



Uplifting Darfur

An activist follows her soul's higher purpose to do something about African genocide

by Mara McFalls

They had just left the American Eagle swag tent after picking up some free sweat shorts and hipster graphic-print underwear. Strolling back up Main Street, they passed people in mountain chic getups and tangelo skin tones toting designer-label shopping bags, fresh off the direct flight from LAX. The town was choked with extra-long and leathered Expeditions and nonchalance. It was opening weekend of the 2007 Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah.

Gretchen Steidle Wallace fit into the scene with deceptive grace. Tall, blonde, and model beautiful, she walked Main Street with a cellphone at her ear and an entourage at her back that included actress Mia Farrow, Oscar award-winning filmmakers, and a former aide to Bill Clinton. She had come to Sundance as producer of the film *The Devil Came on Horseback*, a documentary about the genocide crisis in Darfur, Sudan, scheduled to debut opening weekend at the festival.

Despite keeping glamorous company and wearing the Sundance uniform of Italian shearling, Gretchen wasn't celebrating the peak of her personal journey. The documentary was a byproduct of a larger mission proving that when you listen to your inner voice and follow it, extraordinary things can happen.

Youthful impressions of poverty

The oldest kid of a naval officer, Gretchen had the typical navy-brat childhood, moving every couple of years from age zero through high school. She loved

the adventure of near constant motion and was close to her two younger brothers, especially Brian.

When she was nine, her family moved to Subic Bay naval base in the Philippines, where they lived in luxury among the monkeys and coconuts. Still, what made a lasting impression on Gretchen wasn't the exotic landscape, but the stark contrast with the desperate poverty endured by the people living in the area surrounding the base. At nine years old, Gretchen knew that when she grew up, her work in the world would in some way bring her back face-to-face with the people she saw shuffling through the garbage dumps and rivers of raw sewage.

Like many young idealists and over-achievers, she ratcheted up a list of impressive accolades and accomplishments throughout school and her early career. At 22 years old, Gretchen was an associate at an international investment bank that focused on infrastructure development in poor countries. But she knew she was playing it safe, sitting in an office and tiptoeing around the edges of the problems she felt obliged to address. Before long, she realized she had a fancy closet and impressive title but had lost her way.

Spiritual transformation

Gretchen began to look inwardly to reorient herself away from corporate America and back to the higher purpose she had committed to long ago and far away as a kid in the Philippines. She hadn't ever pursued the spiritual side of herself with any real vigor besides going to a few yoga classes and trying meditation. But now she was ready. She found a spiritual community in



Far Left: Gretchen with refugees from Darfur.

Left: Gretchen at a refugee camp in Chad with her brother Brian.

Below: Darfur women waiting to collect water at one of the refugee camps.



Scene in the Sudan

When he first arrived in the Sudan, Brian was happy to focus on driving his AU standard issue off-roading Landrover and practicing his photography skills with his new high-tech overloaded digital camera. The physical landscape was like the moon; he was living in a video game. But soon enough, the political landscape smacked him square in the jaw.

Darfur currently hosts a conflict between the Arab-led Government of Sudan (GOS) and two rebel African tribal groups. Brian quickly discovered that the GOS was systematically attacking villages in Darfur with help from nomadic Arab militias called Janjaweed (“devil on a horse”), and killing, torturing, looting, and raping everywhere they could. The rebel groups were ill-equipped to defend the villagers from the well-funded, well-trained forces of the GOS and Janjaweed. Brian was not monitoring the ceasefire, he was witnessing genocide. Playtime was over.

He had no gun, and his group had no mandate to defend the victims, but he had his camera and photographed what he saw: men castrated and left to bleed to death, huts set on fire with people locked inside, children with their faces smashed in, men with their ears cut off and eyes plucked out, and thousands of women who couldn’t look him in the eye because they were ashamed of having been raped.



Sibling harmony

After six weeks in South Africa, Gretchen returned home and once again became restless. Now what? She and Brian racked up serious minutes on his satellite phone talking about the horror they had seen and what Brian continued to witness every day. After six months in Darfur, despondent and rocked to the core from seeing so much death, Brian also returned home. In his checked bags were his audio journal and a baggie of 1G chips loaded with photos. And because the Sudanese Government did not allow foreign press into Darfur, Brian possessed some of the only evidence documenting the genocide.

“After the holocaust, the world said ‘never again.’

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Maryland and began taking regular courses and workshops in meditation and integrative breath work. Instead of wasting more time maneuvering through the clever corporate games of how to make rich people richer (herself included), she dedicated herself to spiritual transformation and the pursuit of greater consciousness.

It wasn’t easy, but after many months of playing “business Gretchen” by day and “bindi Gretchen” by night, it happened—EUREKA. Her inner voice said, “It’s OK to be fully alive.” Those six words became her mantra, and she put utter faith in their power. She didn’t yet have the big answers to: What is my journey?

What I am called to do? And how do I turn that into my life’s work? But she was getting close.

“I felt sure there was a way I could serve, so I quit my job at the end of 2003 and went to Africa in January 2004,” recalls Gretchen. With no income and little savings, hefty Ivy League loans, and a life

and husband in America, she knew that she had to take the chance and let the universe support her.

Drawn to Africa, Gretchen found herself in Cape Town addressing the HIV/AIDS crisis at a meeting with politicians, corporate and social entrepreneurs, support groups, and victims of the disease. Coincidentally, two weeks after Gretchen left for South Africa, her brother Brian left for the Sudan. Compelled by a similar sense of duty, he had gone straight from college to the US Marine Corps. But,

like Gretchen, he realized that he too wanted to do more.

He finished his stint in the Marines and became a non-military US representative to the

African Union, whose purpose was to monitor a ceasefire in the Darfur region. He didn’t know much about what was going on, but he would soon find himself a major player in one of the greatest morally charged and internationally politicized battles of our generation.

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Above: Gretchen teaching local women at one of her Global Grassroots workshops in Rwanda.

Below: Darfur refugees clapping and singing.

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF GRETCHEN WALLACE & BRIAN STEIDLE. www.globalgrassroots.org