



MAKING HERSTORY

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Eastern Africa has some of the world's most vulnerable refugees—teenage girls that have experienced war, rape, kidnapping, violence, death and loss of family members, and sex trafficking. These young women have lost their most basic human rights. Many don't know how to put words to their trauma, talk about their loss, or think about their future. A writer named **Spring Sutter**, a photographer named **Emily Reiman**, and a filmmaker named **Zippy Kimundu** hope to change that with a program called *I'll Tell You My Story*.

In 2015 Spring Sutter was working with Zipporah "Zippy" Kimundu in Uganda on the Disney film, *The Queen of Katwe*. Spring, who is from Seattle, was working as a production accountant, but is a writer by vocation. And Zippy, a filmmaker from Nairobi, was working in the film editing department.

In a quirk of the film production schedule, most of the crew went on to South Africa to create another part of the movie, and Spring and Zippy stayed behind in Uganda. Both women thought of themselves essentially as storytellers, each working in a different medium. They were aware of the power of story to heal, and the great need for healing in the conflict-torn areas of the African continent. One night, after the Disney project was over, Spring and Zippy met in Kenya, and had cocktails with a woman named Ashley Beckett, who worked for FilmAid, a UN film production program for refugee camps. FilmAid needed volunteers, and Spring and Zippy had skills to offer.

Excited about the possibilities, Spring returned to Seattle and told her friend and professional photographer Emily Reiman about her experience in Africa. Emily, who has served as a mentor with Big Sister and taught photography to underserved youth, was intrigued and enthusiastic. "You have to do it," she told Spring. "If you do it, I'll do it," replied Spring. The three women got to work creating a workshop for young refugee women to express themselves through writing, photography, and filmmaking.

With the help of Ashley, they connected with **RefuShe**, (<https://www.refushe.org/>), an organization that helps unaccompanied minor girls who have arrived in Kenya as refugees from other East-African countries. RefuShe recognizes the unique challenges these young women face, and gives them a sense of safety, a place to recover from trauma, and the tools that instill internal confidence. The *I'll Tell You My Story* workshop fit into that goal perfectly.

The first ITYMS workshop was held in 2016, but there was quite a bit of chaos. The trio held a GoFundMe campaign with a naive idea of the costs involved. Even after seriously underestimating what they needed, they used their own resources, and somehow made it work. And then, when they arrived to start the classes, there was a language problem. "When we first got into the room none of the students could understand each other," recalls Zippy. "They didn't speak Swahili or any language I could understand myself, certainly not English!"



So the next year they hired a translator who spoke most of the languages you'd run into in East Africa. That has worked much better.

And what happens once these workshops actually start? Typically, there are 15 women and girls in a class, from four or five different countries, all near Kenya (including Kenya itself). More than half come from the Democratic Republic of Congo. They are mostly teenagers that have had such turbulent lives, it takes a while before they feel safe enough to tell their stories. To give you an example of the type of trauma these girls have experienced, in the second workshop there was a girl that was 19 or 20 (most don't even know their true age) that had been kidnapped and held in the bush by her captors since she was four years old.

So Zippy, Emily, and Spring start by telling their own stories. It earns the girls' trust. Mutual respect is essential. "We just let them reveal what they want to," says Spring. "We have them focus on the fact that they get to write a story, take a lot of pictures, and make a movie. We let them know that we see them as really interesting, capable, girls, and not victims."

WE WANT THEM GET TO KNOW THEMSELVES AS SOMETHING OUTSIDE OF THEIR TRAUMA."

Eventually, someone will break through with their real story, and the rest of the group will realize they are not alone in their experience. Some days there are a lot of tears in the room.

There is a sisterhood that rises out of the daily sessions, even among girls from rival tribes. One girl will be talking about something that happened to her, and that will encourage another one to raise her hand and speak, and then another. And in the end, Spring or Zippy or Emily will ask, "Did you know that about each other?" And the girls always say, "No."

So is this therapy? Emily isn't so sure. She points out "art therapy" is a big deal in the United States, but that is not their primary approach. They want the girls to learn about film, photography, and writing, so they have a range of tools in their power. "We really push the fact that they are individuals," says Emily. "Their stories are unique and while there might be some kind of similar traumatic experience, they are all valuable as individuals. If that is also therapeutic, so be it."

And then, Zippy points out, there are the cultural issues. She had trauma in her own family and never spoke about it until she was trying to write a script about it. So she knows first-hand how these storytelling tools can open things up. "Culturally, we don't speak about our feelings," says Zippy. "For example, in the West you go see a psychiatrist; here, we don't have that. The girls don't speak to their teachers or fellow students because that's not a thing. It's too painful. I remember one of the teachers being in our class, and she had never heard 90% of the stories that were being told. She was in tears. All the girls were also affected. They would hug and comfort each other, because they had previously thought that they were alone. We are not an organization providing therapy, but it just finds us. We aren't experts, but we embrace it, and do what we can in the context of teaching a storytelling workshop."

The healing doesn't happen all at once, but by the time they move from the initial group sessions to the actual workshops on craft, there has been a shift, a noticeable movement toward gelling together as one group. "When we get to that meeting where the story is due, we make sure we all sit together at a big round table," says Spring. "We give them the option to read it out loud or just tell us, but we definitely do not ask them to write their refugee story."

We encourage them to be creative, they can do whatever they want."

Spring, Emily, and Zippy are careful not to stick to their planned syllabus too tightly. Depending on the individual students and their needs, the plan might need to be adapted, so they're careful to keep things fluid to keep individual needs as a top priority. This helps to maintain trust, and makes it a better experience for the students.





The point, after all, is to give young women tools to express themselves, and to find ways to believe in themselves. To that end, the program leaders make sure they get to hear from African women (besides Zippy) as often as possible. Seeing someone from their own part of the continent who has succeeded helps them believe that anything is possible. "Emily and Spring have these skills that they are passing on, but there are also these amazing African women who we bring in to speak," says Zippy.

"Some of these girls think that going abroad is the only way to be successful and they leave class thinking differently about that. "

"WE ARE OPENING THEM UP TO THE OPPORTUNITY THAT THEY CAN ACTUALLY MAKE IT HERE, IN AFRICA."

So what's the biggest challenge the program is facing now? No surprise, it's funding, all three leaders agree. They've had to make do with out-of-date technology. Cameras evolve so quickly these days, it's easy for them to become obsolete. "I think if we had better equipment the girls would rise to the occasion," says Emily. "I'm limited with how much I can teach them technically because the cameras are out of date." Zippy adds, "If we could just standardize the cameras, we could then have a similar predictable and consistent foundation for teaching photography and filmmaking."

But the other big thing additional funding would buy is time. "We currently cram the program into less than two weeks," Spring says, "but if we could even get two more days with the girls, we could really do a lot with that time. I feel like they get to a point where they become junior artists, and then we're out of time. It's not quite long enough."



Even though funding is an issue, the trio plan to hold workshops in Kenya, Ghana, and Uganda over the next three years. They are currently researching refugee organizations similar to RefuShe.

For all the good this project does for the girls it serves, a huge bonus for Spring, Zippy, and Emily is that these three women just love working together. "I'm kind of addicted to you guys," Spring says, with laughter from all three that says, Yes, I know the feeling.

And you can't argue with the results. The world can be a terrible place so much of the time. But contrast the dire stories of the horrors endured by these girls with the hopeful, determined work that is displayed on the website. They look without flinching at their own past, what's happened to their families and to themselves. They are not merely surviving. "You can see from the videos we've made, that we don't want to expose their sadness," says Zippy.

"I want them to feel empowered and that they have a renewed energy to move on. There is a lot of media out there that does not represent my continent in an accurate way, it's usually negative, so I am always looking for ways to present our stories with some hope and some light."

Time after time, you hear their statements of determination, plans for the future that involve not just themselves, but making the world better for other children in these circumstances. And that determination to improve the world starts with a newfound sense of self. As one of the short films from the students announces,

"I AM WHO I AM. YOU CAN NEVER TAKE THAT AWAY."

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