



The Kasana OF UGANDA

One TTUHSC Student
Brought Sunshine to a
Ugandan Village and
Helped Transform
a Centuries-Old Culture

By Glenys Young | Photos by Neal Hinkle

As San Juanita Dominguez introduces herself, she immediately comes across as full of life—the kind of person who is brimming with enthusiasm, optimism and a heartfelt desire to better the world.

But the 30-year-old wasn't always as outgoing and vivacious. At 19, just after her sophomore year at Texas Tech University (TTU), Dominguez went on her first international service trip—a two-month stay in Peru with the Salvation Army—as a shy, scared, skeptical teen.

“I was like, ‘I don't want to talk to anyone, I don't want anybody to look at me, don't ask me questions,’ and I just remember thinking, ‘I am crazy. I am crazy going to this country.’ (But) my heart has always been for serving people, and my mom raised me to help whenever you can.”

By the end of the trip, the experience had been so transformative that her peers unanimously agreed she had changed the most of anyone in the group.

“There was this shift in my personality of being more outgoing and seeking out opportunities to learn about others, their culture and their language,” said Dominguez, who just completed her first year as a graduate student in the Department of Speech, Language and Hearing Sciences Speech-Language Pathology Program. “It was suddenly, ‘How can I help you? How can I serve you?’ It was this click and, ‘OK, well that's it—I'm going to keep doing this.’”

And she has.

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BEN



"I am so grateful that I met Kasana. She changed my understanding of how I was seeing Ben as a disadvantaged child. I always saw Ben as someone who won't be able to do anything. Our society has a negative view of persons with disability. San is a good person. She is amazing, incredible, nice, and she is all good."

FLORENCE, A WOMAN WHO LIVES IN MASAKA WHO HAS A DISABLED CHILD NAMED BEN

MASAKA



How can I help you?

TONNIE



"Sister, you opened my eyes wide. Our society sees us as a curse. They call us by our disability, yet we have name(s). People consider us in a different negative way. Society denies us opportunities and people put us down. But, sister, you're different. You inspired me. Changed my mindset. You opened my eyes. Your words, your love, your attitude, your belief in me changed me completely. San, I remember I told you that you have a big heart. I thank and praise the Most High that I got to meet you. May you be blessed beyond measure.

I love you my dear sister, San Juanita Dominguez-KASANA"

TONNIE WASAJJA, SON OF THE VILLAGE CHAIRMAN IN MASAKA

How can I
serve you?

JUMBA



JUMBA



"My sweet Jumba. He was made fun of for not being able to use the restroom on his own and having to use a tube. He LOVED school so much. When he passed away, he asked his parents to bury him in his school uniform.

A few days before heading to Uganda this year, I was notified that Jumba had died. He was born with a kidney condition which got worse over the years. After being in the hospital for three months, his kidneys and heart failed. I was so heartbroken. Today, we visited his home and I missed Jumba meeting me at the road as he saw the car approaching like he did so many times before. As soon as his mother (Sophia) saw us, she began to weep uncontrollably. We wept with her. We listened. We held her. We encouraged her. Jumba impacted many lives in the short six years he had. Jumba, we will miss you greatly.

So a told me Jumba asked her to give me a message because he knew he was going to die: 'Tell her I said goodbye and that I loved her very much.' I love you, too, sweet boy. I love you, too."

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She's since been to Peru two more times, China, Cuba, Guatemala twice and Spain. She also visited El Salvador, where she helped build a well. After digging for four days with no luck, her team finally found water.

"When the people in the village heard the water bursting out from the ground, everyone ran to where the water was," Dominguez remembers. "We ended up soaking in it as we laughed and thanked God for allowing us to find the water. The children laughed and ran around as they got wet. They kept saying, 'We have clean water now!'"

Stories like that are equal parts inspiring and heartbreaking—both for her efforts to improve conditions for those in less fortunate parts of the world and for the vital importance of things many Americans take for granted.

In 2013, Lubbock radio station, K-LOVE, was promoting mission trips and, while listening, Dominguez heard about a service opportunity in Uganda.

Throughout her travels, she had never yet made it to Africa, so Dominguez applied to join the team and

was accepted. While she was there, something happened that would leave her forever changed. On the second-to-last day of the trip, Dominguez and the other 60 people in the group visited an orphanage in Masaka, a tree-covered, red-dirt city surrounded by smaller villages. The woman charged with caring for the orphaned children with special needs had special needs herself.

"In Uganda, children who are born with any kind of disability are seen as curses," Dominguez explained. "A lot of times, they are abandoned or hidden by their family members and they are treated like animals, basically."

For Dominguez, who had worked four years at TTU's Child Development Research Center, the difference in how these children were treated was especially striking. She and a dozen other members of the group went to their leader, Andy Andrado, and proposed helping the woman running the orphanage but, ultimately, there were too many trust issues.

"We're from America," Dominguez explained. "A lot of people from America go to Africa and promise things, and then they never return."

Still wanting to help but unsure how to proceed, Dominguez and her group visited the chairman of Masaka. They told him of their desire to help children with special needs and asked him if there was a need in his village.

"He started crying and said, 'My child has special needs,'" Dominguez recalls.

The chairman didn't know if any other families had children with special needs because they would have hidden them from society, but he and the group members began asking around. Ultimately, 70 families came forward, and Dominguez, with a smaller group, visited them the following year.

For these children with intellectual and/or physical disabilities, Dominguez

and her 15-member group have been lifesavers—in many cases, literally.

"We work with them and see what the need is, (and) then we try to find people to share their expertise in that area to help them," she said.

Now, several years later, she is known by villagers as *Kasana*, which means sunshine in the native language. Working with the people is an ongoing effort, reinforced by the relationships Dominguez and her peers continue to build with each successive return to Uganda. The group is working to build a facility outside Masaka, the Shupavu Community Center, for which each member fundraises \$1,000 annually, in addition to the cost of his or her own travel expenses.

In the local language, *shupavu* means courageous, and, true to its name, Dominguez's group plans to train Ugandans to serve their own people, empowering them and providing them with resources. To make it self-sustaining, they planted bamboo and avocados.

"We didn't want to start building without having the trust of the villagers and families," Dominguez said.

"Usually when you start an organization, you have the building, the offices, the board members and all this stuff in place before you do anything. We did it backward. To us, it was very important to gain the trust of these families, especially in such a delicate situation, so we just went back for three straight years—and we're still doing it—to visit these families.

"Now they know our names. They expect us every summer. They know we're not just making promises, we're going to actually do something."

Even while the facility is under construction, word about the group's plans has spread. As it approaches its fifth birthday, the community center project now includes about 100 families, with whom Dominguez and her group members have become friends. She tells the story of one little girl whose father had just died when the group saw her in 2016. She was doing

Now they know our names. They expect us every summer. They know we're not just making promises, we're going to actually do something about it.

well, but the mother needed to move closer to her own parents for financial reasons. During the process, Dominguez's group lost contact with them. At the end of 2017, the group finally found the family again and, to their dismay, the girl was obviously malnourished. But after reconnecting, they were able to develop a program to provide the nutrition she needed to recover. She's now home with her family and "looks like a completely different child," Dominguez said.

Even more impressive are the reactions Dominguez has seen in the community that once shunned kids with special needs.

"People are starting to embrace these children," she said. "One of the things we've been working on is education."

In many cases, schools will not accept children with special needs because they believe they don't know how to teach them. But last year, team members went into a school and advocated for one child, a little boy named Paul, who uses a wheelchair. They argued that just because Paul has physical disabilities doesn't mean he isn't able to learn. To their surprise, the teachers agreed to take him for one probationary semester.

It's been well over a year now, and he's still in school.

"They love helping him, they love having him, they love empowering him," Dominguez gushed. "He is very developmentally delayed because he hadn't been in school, but he's doing well. He's constantly wanting to learn."

At the end of every school year, the students perform a program for their parents. Despite the teachers' concerns about parents' reactions, Paul was chosen to sing during the event, wheelchair and all.

"As soon as he started singing, parents started talking: 'Oh my goodness, he actually knows the song, and he's able to do something besides just sit there,'" Dominguez said, smiling.

"A little girl with a cleft foot went up and started dancing, and it was an opening for them to say, 'Children with disabilities are still able to be educated, to learn how to sing songs, to learn how to dance, and be part of our culture and society.' We want to provide for these children's needs and bridge the gap between society and them."

And miraculously, it's working. The very families who once hid their children away from the rest of the community are now vitally interested in seeing Dominguez's efforts realized.

"They have taken such ownership of our center," she said. "They have taken ownership of, 'How can we contribute to the education of our children, to the empowerment of our children, and how can I advocate for not only my family but also other families with special needs children?' They're starting to care for each other and be a community to open the eyes of other people. They're saying, 'My children are valuable, they are worthy, and they can learn—they can do things, they can contribute.'"

When asked how she's been able to do so much at such a young age, Dominguez laughs.

"I'm nothing special. I'm just a human being who wants to make the world a better place." 



"These children had never held a mirror before and had no idea what they looked like. It was incredible to watch their sense of wonder at looking in a mirror."



To read more stories, as told by San Juanita, visit: ttuhsc.edu/alumni/pulse