Why were you interested in participating in the Uganda Study Abroad program?

I would never have gotten started on this research if it were not for two fabulous BYU political science professors, Dan Nielson and Mike Findley. I took Nielson’s political economy of development class really early in my college career, and I felt like I was in over my head a lot of the time. But Dan is the most encouraging guy you’ll ever meet (and it helps that he is also a fabulous teacher), and by the end of the semester he suggested that I should consider going to Uganda with him the next year. He said if I wanted to go, I should take Mike Findley’s capstone class on experiments in post-conflict states. So I took Dan’s advice, and by the time I finished Findley’s class, I was a true devotee of the randomized control trial (RCT) research they were both working on and would continue in Uganda. I wrote my original research design in that capstone class, and Mike helped me improve it every time I conferenced with him. He treated my work as preparation for something that would actually be implemented rather than just another assignment, and so that’s how I thought about it too. I don’t think I would have had the confidence to believe I could really do original research if Mike hadn’t taken my efforts seriously. When I tell people about the work we were doing on the Uganda study abroad, most are shocked that undergraduates would be involved in such projects. Looking back now at how, it does seem crazy sometimes, but because Dan and Mike were so confident in our abilities, we just believed them. Those two are truly exceptional mentors.

What sparked your interest to study Ugandan women who have suffered from violent crime?

Two years ago, I started volunteering for the Utah County Rape Crisis Team. Every month I spent at least 48 hours on call, responding to anyone that called the 24-hour sexual assault hotline. In two years, I’ve only had 2-3 shifts where I didn’t receive any calls. That translates to spending a lot of hours talking with people who have just gone through, or are still trying to deal with, past experiences of sexual violence. I started to notice patterns in the way these survivors thought and behaved.

At the same time, I was taking classes in international development and post-conflict issues, and I learned about the concept of social capital—the norms, networks, trust, and cooperation that make societies function. The more I read about it, the more I saw connections between social capital and sexual violence. For just a few examples (people respond,
of course, in many different ways), after you have been raped, your ideas about social norms are obviously shaken, it is common for survivors to disengage socially, and it is often very hard to trust again. There was academic literature about the importance of social capital in economic development and post-conflict stability, and there was a separate body of literature on how widespread sexual violence is during conflict, but there was very little that connected the two. In my head, these phenomena just went together, but scholars really weren’t looking at these questions. So I decided I was going to get to test it myself.

Can you describe your experience in Uganda?

In Uganda, I split my time between working on my personal research and the projects the group was working on together. I learned a huge amount about field research through working on the group projects (and had a lot of fun), but my main purpose in Uganda was to interview as many women as possible for my personal research. I was antsy whenever I was in the capital and not out in the field. I found that I couldn’t stop seeking out the stories these women had to tell. I was a bit of a maniac— I would be out in the bush doing interviews for like thirteen hours straight without eating anything because the women I was working with didn’t have anything for themselves and I didn’t want to eat in front of them. For the most part, the women I interviewed felt really validated that a researcher from the United States wanted to talk to them, and that only increased my motivation to get this project done and to do it well.

What was the highlight?

The highlight was getting to really engage with the people. I’ve traveled a fair amount in my life, but I’ve never been anywhere as immersed as I was in Uganda. I loved going to church in Uganda and hearing their take on the gospel and their accent on the hymns. I loved joking around with the women who translated for me and getting to learn about their lives. I loved conducting interviews. It was amazing to me that so many women were willing to share these terrible memories with me, that they trusted me to do something valuable with the information. It was amazing to see the strength and humor that many of them had, despite everything. In those moments, it was easy to believe that women would lead Uganda rapidly forward.

The low?

The low point was realizing how hard life still is and will be for Ugandan women even beyond gender-based violence itself. There are still national laws permitting domestic and sexual violence in many situations. There are very few medical, legal, and social resources for survivors seeking support, let alone justice. There are still so many barriers to women actually being involved in leadership. And it’s really low when U.S. politicians make statements about rape that is “legitimate” or “god’s will.” And when hundreds of thousands of DNA evidence kits—ostensibly used to prosecute rapists—remain untested around the US, some dating back thirty years. And when only nine percent of US perpetrators are ever prosecuted and only three percent ever spend even a day in prison. If leaders and law enforcement in the United States aren’t taking sexual violence seriously, why should leaders in states like Uganda, let alone the DRC, who have much bigger political problems than we do, feel pressure to prioritize this issue?

What is the next step in your research?

In the past year, I’ve pursued other opportunities and interests that have moved me away from my research on gender-based violence. I was frustrated because I felt that, despite all the hard work, I hadn’t changed a thing. I decided that I needed to take a break, but I don’t know quite how successful I’ve been... I still get inordinately excited about women’s issues, about Africa. And the publicity around the award has meant that the Uganda research has been on my mind all
semester. The more questions I answer about the research, the more I realize how much I want to return to it, how many things I could improve this time around. I don’t know how exactly I will be able to go back to the topic—whether in graduate school, a job, or on my own wild ambition— but I’m starting to feel that same antsiness to get back in the field.

How as the publicity/accolades affected you?

I was excited to win the award, no doubt. The research turned out to be more academically fruitful than I could ever have envisioned. I am always excited when the project is recognized in one way or another because I feel like I have succeeded in drawing attention to violence against women. This is an issue that has been really neglected in academic literature, and is really really misunderstood among the majority of people. I set out to frame the issue using social science methodology—random sampling and statistical analysis—in order to have it taken seriously. And, to my great surprise, it has been. While designing my research project and applying for grants, but also when working on the BYU Political Review and volunteering with the Rape Crisis Team, I ran into a lot of nervousness and dismissal from people when I wanted to discuss sexual violence. In our culture, we have a tendency to engage in this weird rhetoric where sexual assault is basically inevitable in countries associated with conflict, but that in America it only happens to people who are “asking for it.” Either way, it seems that we feel like talking openly about sexual violence would in some way be validating “bad behavior.” It is a really natural reaction to demonize or ignore the things we fear, but unfortunately it only makes the problem worse. I really hope that this award will help assure people—especially at BYU— that it is good to engage in open and thoughtful discussion about sexual and gender-based violence.