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Conflict and Melyn McKay

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In the world's hotspots, Melyn McKay asks the hard questions

Looking back, Melyn McKay '08 figures it was inevitable that she would become an anthropologist. "I think I dressed as Jane Goodall for three subsequent Halloweens," she said, laughing as she recalled her childhood in Utah.

The Halloween treat bag was traded for a backpack and luggage, and the anthropologist, now 28, has worked in Burundi and South Sudan. Currently she is focused on the humanitarian crisis in Lebanon, crowded with Syrian refugees.

At Colby the star student (her professors' assessment, not hers) soaked up the teachings of Colby anthropologists Catherine Besteman and Mary Beth Mills, studied microfinance in Morocco, and won a grant to teach reproductive health in China. A job in advertising was a temporary detour before McKay set off for Burundi, where she worked in a rural health clinic, living with patients in a walled one-acre compound that she couldn't leave without an escort. "It was trial by fire, definitely," she said.

McKay was just warming to her task, which for the past two years has been working as country director for South Sudan for London-based Integrity Research & Consultancy. With clients that include the World Bank, the UK's Department for International Development, and a variety of NGOs, McKay


and her teams study the roots of conflict, and they try to predict where and why conflict may arise and where there are opportunities to decrease those tensions through programming.

South Sudan proved especially challenging, she said. Despite fewer than a hundred kilometers of paved road in a country the size of France, and with seasonal floods leaving portions of the country inaccessible much of the year, McKay's research team has to work in far-flung parts of the country. "I had people sending pictures of our Defender Land Rover lashed on top of fishing boats to ford rivers," she said.

In December the simmering ethnic conflict in South Sudan boiled over, with shelling just blocks from McKay's Juba offices. She evacuated to Beirut, where another challenge awaited.

"There are four million Lebanese and a million Syrian refugees," McKay said. "You really start to see what happens when you stretch infrastructure and basic services."

As she has since she first deployed to East Africa, McKay continues to examine the ways aid may be applied and to ask whether the impacts will be ultimately beneficial to those the aid is intended to help.

"I think it's healthy to question that," she said. "I have to be quite cynical and hard on myself, because that's the standard of care I owe the people who are impacted by my decisions and my thinking." —Gerry Boyle '78 

"There are four million Lebanese and a million Syrian refugees. You really start to see what happens when you stretch infrastructure and basic services."

—Melyn McKay '08

Photo by Georges Rabbath