

## “Jajja’s Kids”

### Constitutionalism & Democracy 2012

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On election night, we spent part of the evening with friends who, like us, had served in the U.S. Peace Corps. The group had invited Diane Reiner to speak about her experience in Uganda. She brought Ronald Sseruyange (pronounced Sse as in send, ru as in rue the day, yang as in fang, and ending with the ge pronounced gay) from Kampala.

Diane described going to Kampala originally on a photographic expedition. While there, she wanted to see the conditions of the poor and was introduced to Ronnie. Ronnie had lived in the street for ten years beginning when his mother died when he was six. As Diane and Ronnie traveled around the poorest areas of Kampala, she saw first hand the efforts that Ronnie was making for the most endangered people there, the children who lived on the streets. Orphaned and without homes to go to, these kids struggled just to survive.

But the police had no use for them and beat them savagely. Ronnie himself was beaten so savagely that he makes due with a jaw hinged only on one side. As a result, the street children sleep in tunnels, covered culverts, so they won't be seen. When the rains come, the children drown where they sleep. These kids are Kampala's throwaways.

But someone extended a hand to Ronnie. And Ronnie turned around and put all the strength he had into pulling other children off the street, creating safe places for them to sleep, arranging for an education and trying to give them trades. By the time Diane met him, Ronnie had become known as the Chairmen of the Street Kids.

For years in the U.S., conservative philosophers have been arguing we have no responsibility for each other. Their argument has borne fruit in the Tea Party. The Tea Party denigrates all the social programs in which we seek to help each other and give each other a chance when people don't have the resources to take care of themselves. People receiving government benefits are just takers, unwilling in their view to contribute to society.

I think the conditions Ronnie described in Africa are the natural consequence of the Tea Party vision, in a society that treats street kids as expendable, and not worth official help, or even just to be treated humanely, rather than brutalized by the police. Without a helping hand, these children would either perish or, most likely, find ways to survive in the underworld, or in gangs.

Everyone's survival and success depends on others and the decency of the ways that the world reacts and treats them. The Tea Party mantra that we are not our brothers' and sisters' keepers is a savage formula for hell on earth. We in this country need to recognize its selfishness for what it is and drive the Tea Party completely off the political scene before they bring their vision of hell here.

I urge you to take a look at Diane and Ronnie's facebook account, jajjaskidsuganda – jajja is j-a-j-j-a and it's one word – jajjaskidsuganda – for a vision of what Ronnie has been able to accomplish. The plight of the street children of Kampala reflects the cruelty of a world in which people take no responsibility for each other, and government takes no responsibility for its people. That some of them have hope reflects what Diane and Ronnie have been doing to give them a chance.