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Point of View: The Lesson of David Kato

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The Lesson of David Kato

By Ellen Morris ’11

Gay activist in Uganda had applied for an Oak Fellowship at Colby; his murder should serve as a warning of the sometimes dangerous power of Americans abroad

There is only one degree of separation between me and David Kato, a gay man from Uganda who was brutally murdered in January for defending his human right to be gay. I am not Ugandan, nor am I gay, nor even male. I am a college student, but I never learned about him in my coursework. I never met David when he was alive, but I still cried when I learned of his violent death on Jan. 26, 2011.

I was introduced to David Kato while working as the student assistant for Colby’s Oak Institute for the Study of International Human Rights. My job was to read and file applications for the fall 2011 Oak Fellowship, a program that brings a human rights activist to Colby for a semester every year. It is a unique opportunity: Colby gets to learn from a front-line activist, and the Oak Fellow receives a generous stipend and a six-month respite from exhausting and often dangerous work. To qualify, candidates must demonstrate a substantial degree of personal risk in their profession; many of our fellows have been blacklisted, arrested, threatened, tortured, or forced to relocate.

David Kato had applied for our fellowship. The Oak Institute staff read his application in early January, just weeks before he was murdered. David was an openly gay activist living in Kampala, Uganda’s capital. Life had become increasingly dangerous for David and his colleagues since the introduction of Uganda’s Anti-Homosexuality Bill in March 2009. The legislation criminalizes homosexuality by sentencing suspected homosexuals to life imprisonment; “repeat offenders” may even receive the death penalty. To make matters worse for David, in October 2010 a popular newspaper released the names and addresses of suspected homosexuals under the headline “Hang Them.” David Kato, whose photo, top left, was published by the newspaper beneath the words “Hang Them,” was bludgeoned to death in Kampala.

In 2010 Uganda’s Rolling Stone newspaper revealed the identities of prominent, allegedly gay Ugandans and called for punishment of gay activists. David Kato, whose photo, top left, was published by the newspaper beneath the words “Hang Them,” was bludgeoned to death in Kampala.

This is not an incident that we can isolate to Uganda. Three American evangelicals—Scott Lively, Caleb Lee Brundidge, and Don Schmierer—held a conference in Uganda in March 2009. The men spoke of the threat homosexuals pose to the future of Uganda; they warned against the “hidden and dark gay agenda” that threatens family values, recruits children directly from school, and seeks to introduce a culture of sexual promiscuity. David Bahati, a member of parliament who attended the conference, introduced the Anti-Homosexuality Bill one month later.

Can we deny the connection between the evangelicals’ visit and the introduction of a bill that has endangered countless gay, lesbian, and transgender Ugandans? We each have beliefs that we hold with great conviction, but what if our words become lethal to those who hear our sermons? Americans have traveled to countries like Uganda—poor, developing, Third World—since the era of colonialism. We’ve served as missionaries, Peace Corps volunteers, humanitarian

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aid workers, students, and tourists. We are not neutral visitors, yet it is rare that we believe our work accomplishes anything but good.

Now I am connected to David through Val Kalende, a lesbian rights activist and close friend of David who visited Colby at the beginning of April. She urged us to be a part of the movement she and David began and to fight against similar legislation cropping up in Malawi and Burundi. She sees hope in Uganda; David’s death brought an onslaught of international pressure that suspended the Anti-Homosexuality Bill indefinitely.

But we are once again confronted with the frightening influence Americans export abroad. As early as 1822, with its first graduating class, the College began sending missionaries and teachers overseas. Now Colby’s network encompasses a wide range of people: international aid workers, academics, journalists, rights advocates. We share opinions, and we disagree. We are engaged; we turn our attention abroad when we travel or read the news. We live in relative peace at home and at work, but we have a limited consciousness of the impact our lives have on others within our personal sphere of influence.

We are influential; we are not powerless. Last year I never would have guessed that I would be a public advocate for LGBT rights in Uganda. But now I (we!) know David, who had wanted to spend the fall recuperating at our lovely college. I feel an obligation to David to do everything I can to ensure that his story becomes a powerful narrative for change and activism. A handful of voices caused his death; perhaps a handful of casual advocates can save the rest.

If you share David’s conviction that homosexuals everywhere deserve to live in peace, please join the movement. But be mindful of your power. You have more than you may think.