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Orphaned, vulnerable children from Uganda perform, share culture

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Children of Uganda

On Friday evening, a group of children, teens and young adults stepped off a bus at Glenbard West High School and experienced their first snowfall.

It was the start of a five-day stay in Glen Ellyn, where members of the group also experienced their first girls basketball game, their first time eating waffles and, for many, their first time on an airplane.

This group of 20 performers, whose ages range from 10 to 25, came from Uganda and experienced many firsts in American culture. But through their energy, culture and display of love, the children from Uganda also changed the lives of many Glen Ellyn residents.

The young performers who visited Glen Ellyn are with the group Children of Uganda — a nonprofit organization that supports 500 orphaned and vulnerable children in Uganda. This year, the Glenbard West Choir adopted the group as its charity to support.



Members of the organization, Children of Uganda, perform a traditional African song for fans at halftime of a Glenbard West Varsity Girls Basketball team on Friday, Feb. 10, 2012. The children, orphans from Uganda, are touring to raise awareness of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa.



The choir raised more than \$9,600 through fundraisers and the Children of Uganda's Tour of Light performance on Sunday, ultimately raising awareness about the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa.

Children of Uganda provides education, food and water, medical treatment and several other necessities while empowering the children to become productive community members who impact Uganda's society.

On Sunday, the group performed traditional African dancing, drumming and singing. While the performance was inspiring for many community members, spending time with the children was more than inspiring for some — it was life changing.

Micia Soane and Ann Marie Davis housed the Tour of Light members in their homes and set up extra beds, pull-out couches and air mattresses to accommodate the large group of more than 20 people. Soane is familiar with the Children of Uganda because her daughters — Anna and Caitlin — have sponsored children in the program since 2005. Davis said housing the children was a rewarding opportunity.

“They're so grateful, thoughtful and have such spirit,” said Davis. “Their love is contagious. They got off the bus (at Glenbard West Friday,) and were giving hugs in the blizzard.”

At Davis' home Saturday, the group played foosball and spent time with students such as 17-year-old Claire Swikle, who is president of the Glenbard West Choir. The choir department works with charities each year, but Claire said this is the most involved the group has gotten. During the visit, Claire traded bracelets with some of the teens from Uganda and kept a list of everyone's name in her phone so she could add them as friends on Facebook and keep in touch after they left Glen Ellyn on Wednesday, Feb. 15.

“They're so nice and outgoing,” Claire said.

The Ugandan children were chosen for the Tour of Light group from boarding schools based on their talent, academics and personality to be ambassadors of Uganda, according to Children of Uganda's Executive Director, Pamela Brannon.

This year, the group has toured San Francisco; Los Angeles; Washington, D.C.; Charles Town, WVa.; New York; Oxford, Ohio; Chicago; Freeport, Ill.; San Antonio and Atlanta.

“We have not met a stranger on our (tour) yet,” she said. “When the kids walk in, everyone is family for a moment.”

Although the kids often bring joy to each room they walk into in America, their lives in Uganda present different challenges. Many of them have lost family members, parents and grandparents to AIDS.

Jessica Nalwoga, a high school student in Uganda, joined the group after her mother died from AIDS in 2002. She also lost her sister, Irene, to the disease last year.

“I like music because it helps me forget the past,” she said during her performance Sunday night.

Jessica is one of several students in the group who’ve been impacted by the disease. But by getting an education, the students are supporting their families and community. Others, such as 18-year-old George Mulindwa, have been with Children of Uganda since 2001. At age 4, his father died and when he was 8, his mother passed away. This was George’s first visit to America, his first ride on an airplane and his first time seeing snow. He writes in a journal every day so when he goes home to his three siblings and his grandmother, he can share stories about his tour in America.

“They are proud of me,” said George, who hopes to one day support his family by being a TV presenter.

But George isn’t the only member of the group with big dreams. On Saturday, Jane Ndagire, a lead performer who came to Glen Ellyn, was scheduled to graduate from Kyambogo University in Uganda with a bachelor’s degree in accounting and financing.

On Jan. 18, Robert Kiwanuka, the group’s artistic director, graduated college as well.

These kids grew up in a culture much different than what many children experience in Glen Ellyn. That’s one reason that Andy Jeffrey, Glenbard West’s choir director, said the cultural exchange is a great opportunity for students.

“(It gives the) kids an opportunity to interact with a culture (different than their own,)” he said. “It gives the kids the sense of something bigger than themselves.”