

Non-profit organization stops in Kirksville

BY KANNA TAYLOR
Staff Reporter

As summer approaches, many children sit at their desks dreaming of fun-filled days of freedom without the responsibilities of homework and class. But children in Uganda can only dream of going to school and instead are forced to fight in a war that has been raging for 22 years.

Invisible Children, a non-profit organization that is trying to provide a solution to this problem, was created by three filmmakers from Southern California to stop the war in Uganda and help the children affected by it. Andi Giovinazzo, a "roadie" on the Invisible Children Tour, stopped in Kirksville last Wednesday to give a presentation with fellow team member David Lewis.

"I think the part that really inspired and impacted me versus other organizations that are similar was not only Invisible Children's desire to change the situation in Northern Uganda and raise awareness about it, but also to change ideals and policies here in the United States," Giovinazzo said. "They really want to, by bringing the story to America, really empower the youth to know they can make a difference."

Giovinazzo is originally from south Florida and heard about Invisible Children through a friend, she said. From there she continued to do her own research and found out Invisible Children did national tours and events and that one of the tours was coming to her area within the next couple of months, she said. Giovinazzo said she managed to get the tour to stop at her high school, and she provided the roadies with a place to stay at her house for a night.

"I just really got to ... hang out with them and really understand their heart for the organization as well as the organization's real goals and the people within it," Giovinazzo said. "I was really inspired, so I applied to be a roadie and I came out to Invisible Children in August. I did a seven-week tour in the fall and then this tour is 12 weeks."

Giovinazzo was a freshman

in college when she decided to become a roadie.

"I hadn't even finished my first year of college yet, and I kind of had what I thought was my life plan figured out," Giovinazzo said. "Even though it was something on my heart to do, I felt like Invisible Children was being put in my path for a reason and I should be doing it."

She said she originally told her parents she wanted to go to Uganda on an internship with Invisible Children. At first it was tough breaking it to her parents, but she said they eventually understood and have been supportive the entire time.

"My dad literally started laughing at me as I told him ... because he knew I was going to ask him to do something like that eventually," Giovinazzo said. "After talking to them about it and after showing them the film and them really

hearing my heart for it, they became really supportive. I definitely appreciate how trusting they are of me [because] there's a certain level of trust you have to have to let your kid drive around in a van for a couple months, take time off of school and financially put yourself in not as great of a situation as you hoped."

Giovinazzo and her teammates are given \$10 a day for food, live out of a van and stay at random people's houses while on tour, she said. There are 50 other roadies on tour right now, split into 10 teams to cover 10 different regions, she said. Giovinazzo said her team covers the Middle America region, which includes nine states from Oklahoma and Arkansas up to North Dakota and Minnesota.

"I think it's always cool to go to high schools and opening eyes of kids that are so young," she said. "Especially in small towns like in middle of nowhere Iowa or Oklahoma, when you show up and they have no idea that anything like this is happening."

One of the most touching moments Giovinazzo has had with Invisible Children was during a national event called Displace Me, in which more than 70,000 people in 15 cities across the nation slept in cardboard boxes



Kanna Taylor/Index

Invisible Children, an organization that helps spread awareness of the 22-year-long war in Uganda that is using grade school-age soldiers, made a stop in Kirksville as a part of their 2008 tour.

and rationed food and water for 24 hours, she said. The point of this event was to re-create how the people of Uganda are forced to live in displacement camps, where more than 1,000 people die every day, she said.

The roadies at Giovinazzo's event in Orlando asked the crowd for 21 minutes of silence, to represent the 21 years of war that Uganda had experienced so far at that time, she said. During the 21 minutes, she said a group of kids were standing in silence, praying and holding hands. Giovinazzo said she and her friends decided to join them, and from there the circle continued to grow until almost the entire crowd of 8,000 people were holding hands in complete silence.

"It was so touching to me because to me it was like a physical representation of how this movement has grown across America from [just] three people standing up for something," she said. "Everyone was crying. It was an emotional experience."

Giovinazzo has come a long way since the event and has been on two national tours, including the Spring Tour of 2008, when she and her teammate Lewis

were asked by Phi Sigma Pi to give a presentation for Truman students. The pair showed a documentary to a crowd of about 70 students in the Activities Room of the Student Union Building last week. The film, made by the creators of Invisible Children, featured a story about a Ugandan boy named Sunday and a short film about what people can do to help.

"The first step is just awareness," Giovinazzo said. "Invisible Children could have never made it to where it is now without people just telling people and spreading the story. As simple as it seems, it makes a huge difference."

She said Invisible Children offers many ways to help, including a letter writing campaign that has contributed to the current peace talks in Uganda. The national event, Displace Me, asked all 70,000 participants to write letters to their senators, Giovinazzo said. After the event, 21 senators sent a letter to President Bush asking for him to take part in this process, and he sent senior level diplomat Tim Shortly to Sudan for the peace talks, she said.

"Since he's been there we've

seen such change," Giovinazzo said. "Out of the five steps of the peace process, we've gone through all five of them, and right now, literally in a matter of days or weeks, we could see the peace treaty signed."

However, Invisible Children's work does not end there. Giovinazzo said rebuilding the war-torn country will take much effort, and Invisible Children plans to see it all the way through. She said they have initiated several programs including the Schools for Schools program. They also sell bracelets and purses made by the people of Uganda and send the profits back to them.

"There are a million ways to help," Giovinazzo said. "I'd say get on the Web site [www.invisiblechildren.com] and check it out."

Sophomores Jocelyn Nebel and Rachel Johnson both attended the event and said they agree that Invisible Children is a good cause.

"It was really moving," Nebel said. "I definitely felt like, you know, this is a cause the U.S. should get involved with. A lot of times we're involved in a lot of wars and all kinds of stuff

that's just for money, but this is actually for the life of people."

Nebel said she found out about Invisible Children through a friend who was writing a speech about it. Johnson said she found out through a friend's blog and participated in the Displace Me event last year in Kansas City.

"It was an amazing experience," Johnson said. "It kind of gave us a little bit of what it's like. Like we weren't allowed to eat or drink 'til like 9 p.m. ... It was pretty hardcore."

Johnson said she has thought about going to Uganda in the future and that she is looking into it. Nebel said she planned on visiting the Phi Sigma Pi table the next day to sign a letter that would be sent to her local senator.

"A lot more people should definitely know about this [because] it's definitely something worth putting yourself into," Nebel said. "I heard a couple of years ago that some people told us that our generation is the next greatest generation, and for a while I was thinking, 'Yeah, right.' But I mean if we put the effort into ... working towards peace, we could do just about anything."

The Center for Student Involvement congratulates all the nominees and winners that were recognized on April 16, 2008 at the

LEADERSHIP RECOGNITION PROGRAM.

We also extend special thanks to all those who worked to make the event a success!

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