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Clare Byarugaba Won't Be Silenced: Clare Byarugaba Fights for Gay Ugandans

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Clare Byarugaba Won't Be Silenced

Clare Byarugaba, the 2014 Oak Human Rights Fellow at Colby, is a prominent advocate for LGBT rights in Uganda, where there is widespread anti-gay fervor and a law was passed that outlawed homosexuality and promotion of it. She continued to work under threat of arrest and violence, and her photograph was published in a popular Ugandan tabloid, identifying Byarugaba as “a gay recruiter.” She is spending the fall semester at Colby, where her presence was immediately felt. Byarugaba was interviewed by *Colby Magazine* this summer, prior to a court ruling in August that the anti-gay law was invalid. The law is expected to be proposed again next year at the time of Uganda’s national elections.

How are things going?

We continue to persevere. And continue to work under very difficult circumstances.

Are you in hiding?

Generally I can’t go to office as frequently as I used to. So I either have to work from home or work from another office. Basically stay away from the public eye. It is quite stressful.

How does this affect your work as an advocate?

People cannot come to the office to see you. We are afraid sometimes that our phones are tapped. I had to change my SIM card twice. And of course [there are] the threats online and by phone. At the same time, this law was passed to ensure that we go into oblivion, that we run for the hills. But we are trying to remain defiant and continue to work as best we can with the situation.

Does the law reflect public opinion as it’s been for some time or did the passage of the law inflame public opinion?

It’s definitely inflamed it. People never thought about this issue or were deeply involved. The people became hysterical once the law was passed. Ugandans listen a lot to their leaders. They feel it’s very important to be vigilant and rid Uganda of gay people.

What is the Ugandan government's motive?

If we start to have some small victories around equality, then another group that is being marginalized will start to speak out. ... They also want to divert attention away from issues that they are failing to deal with. Corruption. The failing health-care system. The failing education system. They'd rather have an issue like homosexuality that excites people.

You spoke in Los Angeles last spring. Is it a bit surreal to go from Uganda to a very different climate for LGBT rights?

It's a huge culture shock, but on the other hand, I take from those experiences. I come back with hope that one day our work shall bear fruit or result in such high levels of freedom for each and every Ugandan.

Are you ever tempted to stop your work?

I feel like it would just be much, much easier being an average woman, hiding her sexuality, not being political. When you start to do this kind of work, you know that as a leader people count on you. People keep telling me all the time, "Why don't you get out of that country?" I tell them I would never seek asylum unless things get really bad. I don't know how bad it would get for me to be willing to leave my country.

A news story reported that your mother said she should turn you in to the police? True?

Yes. She has threatened. I like to think that was her being angry, that at the end of the day she would be a mother and protect me. The homophobia would not overpower her love for me as her daughter.

Are you estranged from your family?

To a large extent I am. My parents say, "Just stay away. We can't have you be around. People have been asking questions." That's very painful. ... I have a brother who is a little bit progressive and always says he has my back. So I can take that and say at least I have someone in my family that would probably rescue me from jail.

Did you know David Cato, the Ugandan LGBT rights activist who was outed and murdered?

Yes. We lost an amazing, amazing activist, one of the pioneers. I felt very strong about trying to fill those shoes.

Do you fear you might suffer the same fate?

Every day. It's scary. I feel like each and every one of us might suffer the same fate, and we don't deserve it. But I feel like the price of our activism is that high. People generally hate gay people and we are targeted. But we can only pray and hope we

don't suffer that fate. Because I believe strongly that a dead activist is not a good activist.

Do you receive death threats?

Yes, I do, all the time. We try to use social media and all the spaces that don't put us into so much trouble. If I was going to go on TV right now to talk about gay issues, I would be arrested. I would be promoting homosexuality.

Jail would also be a very harsh experience, according to news reports.

Yes, my worst fear, honestly, as a lesbian activist, is corrective rape. Because if the president has said that gay people can change, then I feel people will go to any lengths to make you think how you should be as a woman. I'm very afraid that that would happen to us in jail.



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—Clare Byarugaba

Reading recent news may leave some with the impression that Uganda is a very repressive country. Is this painting with too broad a brush?

Yes. I totally believe that Ugandans are largely tolerant. The country I grew up in as a child, in a village setting, was one where people actually shared—shared sugar, shared everything. Our neighbors' kids would not sleep hungry if there was food in my mother's house. People look out for each other. I choose to believe that my country is not that kind of a country where people are targeted simply because they are different. Maybe I'm an idealist, maybe that's what keeps me going. I think there's definitely possibility for change.

What do you hope to accomplish while you're at Colby?

It's a time for me to connect with people at an international level and hopefully try to organize activism in a way that is helpful for our cause back home. But apart from that it's very important to get out of Uganda for a while, to have some time to respite, and to put myself in the larger context of sexual rights in Uganda. It's a huge, huge deal for me.