

THE THING THAT HAPPENED

South of the Nile River, near the remote trading center of Bweyale in Northern Uganda, sits the tiny campus of Hope North Vocational and Secondary school. With no phone, Internet or reliable transportation, the school is an island in a vast sea of African bush. The students here are a mix of former child soldiers, orphans and abjectly poor kids, displaced by the 22-year old civil war in Uganda between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Uganda People's Defense Forces (UPDF). The teachers are mostly rookie educators fresh out of Ugandan universities - some of whom look not much older than the kids. Their teaching tools amount to little more than their own wits and a scattering of out-dated textbooks. With seldom enough money to pay the staff, house the kids and buy school supplies, operating the school is a juggle of compromises. But deficiencies or not, the school is the only chance these kids have to escape their tragic histories. Embedded within this story of tenuous survival at a small school in the African bush is a larger exploration of a powerful concept... the concept of hope.

The Thing That Happened begins with Okello Kelo Sam (Sam), the founder and director of Hope North, driving through the scattered detritus of Northern Uganda. Through his voice over, we learn that his brother's kidnapping and murder, and a subsequent massacre at his own village, (all at the hands of the LRA) drove him to act in response. The scene abruptly shifts to dawn on Hope North's campus. As the rhythms and rituals of morning unfold, we quickly realize the sparseness of this place... porridge is ladled by a woman wearing a baby strapped to her back, trousers are pressed with a coal-fired iron and a discarded automobile rim is "clanged" to signal the start of the school day. It's quickly apparent that like the students, the campus is making do in its tattered, broken or otherwise repurposed state.

By all appearances, the dusty campus is a constant symbol of wanting. But ironically, their isolation from the outside world leaves the students largely unaware of what they're lacking here. And for the most part, the sparse conditions are a step up from the squalor and confusion of their pasts. So they buck up... diligently attending classes, playing soccer and subsisting on a never-say-die attitude that seems pervasive in Uganda.

Personal accounts from teachers put their day-to-day challenges as educators into stark reality. Among them, intermittent electricity, no computers and roughly 4 textbooks for 150 students. Compounded by the school's isolation and need, they know that teaching here is far from ordinary. But the teachers are driven by a sense of responsibility to educate the next generation of peacekeepers and leaders. And turning from the challenges at Hope North would set a bad example for the kids they're working so hard to rehabilitate.

War stories from three of the students collectively outline the experiences of innocent victims; an orphan, a witness and a perpetrator. These candid personal accounts paint a gripping picture of personal loss, unthinkable violence and forced killings; the byproducts of a war these kids were all too young to comprehend.

The Thing That Happened takes a final turn as we reconnect with Sam amidst giraffes and elephants on the African savannah. The serenity of these scenes becomes symbolic of Sam's vision to create peace through education. Sam ultimately arrives at Hope North and is met by a throng of dancing, singing and drumming students as we witness the human spirit exposed amidst an energized tribal celebration. The scars of war are healing here. Against the odds, the school is having an effect on these students. As we see these kids emerge from their unspeakable experiences, it becomes clear that their story-the story of Hope North-becomes a metaphor for personal identity, the resiliency of the human spirit and the power of hope.