

Changing lives in a hell on Earth

What Jessica Posner began as a college theater project is now making things better in Africa's largest slum



Denver's Jessica Posner was voted "the greatest world-changer under age 25" by viewers of VH1. Photo by John Leyba, The Denver Post

By John Moore, The Denver Post

The vastness of the misery in Kenya's largest slum is hard to comprehend, even for the people who have endured it. Just ask Jessica Posner, the 23-year-old Denver woman who has made it her mission to transform lives there.

"Kibera is hell on Earth," she says flatly.

More than 1.5 million squatters cram into this Nairobi tenement the size of Central Park. Most live without drinkable water or electricity, amid garbage and human sewage. Need is as endless as the rows and rows of shacks made of corrugated metal and cardboard.

Posner herself didn't fully absorb the breadth of the despair until she moved there three years ago — a self-described "privileged college sophomore" becoming the only visible white face.

But for Posner, taking up residence was the only way of getting the people there to accept her as both neighbor and helper. And it worked.

What started as her student project introducing theater to young Kiberans has grown into the nonprofit that Posner co-founded called Shining Hope for Communities, which last August opened Kibera's first free school for girls, soon to number 60 students ages 5-8.

Later this summer, Shining Hope will launch Kibera's first accessible community health center, staffed by a full-time nurse and part-time doctor, and run in tandem with local health workers. Through a combination of fundraising and grants, Posner also has initiated a gardening program, which produces three times the normal output of vegetables, a library and an Internet-ready computer center.

And in a slum where there are 1,300 people for every available toilet, she has introduced six ecologically friendly latrines that convert waste to methane gas that can be used for cooking and electricity.

For her efforts, Posner has been named one of the five biggest world-changers under age 25 by the Do Something Awards.

So on July 19 — 10,000 miles and just as many worlds removed from East Africa — she will be hanging at the Hollywood Palladium with the likes of Matt Damon and Natalie Portman for a star-studded awards ceremony to be hosted by Jane Lynch of "Glee" and nationally televised on VH1.

That's the kind of random polarity in the world that Posner has learned to accept.

"There's no rhyme or reason to why I was born into the 80220 ZIP code; why I have never wanted for anything — and these people have nothing," said Posner, a graduate of Denver School of the Arts and Wesleyan in Middletown, Conn.

Posner's odyssey began in 2007 with a four-month project for the School for International Training, a global nonprofit that connects thousands of young ambassadors with self-starting social projects.

Posner believed theater could provide young Kiberans a way to tell their stories about living in extreme poverty. She was referred to Kennedy Odede, a respected community leader who, though just 23, was considered the unofficial "mayor" of this slum. That's not so young when you consider that the life expectancy in Kibera, including infant deaths, is just 30.

Odede arranged for Posner to stay in a middle-class area nearby. Her response: "Thanks, but . . . no thanks."

If she was to be taken seriously, Posner told him bluntly, she would have to live in this slum, alongside everyone else.

"The community was in absolute shock," Odede said from Kenya. As far as anyone there knows, he said, no white person had ever lived in Kibera.

"The Kenyans think white people are wired differently," he said. "They were sure that, if forced to live in Kibera's harsh conditions — it would kill her."

But Odede soon learned what Jessica's father has known all along: She wasn't asking. "Jessica has always been a force, and I don't like to be in her way," said David Posner, a Denver energy consultant. "I have been — many times — and I've learned that's not a good position to be in."

Odede, the eldest of seven siblings, relented and moved Posner in with his own family.

"Every day, there would be a line of people outside my door who would knock to ask, 'Is she still alive?' " said Odede. "After several weeks, people stopped knocking, as they could see Jessica was alive and kicking."

And to think, her mother, Helen, says now, "Jessica doesn't even like to go camping here in Colorado."

But Jessica quickly learned she was in over her head. "Initially, I was useless to everyone," she said. She went to Odede and broke down in tears.

His response? "You're wasting my time."



He told her, "You've gone 21 years without a crisis, but I have been dealing with this every day of my life, and I don't have time to be dealing with this. The only thing that you can do — is go to work."

And so, she did.

Posner's theater initiative proved to be popular to the point of competitive, because participating came with meals. For many of her actors, ages 16-25, it might be their only opportunity to eat.

A powerful creative process ensued. The students wrote of hopelessness, gender violence, tribal conflicts, AIDS and unemployment. Posner cobbled their words into a play. Her "actors" toured the country performing everywhere from sidewalks to the national theater to a political rally attended by both presidential candidates.

That rally preceded a disputed 2007 presidential contest that escalated into widespread rioting over charges of fraud.

Posner's stay in Kibera ended just three days before

much of the slum was set ablaze as fighting erupted along tribal lines. "It was total chaos. People turned on one another in confusion and anger," she said.

Thousands of Kiberans died. One victim was a young mother from her acting company. "She was staying in a camp for displaced persons," said Posner, "and everyone who was living in that camp, except for her baby, was slaughtered in tribal conflicts."

Posner tracked those tense first few days of rioting from the frustrating distance of Denver, knowing that Odede, as a community leader, was in danger. In time, she not only helped him gain asylum in this country — but also to get him a full scholarship to Wesleyan, where he now majors in sociology and government.

But it was during that crisis that Posner's parents realized their daughter was not yet fully out of Africa.

"She had made such intense connections to this community, it was obvious to us that she was going back," her father said.

And she did, in the summer of 2008, determined to create another play, this one focusing on the recent violence. The dynamic this time was intense. Her ensemble included one actor who had killed someone from another actor's family. Through theater, they reconciled.

Only now Posner, who managed to complete her studies and graduate from Wesleyan in May 2009, had a more long-range goal in mind.

The Population Council says one in 5 Kiberans don't live to age 5. For girls who do, "the only real capital they have is their bodies, and the only way to survive really is to trade sex for food," said Posner. The Nairobi newspaper Daily Nation reported in 2006 that in Kibera, 66 percent of girls have exchanged sex for food by age 16.

Posner launched the Kibera School for Girls with a \$10,000 grant called Projects for Peace. She formed a board made up of U.S. business leaders, artisans and educators. Together they raised \$25,000 to build the school and hire a local staff.

Investment — and recognition — have followed. Shining Hope won the 2010 Dell Social Innovation Competition — a \$50,000 prize for projects by college

students. The Newman's Own Foundation gave \$53,000. Recently, Posner and Odede won the prestigious Echoing Green Fellowship, which provides seed funding for social entrepreneurs.

Winning VHI's Do Something Award would come with a \$100,000 prize — enough to run her Kibera School for Girls for four years. More likely, it would bring expanded programming, and the expanded need to pay for it.

On a recent Saturday, just days before Jessica was to return to Kibera for a fourth time, her parents mulled that oft-asked question: "How did you do it?"

They mean raising a good kid like Jessica. And brother Max, a playwriting sophomore at Brown University who by age 19 already had separate plays professionally produced on both coasts. And Raphaela, who at 14 is selling seashell jewelry to raise the \$2,000 a year it will cost to send four of Odede's siblings to boarding school.

Their answer: "We did our best to stay out of the way," said Helen, a clinical psychologist. "Jessica really came into the world the way she is, with a lot of creativity and determination, and she never really looked at obstacles as being obstacles, if it was something that she cared about."

But it wasn't always easy growing up a Posner. There was no cable TV or video games. "I thought my parents were the biggest hippies alive," joked Jessica.

Posner is now back in Kibera for at least the next year. And Kibera's only white resident is no longer a stranger.

"Now, everyone calls her 'our outsider,'" said Odede. "She has really become a respected and treasured member of this community. She has empowered people to devise solutions to the many problems that they face. Our school is changing the futures of girls in Kibera. Our health clinic will save the lives of thousands."

Life in Kibera, Africa's largest slum:

Population: 1.5 million. That's 50 percent of Nairobi's total head count living on less than 5 percent of its land.

Average life expectancy: 30 (including infant deaths).

The rest of Kenya is 50. 1 in 5 Kiberans do not live to age 5.

Toilets: 600. That's 1 for every 1,300 people.

Amenities: Most homes lack running water and electricity.

School: Only 8 percent of the 500,000 girls under 18 ever have the chance to go to school.

Sex trade: 66 percent of girls regularly trade sex for food by age 16. Many begin as young as age 6. Young women contract HIV at five times the rate of young men.

Sources: United Nations, Population Council, Holistic Health Centre of Kibera and the American Journal of Public Health

Shining Hope for Communities initiatives:

(co-founded by Denver's Jessica Posner, 23, and Kibera native Kennedy Odede, 26):

Kibera Schol for Girls: Kibera's first and only tuition-free school for girls opened in August 2009.

Johanna Justin-Jinich Memorial Health Care Clinic: Devoted to women's health and combatting pneumonia, diarrheal diseases, HIV, AIDS and tuberculosis.

Green Bio Latrine Center: Kibera's only sanitary public toilets.

Library/computer center: A full-service, digital place for families to explore literacy, reading together and the Internet.

Gardens for Growth: Sustainable, mobile gardens planted inside burlap sacks that produce three times the usual amount of food.

Remembering fallen friends

Two Wesleyan University students from Colorado who died in separate tragedies will be remembered in perpetuity in Kibera, Kenya, the largest slum in Africa.

Johanna Justin-Jinich of Timnath, a town of 200 southeast of Fort Collins, was shot execution-style in

2009 by a man who had been harassing her on the campus in Middletown, Conn. And Chase Parr died with her parents, John Parr and Sandy Widener, in a wintry automobile accident near Rawlins, Wyo., in 2007.

Jessica Posner, another Wesleyan from Colorado, just opened the first accessible public-health center in the Kenyan slum of Kibera. It is named after Justin-Jinich, who planned to pursue a career in international public health.

"To see a health clinic in Kibera that devotes itself to healing the bodies and souls of women and girls, so that they, in turn, can more fully care for their own families and contribute to their own communities, is a wonderful expression of Johanna's aspirations," said her mother, Dr. Ingrid Justin.

And a reading room in the clinic's wellness center will be named after Parr, who had planned to spend time serving others in Africa.

"I can't say what Chase would be doing if she were alive today, but she would most certainly be doing it with the same passion and altruism that is fueling this amazing project," said Chase's best friend, Kendall McKinnon.