



Saint Viator Graduate Working in Darfur Comes Home

September 1, 2010



Lisa Browne '99 with a child from Darfur.

Members of Saint Viator High School's STAND Club, or Students Taking Action Now for Darfur, met a humanitarian worker on Tuesday who is stationed in one of the most dangerous regions of Darfur.

What brought home the presentation, students said, was that she was one of them. Just over 10 years ago, she walked the very same halls.

Lisa Browne is a 1999 graduate and Mount Prospect native, who serves as a public health coordinator for a German non-governmental organization.

The Rev. Corey Brost, C.S.V., who moderates the school's STAND Club, invited Browne to speak to its members.

"I want to thank you," Brost said at the outset. "Here you are, a Viatorian graduate, taking these people of Darfur under your protection."

Browne grabbed their attention right out of the box with her story of traveling in a convoy of six jeeps, venturing out into rebel-held territory to conduct nutrition surveys and bring nutritiously packed meals to children.

"We never travel alone; we always have at least two cars traveling together," Browne said. "But that night, after we were done, I returned with another jeep, but the other four stayed. We found out later that one of them was hijacked."

Browne manages 11 health clinics in the Ed Al Fursan region of Darfur, supported by the country's Ministry of Help. Her primary goal, she says, is to renovate the clinics, making sure they have enough drug and medical supplies, as well as equipment and trained staff.

"We work with 12-person health committees in each village," Browne said. "We want to empower the communities and make them responsible for their own health."

Browne lives in a compound with other international relief workers that is surrounded by razor wire and protected by armed security guards. She is careful to know her surroundings at all times and never travel alone. However, she has become slightly immune to the dangers.

"I know psychologically it's not healthy, but you have to go on," Browne says.

Students on hand asked her a variety of questions ranging from details about the infrastructure of the villages in Darfur, to how the civilians are protected. They also asked Browne what drives her to put herself at such risk.

"I want to help those who can't help themselves," Browne said. "For me, the chance to give back, in however small way it might be, that's what drives me."

For students like seniors Frank Avino from Arlington Heights and Samantha Ropski from Prospect Heights, who have participated in silent demonstrations to raise awareness about Darfur, meeting someone in the trenches made an impact.

“We’ve never spoken to someone who’s been there; it’s always been second hand,” Avino said. “The fact that she’s working there now is really motivating.”

Ropski agreed, adding that knowing Browne was a former Saint Viator student brought home her message even more.

“It’s inspiring knowing someone from Saint Viator can really make a difference in people’s lives,” Ropski said.

Browne is in her third aid posting in Africa since obtaining her undergraduate degree from Lake Forest College and master’s in public health in policy and management from Columbia University in New York.

Her first post in Africa came when she served on the Ethiopian Hospital Management Initiative for the Clinton Foundation in 2006. After two years, she joined the American Refugee Committee as public health coordinator in Nyala, located in South Darfur.

Browne returns to Darfur in mid-September before accepting an assignment with the World Health Organization in October. She has deferred her acceptance at the University of Connecticut Law School for one year.