

# The Red Hippo Arts Project

## Leah Henderson's Web Log

### Evolutionary

Jul 2, 2008 in Uncategorized

I remember sitting in an international conference in Perth, W. Australia about five years ago. I was listening to this African man talk about the Aids Pandemic. As he was sharing his personal story, I was dreaming of becoming a photographer, my future was rolling through my mind like the frames in a film camera. I experienced an overwhelming desire to become a photographer so that I might document and display the beauty and strength of the human spirit around the world. Years later here I am with my degree in photography, and the vision is still lingering there in my memory. Along the way I've been inspired by documentary films such as Born Into Brothels (Kids With Cameras), and countless artists, students, and friends who have been striving to make a difference, hugely through using the arts, and chiefly impacting children. Children, the bridge in every culture, the bright stars of this earth's future.

I am so excited to be a part of the Red Hippo Project. The motivation, worldview, and skill base of the team sits well with me. I hope that this will be the first of many like-minded projects that I get to be a part of.

I will be blogging every day on here while in Uganda, even if it's only a few sentences, to journal my experience. Feel free to join me on my journey. I will also be posting images regularly on my photo blog- just click on the link to the right of my post "A picture is worth a thousand words. "

See you in Uganda!

#### 2 Replies

##### 1. Noelle

*Jul 25th, 2008 at 2:23 pm*

*For real- see you in Uganda!*

*I'm so happy that you and Sam will be coming out west too!*

*Can't wait to experience this with you! See you next week!*

##### 2. Rem

*Aug 1st, 2008 at 2:23 pm*

*Hi Leah,*

*Just a short note to say I will be praying for you...and your team! It's a thrill to see you launching out and touching people like this. Be safe! Be successful! Listen to your intuition!*

*Rem*

## Uganda

**Aug 2, 2008 in Uncategorized**

I am here! After two and a half days of travel, an afternoon in London, and some lost luggage in Kenya. The taxi ride from Entebbe airport was truly african style ; the speed speedily indecipherable, the weaving in and out of people, bikes, mopeds, and buses with slogans like " Praise the Lord ", heart-stopping and magical. Apparently no one sees the need to wear seatbelts here! The taxi driver waved a friendly hello, yelling out a Lugandan greeting to every second person, bike, and moped on the street from the Entebbe airport to Kampala where we are staying. The brightly painted pink, aqua, and yellow brick buildings flashed by.

The first night I sat and listened to the incessant crickets and motor bikes in the warm african night. It didn't take long for children to start waving madly at us greeting us and calling us Mzungo! Ah- I am finally a minority again, it is challenging and great.

It is now early morning, the rooster woke me up. I am sitting on the fourth floor balcony watching the Ugandan sun rise over the lush vegetation and baked red bricks. There is an old man in a long trench coat with a rifle and a flashlight walking around. At six in the morning it is still. The whole night was saturates with sounds of dogs barking, motorbikes zooming by, and people yelling here and there. I'm off to the roof for some toast and tea. I'll try to post every second day. Pictures to come! I need to get used to this place, meet some more people, and feel somewhat less of an intruder before I start taking pictures.

I'll keep you posted!

*One Reply*

*1. Emerge*

*Aug 3rd, 2008 at 6:57 pm*

*Hi Leah!!*

*It's Sunday evening and it's raining again HA!*

*We send you tons of love as well to the whole team.*

*It's great to know that you were sitting on a balcony watching a beautiful lush vegetation. We are sitting in the dangeon of the undercroft HA! HA!*

*Right now we are eating a delicious salad that Joan prepared (Sue will love it)\* it's made of tomatoes, cilantro, lettuce, lemon and some salt. Quite refreshing.*

*Emilie, Laurel, Didier, Hanif, Matthew, Nick and Joan*

*When we finish eating Joan's delicious\* salad we'll be praying for you guys.*

*Tons of love from your fellow emergers*

*ps: keep an eye out on the old man in a long trench coat with a riffle and a flashlight :-D*

*bye for now*

*\*written by Joan*

## **Nsambya**

**Aug 4, 2008 in Uncategorized**

We spent the afternoon with the Nsambya street boys NGO, in their home slum hood. They cooked a meal of plantain, corn, rice, beans, and avocado for us and put on an incredible show of acrobatics and dance. They are working to take young boys and girls off the streets and teach them to use their talents to generate an income, rather than relying on pick pocketing and thievery. These are some of the nicest, most generous, thankful, devout, and caring boys I have ever met.

## **The Taxi Park**

**Aug 4, 2008 in Uncategorized**

One open mud field in the center of downtown kampala market.

500 taxi buses jumbled and parked bumper to tailgate to side door to back wheel.

A few hundred motorbikes wending through the chaos.

Chanting sardine masses of Ugandans.

A handful of white faces trying not to get sandwiched between to honking buses.

## **Namwongo**

**Aug 4, 2008 in Uncategorized**

If it's possible to have the best moment of your life, I had it today. One moment. We met the children today. I was a bit nervous, and felt presumptuous. All this was blown away in one moment. Sue was the first to arrive at the small cutout door in the iron gate. As soon as she set her foot in the air was bursting with joyful greetings from 30 little African voices. Before we could get through the door we were bombarded with hugs. Bear hugs. Little human hugs from 30 little Africans. Their faces were shining. They clasped our hands. I was in tears. It is the best greeting I have ever received in my life.

Olio tia! Olio tia! (how are you) Ghendi! Ghendi! Ghendi! (fine) from a chorus of little voices a thousand times over. I can only describe it as a tidal wave of unexpected, underserved love.

There are 30 children, most of them are from Northern Uganda and are orphans or living with relatives here in southern Uganda because the war in N. Uganda has made them refugees. They are all from the neighbouring slum of 12,000 called Namwongo. This handful of children have been given a chance and a hope. They will receive an education if they are sponsored, and will not have to return to live in the slum of refugees. The joy they exude speaks volumes of the change that has been wrought in their lives because of this.

We walked through Namwongo slum after we met the kids. Tightly packed mud brick huts, with old sheets for doorways, a sewer river for waterfront, and garbage for scenery. Prime property. These people are the poorest of the poor in Uganda, and they are refugees, without the means to travel back to their home in N. Uganda.

I am so excited to see these children every day for the next 3 weeks. If one moment can change me, imagine 3 weeks of moments. It's true. Africa does change you.

## Turkey vultures

Aug 5, 2008 in Uncategorized

There is a high, steaming, stinking mountain of garbage inside Nsambya slum. Right next to it the children play soccer in their bare feet and the old men ride through on their old, rusted bicycles.

The turkey vultures live here.

(Think the shady vulture character in 'The Lion King')

They stand on tall, skinny, spindly legs and preside over the dump. Their red, hairy gizzards hang down almost to their knobby knees. Their beaks are pelican-like snappers, eyes squinty, and wing span massive.

Anyone who has seen Hitchcock's 'The Birds' is advised not to walk by these turkey creatures late at night - or anytime.

Pictures to come ( if I am brave enough to get somewhat close to them with a camera). Luckily our african friends laugh at our anxieties . The birds can't really be that dangerous after all.

### 5 Replies

1. tumwijuke

Aug 5th, 2008 at 7:34 am

Welcome to the Ugblogsphere.

*Those are not turkey vultures. Those are marabou storks. They are attracted to the city by garbage. It is said that you can tell how hygienic a city in tropical Africa is by the number of marabou stork (karolis).*

*Outside of the city, in their natural surroundings, they are quite beautiful. They are not dangerous at all. In fact, if you can bear the smell, you can walk up and pat their heads.*

2. spence henderson

Aug 5th, 2008 at 11:45 am

*Happy Anniversary . Imagine starting year three in Africa . Can't you just use a telephoto lens to get close enough for a picture ? I loved seeing you guys at the wedding and over the last couple of months . all the best in your African adventure .*

*I love you Papa*

3. Catherine

Aug 5th, 2008 at 1:22 pm

*Leah - i have no words, and they would mean nothing here, anyways. all i'll say is that you are my hero, and that i'm behind you shouting at the top of my lungs " go! go! go !" because this world so desperately needs you.*

so GO !

*all my love, always.*

*bisoux*  
4. Dldi

*Aug 5th, 2008 at 1:39 pm*

*Leah,*

*I love your poetic descriptions of the environment you are encountering  
I can't wait to see pics too!*

*love maman xo*

5. micah

*Aug 12th, 2008 at 1:47 pm*

*Yeah, a local gentleman told me that their poop is highly toxic. If they poop on you, you have to just throw away the clothes. So, yeah...don't get pooped on by a turkey vulture...er...marabou stork. They are the ugliest things I have ever seen...although yesterday playing soccer with the boys I noticed that if I were to resemble a bird, it would definitely be the marabou stork...their wingspans are massive, they are quite skinny, and I recognize my own slouch in their perch. Cheers, Leah...for being such a wonderful observer here.*

## **I am rich**

**Aug 6, 2008 in Uncategorized**

Here I drink bottled water every day

I am rich

Here I have a hot shower whenever I choose

I am rich

Here I have shoes

I am rich

Here I eat beans, rice, and vegetables each night

I am rich

Here I can afford to stay in a hotel for \$15 a night

I am rich

Here I can go out and buy an ice-cream cone with my friends

I am rich

Here I can buy a plane ticket and fly home

I am rich

Oh God, let me never take these things for granted again.

### **6 Replies**

**1. Nick Brotherwood**

*Aug 6th, 2008 at 10:32 am*

*Hi Leah! so you are a brilliant poet as well as a brilliant photographer! I never knew. your posts have been moving me to tears, they are incredibly evocative. keep blogging. give my love to all the RHAP crew.*

*God bless,  
Nick*

**2. Catherine**

*Aug 6th, 2008 at 11:56 am*

*oh Leah !  
words would be futile here, but they are all i have to speak to you right now.*

*you are my hero.*

*i'm behind you all the way cheering " go ! go ! go ! "*

*we need you Leah, we need you.*

*i can't begin to say how happy you make me by chasing after what's been in your heart for so long - and there you are, right in the middle of it... it's the most beautiful, inspiring you've ever been :-)*

*all my love, always.*

*bisoux!*

*3. Pippa Brady*

*Aug 6th, 2008 at 12:33 pm*

*Leah, that was beautiful, I had tears in my eyes. We are praying for you all everyday. God Bless, Pippa, Paul, and Malachi*

*4. admin*

*Aug 7th, 2008 at 3:06 am*

*thanks everyone! your comments are a great fuel! xoxo*

*5. admin*

*Aug 7th, 2008 at 3:07 am*

*6. Didi*

*Aug 8th, 2008 at 2:22 am*

*Leah;*

*I can sense the change and the quickened pace of your heart as you pursue what you are meant to do. I'm inspired by the window you open to us all as you experience Uganda.*

*God bless,*

*safety and good health to you and the team*

*xo-maman*

## Hospitality

**Aug 9, 2008 in Uncategorized**

Yesterday we taxied an hour and a half outside the city, over narrow red-rutted roads and past jungle-looking bushes, birds of paradise plants, and the ' Jesus loves you super market '.

We were invited to spend the afternoon with a large muslim family and their village. We were welcomed with traditional drums and dance and a steaming hot meal of rice, plantain, and potatoes wrapped in banana leaves.

Truly african hospitality is so delightful. They had never met us and they told us that Africa is now our home, and we can return at any time to stay in their huts.

*One Reply*

*1. Roxanne*

*Aug 12th, 2008 at 1:15 pm*

*Leah,*

*It is so wonderful to read all about your experiences. It sounds very beautiful, and emotional. I can't wait to read more. Good luck with everything- I hope you are doing well and that this malaria medication is much better than the last one!*

*Much love,  
Roxanne*

*PS- Have you gotten a picture of the big garbage stork yet?*

The View from Hotel La Grande Chez Johnson

Aug 9, 2008 in Uncategorized



2 Replies

1. Catherine

Aug 11th, 2008 at 4:20 pm

*ahhhhhhhhhhhh !  
how enchanting !*

*hehe!*

2. David

Aug 12th, 2008 at 12:34 pm

*Hi Leah!*

*I am glad to see that you have arrived safely and that you are thriving in your ambitious project. It seems it will have a big impact on you, the Ugandan children, and the people you share it with during and afterwards. This is a good thing, a good choice you have made.*

## Leah and Immaculate

Aug 13, 2008 in Uncategorized



## Photo Blog

**Aug 13, 2008 in Uncategorized**

I've finally posted some pics on my photo blog ( see link to right 'A picture is worth a thousand words') <http://www.leahhenderson.blogspot.com>

These kids have captured my heart. The weather is too hot!! ( even though it's winter here). More thoughts to come....

## Kids With Cameras

Aug 14, 2008 in Uncategorized

I cannot describe the delight that fills the eyes of the children when they receive their disposable cameras and take pictures. It is like Christmas. For a western child it would be merely a diversion, another neat gadget to add to their collection. For some of these children, it is one of the first gifts of their lives. It sets them apart and makes them feel special, in a country filled with orphans who are statistics only.

There is the moral debate that if we “muzungu” (white people) come and give gifts we leave the children worse off than before because it is illustrated to them how poor they are. In some cases this is true. But, come, try giving a little plastic camera to one of these children, look at their faces, and you will know you are doing the right thing.

Our goal is not to illuminate need or difference, but to have the children take pride in their country, their culture, themselves. We are encouraging them to explore and express their world and see it through new eyes, in a new context. May it lend them hope in a country desperately in need of hope, and give them courage to find creative ways to see and live their lives.

Today we went with eight of the children – Barbara, Prissy, Kevin, Jackie-Sharon, Jairus, Joel, Florence, and Julius-K to Namwongo, the slum where they live. We asked them to take pictures of their, relatives, and community. As we handed out the cameras a crowd grew around us. After each of our children had received their cameras, there were 30 more hands waiting to get cameras.

Namwongo is filled with school age children who are not in school. Their parents cannot afford to buy the uniforms and food it would take to allow them to attend public schools. Most of the families are from Northern Uganda. It is still unsafe to return to their homes. These children are also at the age where the Lord's Resistance Army recruits and trains them to be child soldiers.

It is easy to get overwhelmed by these circumstances. I've traveled in developing countries before and I have reached what I call the “overwhelmed – by – poverty mid -point of my trip. But this time I choose to live in the moment. I choose to focus solely on the few children that I can help and love, right here, right now. I choose to focus on the beauty of Africa, and not the need.

Ugandan people are so warm and hospitable. The children who have been given a chance are filled with joy. These are festive people. The countryside is packed with banana trees, mango trees, papaya trees, avocado trees, palm trees, coffee trees, and bird of paradise flowers. Banana trees grow on the land of the rich and the poor alike. Here is some of the best coffee in the world. We went in to Kampala to a café and the coffee berries had been recently picked and dried from the backyard garden.

All of the food here is local, fresh, and organic. People cannot afford to spray their fruits and veggies with chemicals. If you want chemically treated food it is very expensive. (North America, haven't we got it all wrong?) Also, cake is very expensive here because people don't really eat cake.

The human spirit is the same everywhere though - you will always find those who are beautiful, strong, generous, and courageous in the midst of struggle.

#### 4 Replies

1. Nick Brotherwood

Aug 14th, 2008 at 12:55 pm

*Brilliant again, Leah. Keep loving those kids, keep loving Uganda, keep taking photos, and keep blogging! God bless,  
Nick.*

2. Audrey O' Braham

Aug 15th, 2008 at 11:18 am

*Hey Leah,*

*keep doing what you're doing! Can't wait to see the pictures that the children are taking of their own environment, from their own perspective. I feel overwhelmed myself just by reading your blog and the others'. Thanks for your photos, too. It's nice to be able to see what you see.*

*Love & God bless,  
Audrey*

3. spence henderson

Aug 15th, 2008 at 11:24 am

*The human spirit is the same everywhere though - you will always find those who are beautiful, strong, generous, and courageous in the midst of struggle.*

*That's the good part of struggle and adversity. The opportunities to choose life over whining, pity parties ect. Strange that the ones who seem to have the most adversity often seem to have the better attitudes. I'll always remember how generous the Mexican people were who had a wee bit less than us.*

*Thanks Leah i look forward to the smiles you bring everywhere you go*

*love ya Papa*

4. Dann

Aug 20th, 2008 at 10:21 pm

*It is great that you guys are in Africa. Africa is a nice place located in the northern region of Canada. I trust that your journey there did not include too many close encounters with the local grizzly pig population. I can write about these things because I am an expert on these types of things.*

## **Kids making music**

**Aug 18, 2008 in Uncategorized**

This morning we went to the Alpha and Omega boarding school. 350 children go here, mostly from Uganda, but some from Sudan also. We had yet another delightful experience when the choir/dancers/musicians performed for us. These children practice for hours every day, learning English, numbers, and social skills in between. All their instruments are local and traditional African instruments such as the bow harp, the thumb piano, panflute, lire, tube fiddle, xylophone, shakers, and of course drums and more drums. All of these were made out of animal skins, wood, and string.

The music was inspiring and invigorating, the songs full of joy, and the traditional dancing was the best of all! The music teacher said their goal is to train the kids in the traditional African arts so that they will be able to take pride in their culture and celebrate the good in Africa.

The kids were so animated, extremely talented, and cute as buttons. I met the Shirley Temple of Africa (little Esther with braids) and also the Audrey Hepburn of Africa ( One of the volunteers-graceful Abigail from Kenya).

## African Rainstorm

Aug 20, 2008 in Uncategorized

The other day i spent a long afternoon playing cards and listening to reggae in a 1 room mud house with a dozen young ex street children during an african rainstorm.

The sky before a storm here is incredibly beautiful in contrast with the palm leaves. The raindrops are massive, hot, sizzling, and create red running rivers of the mud streets. People are content to either wait out the hour long rainstorm in their huts or under awnings, or to simply keep on with their daily lives, carting their banana bunches and shoals of sugarcane by bike or boda boda.

"I am a part of all that I have met

Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough

Gleams that untraveled world."

-Tennyson

One Reply

1. Catherine

Aug 20th, 2008 at 6:00 pm

*it's amazing how the simplest things are coated with wonder when we travel... i remember my very first trip abroad when i was 18 ( just a little kid ! ) and it started to rain and i didn't have an umbrella = i was getting soaked...! yet i couldn't stop laughing, it was uncontrollable, giggling as if i was being tickled by invisible fingers... i kept thinking " this is London's rain! i am in London and it's raining ! this is the rain of romantic poets and ruthless kings and victorian paintings, this is historical rain, this is the rain i've heard about, read about and dreamed about, and now it's rolling on my forehead, it's leaking through my clothes !".*

*so bottle the rain Leah, open your mouth wide and drink it all in in big gulps, let the sound of it stay in your ears like in an oceanic shell and let the feel of it penetrate your skin through every pore.*

*get wet ;-)*

*so we can all drink from you, rivers of living water.*

*all my love*

*xxx*