



HER STORY

INSPIRATIONAL SPEAKER | CEO OF WEND

My name is Jolly Okot and I'm an Acholi from Northern Uganda. As a child, I grew up in the same village as Joseph Kony, never imagining what he would one day become and the horrors I would face.

In 1986, as a teenager, while walking the 10 miles home from school, I was abducted by a group of rebels. Immediately, they captured me and I began to hear gunshots. When I turned, I saw a commander draw a pistol and shoot two people in their feet. This was my introduction to the rebel group that was then called the Holy Spirit movement. The rebel group would later come to be known as the LRA- the Lord's Resistance Army. They held me captive for the next two years where I was forced to fight, forced to steal from my own people at gunpoint and was repeatedly raped by the commanders. Despite the horrific circumstances, I did not give up. I was determined to make it back home to my family.

Finally, two long painful years later, I managed to escape... but I would pay a heavy price. When I returned home, I learned that my beloved father had been imprisoned and was soon to be shot to death. Using the training that I was forced to learn while captive, I lead a nighttime raid and successfully freed my father. The next day, I walked 60 miles in search of safety and education. When the LRA learned of what I had done to free my father, they retaliated. A couple months later, they went to my village and killed my uncle. A year later, they returned to my village and killed 21 of my cousins in a single night. Despite the atrocities I faced, I went back to school, realizing that education was the only hope for creating change. During that time, I was offered a life of freedom in the United States, but I declined because I felt that I had been blessed to return to my family and felt it was my responsibility to help other child soldiers regain what they could of their lives.

Since then, I have dedicated my life to working with communities affected by LRA violence. I have worked with dozens of organizations such as *Oxfam*, *MSF*, *InterAid*, *UNHCR* and founded *HEALS* - an organization focused on providing "play therapy" for children who were night commuters (children who would walk miles to avoid being abducted by the LRA.) Because of my work with *HEALS*, in 2005, I was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. Around that time, I was introduced to the filmmakers of *Invisible Children*, and took on the role as the *Director of Invisible Children Uganda*. As a director, I developed many successful programs - one of my proudest being founding the Legacy Scholarship program, where we put 4,800 children through school. Currently, I am the CEO of *WEND*, a socially minded fashion company that employs and empowers women formerly affected by the war in Northern Uganda. We provide advanced training in tailoring, finance, and personal development to the seamstresses we support. Watching these women grow and become self-sufficient, strong, and educated with every day that passes is my constant reminder of why I do what I do.

"People will jump on a wagon because it is easy to go for a ride. The joy of the ride is fleeting and fast. But the ones who will truly feel the kind of joy that last a lifetime aren't the ones seated, but the ones pulling the wagon. The true listeners, the people who hear God and act on it are the ones pulling the wagon- that is both who I am, as well as all the ladies at WEND, and that is who we will always be."