

Inspiring Empowerment In Africa

by Ruby Manson

After five years of compelling herself to channel her grief and indignation into developing empowering programs that provide women and children with lifelong skills, **Maddi Kent** has committed herself to educating people across Africa about their human rights.

Among the usual weekday bustle on a rural Kenyan road, Colac's Maddi Kent walks with purpose. She's looking for a girl, Esther, a 6-year-old who had gone missing from a children's home where Maddi had been a volunteer for about four months.

It's not far down the road where Maddi finds her.

The bones in both her legs broken, covered in blood, her clothing and underwear in tatters, people continue to walk by as Esther lies alone on the roadside.

It is in this moment, about five years ago now, that Maddi says her life changed forever.

THE BUDDING HUMANITARIAN

Maddi said she had always been a passionate humanitarian, previously telling the Colac Herald in 2012 that she wanted to start an aid organisation in Africa.

Maddi spent time in Uganda and Kenya in 2014 teaching English and facilitating counselling sessions for children, where her views on the nature of Western volunteer work were challenged.

"At 20 years old on my first trip to Africa I learnt that I was being more detrimental than beneficial to these children's lives, even though I went over there thinking 'oh I'm going to help'."

"When I was in Kenya I realised the negative effects of voluntourism; if it's done wrong, that's how most forms of child trafficking comes about," she said.

"I was in a children's home, and slowly I started to find out through my counselling sessions with them that they had families.

"They were sold into children's homes; some had been in many and had run away trying to find their families, or they'd just been 'abandoned' there as an orphan, they'd get picked up off the streets and sold to the orphanage knowing that Westerners come and give money, more money than they'd ever

seen in their lives. "That was really shocking to me." It was at the children's home where Maddi met Esther.

ESTHER

"I really formed this bond with her; I saw parts of myself in her, her strength and tenacity," Maddi said of Esther.

She said Esther was in the children's home after her grandmother sold her to work as a prostitute.

Esther had already contracted HIV after being raped by her uncle at 3 years old; a victim of a popular sub-Saharan African myth that "if you have sex with a virgin your AIDS will be cured".

Maddi said that Esther had left the home to visit other street children, but hadn't returned for a while, so she went looking.

Maddi said "straight away" she knew Esther had been raped when she found her; her time in Africa quickly ingraining the image of rape and torture victims in her mind "because it's something you see so often".

Unable to speak much English and bleeding heavily on a surgery table, little Esther still managed to relay what had happened to her.

Doctors told Maddi it was likely that Esther had been gang-raped by more than three men, before beating her to within an inch of her life.

"He'd seen it happen to young girls before."

Maddi didn't hesitate when the doctor asked for \$2500 to pay for the vaginal reconstructive surgery required to try to save little Esther's life.

She stayed with Esther through the 14-hour surgery, running on shock and adrenalin while holding her optimism and hope close to her heart.

Esther didn't make it. "She ended up bleeding to death from the significant damage that had been caused to her, and died in my arms in hospital that night."

Such an ordeal could understandably traumatise someone to retreat into



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MADDI KENT



EMPOWER: Colac's Maddi Kent, 24, has committed her life to educating women and children across Africa after years of visiting and volunteering in Africa. Her self-founded organisation, the Evie Grace Foundation, will implement health and education projects in Kenya during its inaugural trip next month.

a relatively sheltered life in Australia, and Maddi said that for the following two years, she did just that.

A RAY OF LIGHT GUIDES RETURN TO AFRICA

"I didn't then return to Africa for two years, I was so severely traumatised," Maddi said.

But Maddi said she told no one of her trauma or grief, afraid of people judging "the continent that I'd so clearly fallen in love with".

The now 24-year-old continued her international development degree at Deakin University at Geelong when she got back to Australia, which prompted her return to Africa to complete a human rights internship in Ghana.

Maddi said she hosted an event at Geelong in 2017 to fund her trip, where she met Evie Grace Anderson.

"We got talking and all our passions lined up, she was just going a thousand

miles a minute, wanting to save the environment, the kids, the animals, she was amazing," she said.

Maddi said she and Evie had planned to meet the following week, and had discussed creating an aid project together to implement in Africa.

"Then that weekend, she tragically lost her life; that put a massive impact on me and everything I was doing."

Maddi said having someone who had such an immediate impact on her, who she'd envisioned a life-long friendship with, be ripped away from her so suddenly exacerbated her feelings of worthlessness and struggle to escape an "emotionally-abusive relationship".

She said her life suddenly downward-spiralled, before she reached a point of ultimatum; either succumb to the trauma of what she'd witnessed in Africa and Evie's sudden death and end her life, or use it to motivate her to realize her dream of founding an organisation.

"I'd always wanted to create an

organisation, so I thought 'how fitting for it to be in the memory of this person who fulfilled every aspect of love, kindness and compassion; this ray of light'."

THE EVIE GRACE FOUNDATION

Maddi founded the Evie Grace Foundation in October last year, and hoped the programs implemented during the organisation's first trip to Kenya next month would realize a manifestation of her growth as a humanitarian.

"It's taken me the last four years to really develop projects that are fully sustainable, that when I leave that country, they can continue and grow perfectly, and don't require me to be there," she said.

Evie Grace Foundation projects include initiating food programs, donating shoes which grow with children's feet, providing education about sexual and reproductive health and sexual rights, and teaching girls how to make

reusable sanitary items, which Maddi hopes to implement during the foundation's inaugural trip.

"They need empowering assistance; no one ever wants to think of themselves as needing a handout or pity," Maddi said.

"Turning money into a project, teaching girls how to make reusable pads so they're not putting dirty rags in their underwear and getting infections, means so much more than you giving them a \$20 note.

"Then it's not just that a white girl has come and given me something, it's 'I've got a skill that now I can have for the rest of my life'."

"For a woman who is older than 25 and has never been educated; that is so impactful for her, to know something, means so much."

HOPE TO SPREAD

Maddi admitted it was often difficult

to stay motivated and optimistic when she was seeing extreme human rights violations so often, but said she was empowered by the hope fostered by her work.

She said the deep level of empathy she had for the children she had met and was yet to meet could be a result of growing up as an orphan herself.

"Being in foster care and not having a very good childhood when I was quite young and lost my mum, whether I've got that next level of empathy from knowing what it's like to be an abused child, I'm not sure," she said.

"It's probably the hardest job in the world to be faced with these situations on a daily basis.

"For a Westerner to walk into that situation, it's crazy, but they need hope so badly, it's a matter of just listening to them, counselling them, and having programs which can teach them about their self worth."

And while she understands that half a

world away in Colac stories like Esther's might seem incomprehensible, Maddi hoped that sharing stories of her work would compel people to exude empathy and not judgement.

"It really is unimaginable, in Australia you're not going to be worried about your daughter or son being stolen into child labour, working on a fishing boat for 18 hours a day, six years old, can't even swim and being pushed down into the depths of the ocean to get the fishing nets, and then the child drowns, so tomorrow you find a new one.

"I understand that if you haven't experienced it; it's difficult to have that empathy or understand how bad it can be for others out of no fault of their own.

"But for me it's a one-by-one mentality; I'm not going into the world going 'okay, in my lifetime I'm going to save 80 million'."

"It's every day, if I can change just one child's life, then that for me is my purpose, that's my motivation."