of those donations go to overhead and administrative expenses; the rest is plowed into the hospital. The hospital even accepts gifts of airline miles, to fly staff back and forth, and it eagerly welcomes volunteers and visitors.

'I'd rather have someone come here and see what's going on than write a check for one or two thousand dollars, because that visit is going to change their life,' Harper says. 'I have the privilege of hearing from church members and other visitors about how their time at HEAL Africa has turned their worldview upside down and changed their lifestyle at home.'

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As Harper jabbbers away in Swahili with her African friends, it's clear that she is getting as well as giving. She agrees:

There are times when all I want is a fast Internet connection, a latte, and a highway to drive on. Yet the greetings I receive in the morning from my coworkers are enough to keep me here. I have the blessing of carrying a purse sewn by a woman waiting for fistula surgery at the hospital and watching how these new skills have changed her whole composure and confidence, of celebrating with my Congolese friend who was accepted for a job right after he graduated from university, of seeing children in school who previously never had the chance, of rejoicing with a family over their improved harvest, of dancing with my coworkers over a grant awarded for a program. The main factor that separates me from my friends here is the opportunities I was given as a first-world citizen, and I believe it is my responsibility to work so that these opportunities are available to all.



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The more Westerners the movement reaches, the better. But the most effective supporters will donate not only their money but also their time, by volunteering on the front lines. If you care about poverty you must understand it, not just oppose it. And understanding poverty comes from spending time observing it directly.

In talking about sex trafficking, we mentioned Urmi Basu, who runs the New Light shelter for trafficked women in Kolkata. Over the years we've steered several Americans to volunteer at New Light, teaching English to the children of prostitutes, and they find it pretty overwhelming at first. One of those we introduced to Urmi was Sydnee Woods, an assistant city attorney in Minneapolis who wasn't finding everything she wanted in life from her job. She asked her boss for a ninety-day unpaid leave to go to India to work at New Light, and he flatly said no. So Sydnee quit, sold her home, and moved to Kolkata. She found it a very rough adjustment, as she put it in an e-mail to us:

It took me about 6 months to actually admit to myself that I hate India (well, Kolkata, at least). Truly I absolutely loved New Light – the children, the mothers, the staff, the other volunteers, Urmi. But I hated everything else about being in Kolkata. I found it extremely difficult being a single, black American woman there. I was constantly met with suspicion – not so much due to my color, but because I was not married and was often by myself



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(in restaurants, at the mall, etc.). The staring was emotionally exhausting and I don't think I ever truly got used to it.

Chastened that our advice had produced such a painful experience, we asked Sydnee if that meant that she regretted having gone. Would she recommend such an immersion to others? Moments later a very different e-mail arrived:

I am so glad I went! I am considering going back to New Light next year. I fell in love with all of the children, but two of them, siblings Joya and Raoul (they are 4 and 6, I think), truly touched my heart and I am totally committed to making sure they get an education and get out of Kalighat [the red-light district]. I know that I did some good there, which is satisfying. The experience (good and bad) changed me forever. I have become incredibly laid back and able to deal with setbacks and hardships much more easily. I had never traveled out of the country (other than touristy trips to Bermuda, Mexico and the Bahamas) and now I can't imagine not traveling abroad as often as possible. I made lifelong friends in India. It's difficult to put into words – but I am a different, better person. I would definitely recommend it – especially to other single, black women. It was difficult – but necessary. India changes you – it makes you confront things about yourself that you may have chosen not to confront. As far as I'm concerned that can only be good. It was good for me.

Indeed, while the main motivation for joining this global





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movement is to help others, the result is often to help oneself. As Sir John Templeton said, 'Self-improvement comes mainly from trying to help others.' Social psychologists have learned a great deal about happiness in recent years, and one of the surprises is that the things we believe will make us happy won't. People who win the lottery, for example, enjoy an initial spike of happiness but then adjust and a year later are not significantly happier than those who haven't won. Our happiness levels seem to be mostly innate, and not markedly affected by what happens to us, good or bad. People in end-stage dialysis, for example, turn out to be no different in their moods through the day than a comparison group of healthy people. And while those who suffer a crippling disability are initially deeply unhappy, they adjust quickly. One study found that just a month after becoming paraplegics, accident victims were in fairly good moods a majority of the time. Other research found that within two years of suffering a moderate disability, life satisfaction fully recovers to the predisability level. So Jonathan Haidt, a psychologist at the University of Virginia who has studied happiness, advises that if you are hit by a truck and end up a paraplegic, or if you win the lottery, remember that a year from now, it won't make much difference to your happiness level.

Yet Professor Haidt and others advise that there are a few factors that *can* affect our happiness levels in a sustained way. One is 'a connection to something larger' – a greater cause or a humanitarian purpose. Traditionally, this was what brought people to churches or other religious institutions, but any movement or humanitarian initiative can provide a sense of purpose that





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boosts one's happiness quotient. We are neurologically constructed so that we gain huge personal dividends from altruism.

Thus we hope you will join this growing crowd and back it in whatever way you can – volunteering at Mukhtar Mai's school in Pakistan, writing letters as part of Equality Now campaigns, or sponsoring Tostan to educate a village about genital cutting. Browse the aid groups in the appendix of this book, or go to [www.charitynavigator.org](http://www.charitynavigator.org). Then find a group or two that you want to commit to. Philanthropists and donors traditionally haven't been sufficiently interested in women's rights abroad, giving money instead to higher-brow causes such as the ballet or art museums. There could be a powerful international women's rights movement if only philanthropists would donate as much to real women as to paintings and sculptures of women.

We don't presume to say that all of your giving should be targeted to the needs of women abroad, any more than all of ours is. But we hope that some of your giving will go to these causes, and that you will give your time as well as your dollars. A portion of the income from this book will go to some of these organizations.

If you're a student, find out whether your school or college has classes or study abroad programs that address these issues. Consider volunteering for a summer internship at one of the organizations we've talked about. Or take a 'gap year' before or after university for travel or an internship. If you're a parent, take your kids not just to London but also to India or Africa. At a town meeting, ask a candidate about maternal health. Write a





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letter to the editor of your local paper calling for a big push for girls' education.

The tide of history is turning women from beasts of burden and sexual playthings into full-fledged human beings. The economic advantages of empowering women are so vast as to persuade nations to move in that direction. Before long, we will consider sex slavery, honor killings, and acid attacks as unfathomable as foot-binding. The question is how long that transformation will take and how many girls will be kidnapped into brothels before it is complete – and whether each of us will be part of that historical movement, or a bystander.

### *Four Steps You Can Take in the Next Ten Minutes*

The first step is the hardest, so here are several things you can do right now:

1. Go to [www.globalgiving.org](http://www.globalgiving.org) or [www.kiva.org](http://www.kiva.org) and open an account. Both sites are people-to-people (P2P), meaning that they link you directly to a person in need overseas, and this makes them an excellent way to dip your toe in. Global Giving lets you choose a grassroots project to which to give money in education, health, disaster relief, or more than a dozen other areas around the developing world. Kiva lets you do the same for microlending to entrepreneurs. Browse the sites to get a sense of the needs and donate or lend money to those that appeal to you, perhaps as a gift to a family member or a friend. Or