



Fulfilling the Dreams of Many

Shauna Davidson '08 helps build primary schools and empower children to overcome poverty in Northern Uganda.

By Meilee Bridges
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Orit Barpunu is a small, remote village in Northern Uganda—one of the most impoverished regions of the country. Within its thatched-roof houses, there is no electricity and no running water; holes in the ground serve as toilets. But outside the newly erected brick walls of Nahla Nursery and Primary School, a small group of youngsters wearing patterned dresses and brightly colored shirts dance and sing, their voices joyful. And looking on with excitement and pride are Etyang Fred, cofounder and director, and his partner, Shauna Davidson '08, who serves as cofounder and board president.

DREAMING OF BETTER LIVES

Davidson has helped build the school through fundraising, administrative work, and the creation of a 501(c)(3) nonprofit over the past two years. It's a labor of love for the Southwestern alumna, especially considering that she's engaged in all these efforts during her off hours: she daylights full-time as a grants and compliance specialist for Educate!, another nonprofit that partners with schools and governments in Africa to better prepare students for careers, entrepreneurship, and community development.

But Davidson is careful to say that the original conception of the project should be attributed to Fred, who was raised in a slum in Kampala, Uganda's capital, and whose family grew up in Orit Barpunu. Having experienced similar difficulties in attaining an education, Fred recognized a need in his family's community; Davidson's role was to help him find the financial resources to meet that need. "This was his dream, and it's actually been his dream for a really long time—since he was in school," Davidson says. "It was his idea, and I'm supporting local development; I'm not telling people what they need. But I see this as fulfilling my dream of creating my own nonprofit. Sometimes I can't even believe how cool it is that I get to live out this dream life that I've had."

Nahla School is the realization of a vision for many more than Fred and Davidson; it's the dream of Obit Barpunu's children and their families, too. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the village was caught in a violent conflict between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Ugandan government. Children were orphaned during raids that also destroyed their schools, churches, crops, and livestock. Many were forced into refugee camps. Although peace was restored years later and fractured families were allowed to return to their homes, picking up the pieces amid postwar trauma proved slow and difficult. Before Nahla opened its doors in 2017, children would have to walk two hours to get to the nearest elementary school, and during the rainy season, many could not make the arduous trip because the bridge on the path would be impassable. Those who did make it to school might then be disappointed to find that untrained teachers had not bothered to show up.

Because formal education was so inaccessible, more than 70% of children throughout some Northern Ugandan villages were not attending school on a regular basis. Instead, the children would stay home to do dawn-to-dusk farm work. Some would even go to bars to drink. One 14-year-old girl married a 50-year-old man just so that her family could benefit from the dowry. The cycle of poverty would continue.

But with the February 2018 opening of Nahla School, which now serves 400 students and employs 12 teachers in Obit Barpunu—and with a second school on the horizon—children are studying, learning to read and write, and interacting with classmates. They are happy and confident: whereas once they would be too shy or even afraid to answer questions, now, they can realistically dream of the future. "The most exciting thing is to actually see all the kids at the school who are learning and getting an education and to hear the feedback from their families that they've seen a change in their kids, that they're speaking more English at home now," says Davidson. "Now, [the children] say, 'I want to be a doctor! I want to be an engineer! I want to be teacher!' That's the most rewarding part: this school is impacting all these kids' lives—and their families' lives."

THINKING DIFFERENTLY THROUGH ANTHROPOLOGY

The seeds of Davidson's dreams were originally sown at Southwestern, where her passions for art, anthropology, and international development first coalesced. As an undergraduate, Davidson double-majored in studio art and anthropology while minoring in art history. She had always loved painting and drawing, so studio art and art history were natural choices. But anthropology was something she discovered during her first years on campus. "I really



Fred and Davidson in front of Nahla School.

love how cultural anthropology opens up your mind to see the different ways that people live their lives," she says. "For me, that allows me to challenge the assumptions that I have from my culture about how life is." She credits Professor of Anthropology Melissa Johnson for introducing her to the field, and some of her favorite authors are scholars such as the renowned David Graeber, who argues that the widespread notion of having to repay a debt is a mere myth. "I really love anthropologists, especially the ones who can really take a concept and turn it upside down I just love how anthropologists can help you think about something differently."

One pivotal example of thinking differently was a discussion that took place in Anthropology of Development, a course that Davidson sees as "a monumental moment" in her career and life. She and her fellow students were discussing anthropological critiques of global development: for instance, the so-called improvements in technology and economics introduced in a developing region can be offset by their ultimate unsustainability or by the negative and even devastating social consequences of those changes. Davidson knew she wanted to work in development, but the dialogue in that course helped her shape a nuanced approach: "I want to do development work from an anthropologist's perspective. A lot of development projects end up failing because they don't really know or understand what a community actually needs. ... My goal—my dream—is to support locally led development because I think the people who live in an area know what's best for that area. So that's where all of this started, and the very first seeds were in that class at Southwestern."

After graduating from the University, Davidson had planned to join the Peace Corps, but a soccer injury prevented her from going. After recovering from major surgery, she moved to Austin without a clear career path, working at an after-school program and as a nanny while struggling to decide what to do next. Little did she know, another seed had been planted: she was already beginning a career related to education. But to Davidson, those jobs simply reflected her commitment to supporting children: "I've always loved kids. I've always wanted to help kids, especially underprivileged kids—kids that are struggling and having a hard time. I think that's why I've always gravitated toward those jobs."

Still, Davidson knew she wanted to extend her education, so she applied to graduate programs in anthropology and development, landing at the London School of Economics to pursue her master's. "It was such a cool environment to study anthropology because I was studying it with people from all over the world," she recalls. Her classmates and flatmates hailed from

Germany and China, Macedonia and Mexico, so time spent both inside and outside the classroom was filled with dynamic conversations about various social norms and cultural values throughout the human experience. "It was so much fun to be able to talk with them about anthropology concepts and ideas and hear all their different perspectives from where they're from," she says.

Anthropology is, in some ways, one reason she eventually ended up in Orit Barpunu building a school for underprivileged youth. "That's what I really love about living here in Uganda: living in a different culture, I get exposed to different ways of living [and] different beliefs, and then I can choose if I want to take those on," Davidson reflects. "And that's why I still love anthropology."

FALLING IN LOVE WITH AFRICA

The path to Africa specifically began during a semester-long study-abroad program when Davidson was at Southwestern. True to her commitment to inhabiting diverse perspectives, she chose to spend nearly four months at the School of International Training (SIT) in the Republic of Senegal, a country in West Africa that had spent a century under French colonial rule until its independence in 1960. The republic takes pride in its rich mix of ethnic groups and religions that nevertheless live together harmoniously.

"I decided I wanted to study abroad in the most culturally different environment I could find, so I did SIT in Senegal," Davidson remembers. She relished living



Davidson was presented a live chicken by Local Council 1 Oca Celestino, the government representative for Orit Barpunu and a member of the Nahla School Management Committee, as a gift for the school.

with a host family and learning about their beliefs, customs, and daily life. "I just felt like it was home. I really liked how people are very social and they're always around other people, always taking care of each other. It's a very different environment from the individualistic environment in the U.S.," she says. "I had one of the very best times of my whole life there. I fell in love with Africa then, and that's the reason why I'm back here now."

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But perhaps the most significant part of her trip was an independent research project that she designed in which she observed and interviewed subjects at local orphanages. She later translated those findings into her capstone project and presented her work, "Orphan Care in Senegal," at the annual meeting of the Southwestern Anthropological Association in California. "I think the capstone really inspired me to think about what impact I could make on the world," Davidson says. In addition to the project itself, she remembers her capstone classmates going around in a circle to share what their future goals were. "I remember saying I wanted to do something like end poverty, something really big and generic," she laughs. "But at the time, I 100% believed it. I always think back to that: how I declared to everyone that that's what I was going to do. And now I'm doing it in my own way, the best way I can."

FROM ORPHANAGES TO PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Davidson's capstone research on orphanages in Senegal was an extension of a month-long internship she had completed in Guatemala—an opportunity her mother had found for her. Working with Dallas-based Buckner International, Davidson and her colleagues led programs at the orphanages to engage the children. "And that's where I really realized that's the work that I want to do," she recalls, "because I saw the conditions that the kids were living in, and that was life-changing, too." Horrified that large groups of children were sleeping in enormous rooms filled with bunk beds with only one or two adults to watch over them, Davidson knew she wanted to make a difference. "There was just this heartbreaking moment when I had to leave the kids at the end of the week, and it was all younger kids," she says. "There was this one girl I had just fallen in love with, and I just remember having to leave her in this huge room to go to sleep with a bunch of kids crying. It was awful."

But a ray of hope also emerged from that wrenching parting from the little girl, whose name was Christina: "She's like a big inspiration for me," Davidson says. "I actually did a painting of her, and all my friends and family know about Christina because she still inspires me and is part of the reason I'm doing what I'm doing."

Organizations such as Buckner International have since moved away from supporting orphanages and toward building foster-care and adoption programs because they have learned that children benefit from living in family environments rather than in isolated institutions—another change in thinking that Davidson endorses. But she still credits her volunteer experience as yet another seed for her efforts in cofounding Nahla School. "It really inspired me down the path I'm on today," she reflects. "If I hadn't done that, I don't know that I would have ended up where I am."

And given Davidson's warm personality and her dedication to children, it's perhaps unsurprising that she still communicates with some of the children she met during that fateful trip to Guatemala, who seek her out on social media and keep in touch with her as she works to help other children thousands of miles away.



A BUMPY BUT SUCCESSFUL ROAD TO FULFILLING DREAMS

Davidson is honest that her path toward living and working in Africa was neither smooth nor easy. In addition to working as a nanny and at an after-school program after graduating from Southwestern at the height of an economic recession, she also worked as a barista. After returning to the U.S. after earning her master's from the London School of Economics in 2010, she admits that she "had the hardest time finding a job," so she volunteered, worked odd jobs, and answered phones at a utility company.

But even without a clear plan, engaging in unpaid work and community service eventually led to the career she had envisioned at Southwestern. While living in Colorado and volunteering for Attention Homes, a homeless shelter for youth in crisis, she applied for a position as the organization's grants manager and advanced quickly from there. "They started me slowly, writing grant proposals, and I realized it was something I could actually do well because I'd always been good at writing papers for school, and it's really similar. I've always loved that," Davidson shares. Over the next four years, she gradually but assuredly built a base of knowledge of fundraising, which allowed her to win an internship with Educate!, where she eventually landed her current job with the company. "I was really excited because their focus is on empowering the next generation of leaders and entrepreneurs in Africa. Educate! is about [giving] people the skills to help themselves ... so that they can come up with their own business, their own ideas, their own innovations, [and] their own businesses to help their communities [and] their families."

Working for Educate! also meant realizing Davidson's dream of returning to Africa.

"I had always wanted to go back," she says. "I always wanted to push myself to go back to that environment and be able to live there and really immerse myself in a different culture for a longer period of time." It was then that she and Fred met, fell in love, realized they had complementary goals and skills, and decided to realize their dreams by building Nahla Nursery and Primary School. While she focused on applying for grants, courting foundations such as Growing Hearts of Africa, and overseeing the financial side of the community project on top of her day job, Fred applied his background in construction and his local knowledge to manage both the building process and the school's opening by hiring teachers and gathering supplies and materials for the students' learning.

It's a challenging process with lots of moving pieces, yet Fred and Davidson show no signs of stopping. "We have really big dreams to grow," Davidson says excitedly. For example, they are hoping to build a business to help make the first Nahla school self-sustaining and to assure that the school remains tuition free. In addition, she says, "We're building another school—and hopefully maybe a couple more in the future—because northern Uganda has such a big need for it. Our goal is to help kids get access to education so that they can build a better future ... to help uplift them, or to help give them opportunities to uplift themselves."

Davidson hopes that her experiences demonstrate that following one's dreams is never a futile pursuit—as long as one thinks realistically and creatively about how to convert vision into profession. "Find the things that you love, and pursue learning about the things that you love—but then think about how you can turn that into your career," she advises. "When I was in school, I found anthropology, I found international development. I loved it, and I was so excited, but then, for some reason, I never thought about what I was actually going to do. So I struggled a little bit after I graduated because ... I missed that step of 'how am I going to translate that into a career?'"

But Davidson's realistic attitude is balanced with her enduring spirit of optimism. "Never give up, because there were so many times I could have just given up. But it's completely possible to do what you dream of doing. Just work hard at it, keep up with it, and keep going," she suggests. "I've had trouble really believing that I can have an impact on other people's lives, like really believing, 'Can I really be the one who does this, who builds this school that all of these kids can go to?' ... You should really believe in yourself and in the impact you can have on the world because you really can do it."

