



LYNCHBURG COLLEGE PHOTOS

Lynchburg coach extends his reach

Lynchburg soccer player Cecilia Moore interacts with children of the Gulu community, sharing photos of themselves. The children love to have their picture taken and then have the opportunity to look at them. Many of them have never had the chance to see what they look like.

By Gary Brown

When Todd Olsen became a full-time professor and women's soccer coach at Lynchburg College in 1994, his academic mentors were a little miffed. By that time he had received his bachelor's degree from Slippery Rock, went to England for a master's in public health at Loughborough University and followed that with a Ph.D. in epidemiology from Pittsburgh.

Trained in the branch of medicine that investigates the causes and controls of epidemics, Olsen was primed for research at a place like the National Institute of Health more than he was to coach soccer at a small liberal arts college.

"My mentor at the time was pretty confused," Olsen said. "I was going to teach and coach, and he said that's not really what we trained you for."

Olsen has had just as much of an impact, if not more, at the 2,500-student Division III school in central Virginia. But don't worry – he didn't abandon his public-health roots.

In May, Olsen the humanitarian made his sixth trip to the Gulu District of northern Uganda, where civil unrest has wreaked havoc on the people there for nearly 20 years. This time he took 10 Lynchburg students with him, including four of his soccer players.

Part of the project was to dedicate a fresh-water well in honor of Anna Wright, a senior-to-be and starting goalkeeper on the Lynchburg team who was killed in a single-car accident last July. Among the student-athletes making the trip were two of Wright's closest friends.

The wells cost about \$6,000 apiece to drill, but the Lynchburg community raised enough money in the past year for three of them. The well dedicated to Wright is in what Olsen calls "the Dancing Village," known for the people there who perform native dances.

"It reminds me of Anna because she was so full of spirit and energy," Olsen said. "You never know the impact you have. The first call I got after the accident was a horrific one from her parents telling me that Anna had died. Then two days later, they called back and said how much Anna admired what we were doing in Africa and wondered if there was a way to honor her."

Olsen's passion for service in Uganda began by chance several years ago when through a soccer acquaintance he met people involved with Sports Outreach, a mission-based philanthropy in Virginia and North Carolina that uses sport to uplift downtrodden populations primarily in eastern and central Africa.

Learning of the atrocities in the Gulu region triggered what Olsen calls "a visceral response in me to act."

He was doing a lot of soul-searching by then anyway, he said. His father was a successful gymnastics coach who spent a lot of time during Olsen's youth helping other people's kids. While Olsen is close with his father, he didn't want to be known to his own two children as just a soccer coach.

"I didn't want my children to see me only as a soccer coach without other interests," he said. "I wanted to model service to them, with the hope we could do it together."

That happened last year in fact when Olsen took his 12-year-old son to Africa. "It was an awesome experience for both of us," he said.

PROFILE:
**TODD
OLSEN**



Top: Todd Olsen and student-athletes Alicia LaPorta, Cecilia Moore and Betsy Kwiatkowski pose at the dedication of a Gulu fresh-water well that was built in honor of Anna Wright, a former teammate who was killed in a car accident last year. Bottom: Kwiatkowski helps the children on the Koro farm wash their hands before their meal.

Olsen said he was overwhelmed by the state of affairs during his first visit to the ravaged region. But he quickly realized the power of sport.

"It's the ball," he said. "You roll that ball out and the kids come from everywhere. Once they start playing, you can start intervening and talking to them about health and taking care of themselves. Once you develop that trust with the kids, then the parents come on board. And once the parents trust you – especially the mothers – then you can start to effect change in their health."

That's what Olsen and others have done now for several years. "These people had suffered, yet they were so strong, and I realized then the power of perseverance. That's what got under my skin and what I wanted to bring back to teach my children, my players and my students," Olsen said.

It's also why he loves being at Lynchburg.

"I can teach what I am passionate about, which is health," he said. "Also, Lynchburg emphasizes service, so the kids who are attracted to the college are attracted to service, which just adds to what we're doing here."