

northwest

Run for Dignity

Portland woman's compassion reaches the Congo

by Andrea Shanafelt

It may be cliché the way it all began: with Oprah Winfrey, of course. But the way it turned out is anything but clichéd. On the contrary, it's a surprising story of how one woman's sudden and unexpected need to act transformed countless lives—including her own—and started a global movement.

Portlander Lisa Shannon, a photographer and independent filmmaker, three years ago found herself shaken to the core by an episode of *Oprah*. It focused on the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the devastation it was wreaking on women and children. She heard stories of women whose lives had been shattered by myriad forms of violence and of children who didn't live to see their 5th birthdays. As shocking as these stories were, Shannon found it even more disturbing that the atrocities weren't being covered in the mainstream media.

She learned more about Congo. The violence began in 1998, initially spreading across the border after the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. The conflict, dubbed "Africa's first world war," escalated as various groups vied for control of the country's rich natural resources.

It was the effect of the war on women, though, that continued to haunt Shannon. One story in particular, about a woman who had been attacked and was begging for her life, stood out from the rest.

"She was told basically that she wasn't human, that she was like an animal and nobody would care if she was killed," Shannon says. "For me, that's the

sort of sentiment that has been echoed in the international community. With our silence, we're saying that their lives are worthless. To do nothing would be making that statement. I needed to find a way to make the opposite statement, to say that these lives matter."

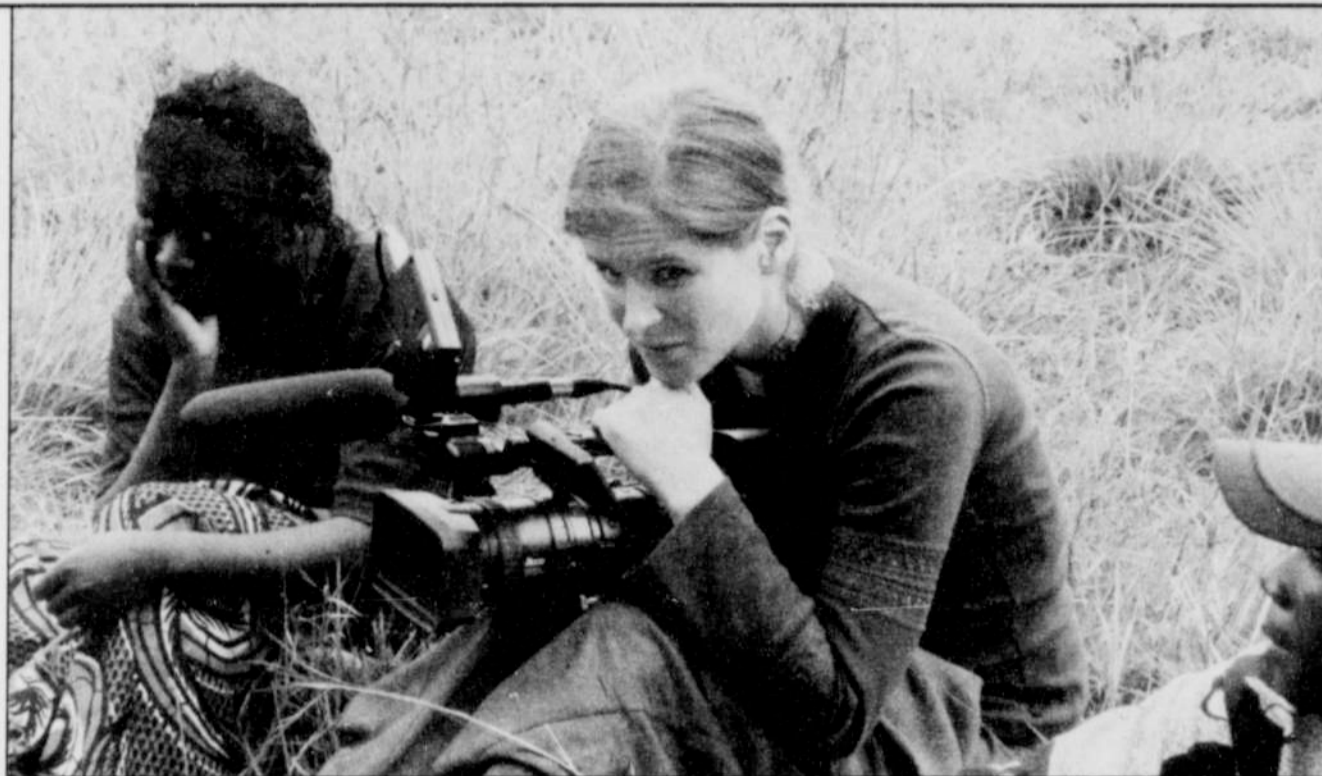
Her solution? To run 30 miles along Portland's Wildwood trail and raise enough money to sponsor 30 women for one year through the charitable organization Women for Women International. A sponsorship for one woman costs \$27 a month, which provides discretionary income, seed money for small-business development and human rights and leadership training.

Nobody joined Shannon that first year. Nevertheless, she raised enough money to sponsor 80 women and caught the attention of the media, and in 2006 a Run for Congo Women was held in 10 states and four countries. The movement had developed a momentum of its own.

Nobody was more surprised than Shannon. "I think I was shocked, actually. I really thought I would do my run my first year and that would be that," she says. "The fact that it's taken off [shows] when people know what's going on, they do care."

Nancy Glass can be counted among the people who heard Shannon's message and stepped up. She divides her time between Baltimore, where she is an associate professor specializing in intimate partner violence at Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing, and Portland, where she maintains a home with her partner, Oregon Health & Science University employee Lisa Wood.

Glass was the first person to sponsor a Congolese woman when Shannon began fund raising for her solo run in 2005. In 2006 she went the extra mile—or rather, 30 of them. An experienced runner, she was one of only six to complete the entire race that year. She won't be in town to participate in this year's run; instead, she'll be in Washington, D.C., attending an international conference hosted by the Institute of Medicine. The topic? "Prevention of Violence in Developing Countries."



Lisa Shannon interviews three teens in February in Kaniola, Congo. The girls had been abducted by the Interahmwe militia group but were rescued by the Congolese army.

Although Glass can't run this year, she and Wood each sponsor a Congolese woman. "I'm sure we'll continue to do that as long as we can," she says.

Clearly, the situation in Congo resonates with Glass on a number of levels. Not only is it of professional interest, but in the early 1990s she lived in Congo (then Zaire) as a Peace Corps volunteer, focusing on women's reproductive health and child health education. She calls Congo "a wonderful place," noting that the music is some of the best in Africa and that the people remain gracious and spirited despite their hardships.

Furthermore, from a perspective of basic human rights, she sees an overlap between the queer struggle and the struggles faced by Congolese women. "I think a woman should have the right to choose her own destiny," Glass says. "And the right to choose who she loves is part of that."

Of course, Glass is quick to point out that in Congo, a woman's inability to shape her own life is complicated by a tangle of factors such as race, poverty and class. But at its core, the request of Congolese women is a simple one: to be accorded the dignity that is their right as human beings. For Glass, that basic demand is where the two movements align.

Regarding queer issues in Congo, Shannon—who visited the country earlier this year and interviewed numerous women about their experiences—deftly puts this topic in perspective: "If a woman only wanted to have two children instead of six, that would be a huge problem for her. For a woman to come out as gay in Congo would be a very significant threat to her safety." Glass concurs, adding that in a recent visit to neighboring Uganda she was careful about discussing her sexual orientation.

Nevertheless, there is much to be positive about. Both Shannon and Glass have received letters from grateful Congolese sisters who are rebuilding their lives through Women for Women International. Rape carries such a cultural stigma in Congo that many women who have been sexually violated—and, as a result, abandoned by their husbands—cannot get married again even if they want to. Instead, they are learning to support each other. They are entering into business together. They are reclaiming their dignity, their womanhood and their status as human beings. These victories, says Shannon, "are not necessarily quantifiable." But it definitely feels like success.

In 2007, Run for Congo Women continues to grow. This year, the Portland run/walk will be held June 23, with several options in running between one and 30 miles. Shannon is expecting about 250 runners, up from approximately 100 last year. As the movement expands, she is less focused on how much money they will raise.

"This year I'm not setting fund-raising goals," she says. "A lot of people do that, but it is every bit as much about the statement people are making when they participate."

Lisa Shannon has made her statement loud and clear. Nancy Glass has made hers. And so can the rest of us, when we decide that a Congolese woman's life is worth running for. **jo**

For more information about the RUN FOR CONGO WOMEN visit www.runforcongowomen.org.

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Lisa Shannon hugs Congolese expatriate Jacky Mwana-Nteba after the 30-mile fund-raising run in September 2006.

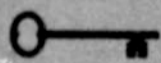


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