



AUBURN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
LIVES OF COMMITMENT AWARDS CEREMONY 5 MAY 2003
ACCEPTANCE SPEECH BY CAROLINE BARON

It is indeed a privilege to be here this morning. To be honored for a life of commitment by an organization so dedicated to promoting tolerance and healing cultural divisions is especially gratifying.

I grew up in a socially conscious family and have always felt a strong need to give back. As Jews the very essence of our religion is a concept called *Tikkun Olam* - which literally translated means, to repair the world, to leave the world in better shape than we found it. Four years ago, I was watching images of desperate, frightened people pouring into Macedonia and Albania. This was the war in Kosovo- one of the largest refugee crises in the world's history. I was devastated by what I saw but like many of us, felt powerless to help.

Although none of my immediate family perished in the Holocaust I couldn't help but wonder what I would have done, had I been alive in the United States during that time. Now, faced with a tragic situation unfolding in my generation, I thought, "I'm not a doctor, I'm not an aid worker, I'm a film producer. What can I do? How can I possibly help?" Then one Sunday morning I heard a report on NPR about the conditions of a refugee camp in Macedonia. Surprisingly, the biggest problems in the camp were not the lack of food, shelter or medicine- they were psychological trauma, idleness, boredom, and fear. I had an idea to bring films to the children- to hold outdoor screenings- to alleviate some of the tension and create a diversion from their desperate situations. To bring a little joy. Maybe even laughter. **This** is how the idea for FilmAid International came to me.

In support of my idea, a Bosnian friend told me about a film festival he and some colleagues had organized when Sarajevo was under siege. At risk of being killed by sniper fire, people ran to the theater just to get some diversion. These people were saying that it didn't matter how full their stomachs were if their minds were not engaged. Their bodies would be fed but their spirits would be empty. It was then that I realized that what I do for a living, making movies, is not frivolous. What I take part in creating has power and value.

Within six weeks of hearing that radio broadcast we were on our way to Macedonia. I had gathered support from old and new friends in the film business and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the department in the UN responsible for all refugees

around world. Robyn Groves, UNHCR's representative in NY, said it was the first good news she had heard since the war began.

At our first screening - a refugee camp called Nephrosto in Macedonia, hundreds gathered to watch cartoons under the evening sky. Children were laughing, their necks craned up to the big screen. The adults were there too, and their laughter was just as contagious.

Although we had clearly achieved our initial goal of bringing joy and distraction, we quickly realized that the screen could be used for much more than entertainment. We saw that it could be utilized as an amazing communication device, and through careful collaboration with the refugees; we could educate and inform them as well as offer hope and diversion. We discovered that even the most rudimentary techniques can be effective. For example, there was a desperate need for information about the dangers of landmines, and UNICEF had been passing out a brochure to educate the refugee population. We videotaped the brochure and projected it and it quickly and efficiently provided life-saving information to the masses.

After the success of FilmAid's programs in Macedonia, UNHCR invited us to continue the project in Africa where there are millions of refugees and displaced persons— most of whom have been in camps for 10 years or more.

Through my work with FilmAid, I have visited several refugee camps around the world and met countless victims of war. I have learned some astounding statistics, perhaps the most staggering - there are 35 **million** refugees and displaced persons in the world. And that number is only rising. 80% of these are women and children. Refugees and displaced persons are a population cut-off from information and normal life. And if not for circumstance, they could be you or me.

I must tell you that refugee camps are far from anyone's vision of home. They are often set in the most undesirable section of a country. They are insecure and isolated and offer only the barest necessities.

Kakuma a town in Northern Kenya, just south of Sudan is host to a refugee camp with 83,000 people. It is 12 square kilometers of **unrelenting** heat and dust. The majority of the refugees have been there since 1992. Children are born and raised there.

FilmAid has been conducting programs in Kakuma since 2001, and our evening screenings – a combination of entertaining and educational films - repeatedly draw audiences of **10,000 people** or more.

In addition to these screenings, FilmAid shows films throughout the day to smaller audiences in more targeted settings—centers for the mentally ill, schools and hospitals. We are thrilled by the effect our films are having in a therapeutic feeding center for malnourished infants. Before FilmAid appeared, the feeding center had been unable to engage the children and their mothers. The children were not gaining weight, the deaths from malnutrition continued and the program was failing. When FilmAid started to show

Winnie the Pooh in the center everything changed. Not only did the attendance rate increase, but children were engaged and stimulated.

We are seeing positive changes in behavior even when faced with long entrenched social or cultural traditions. In the Somali community for example, it is unheard of to discuss sex or AIDS, even amongst family members in the privacy of their own homes. An encouraging anecdote came from the camps recently, when a Somali woman was heard yelling after her son to bring a condom with him as he left their hut. She had just seen one of the African-made films about HIV/AIDS and wanted to make sure he was protected.

Mandela and Gandhi have become heroes of the camp. Before showing a documentary on Mandela, it was common for the refugee leaders to sit around and talk about war strategies. After the screening, these same men stayed up all night discussing how they could non-violently solve their problems like Mandela did.

One of FilmAid's most exciting programs is a filmmaking class for refugee youth. They are learning how to tell their own stories. After their films are completed they are shown to the refugee population at large. One of the most popular films in the program was written and directed by a teenage girl. It describes her experiences growing up in a **polygamist** family.

I went to Afghanistan last year. We wanted to see if FilmAid could be helpful there. At a screening of The Wizard of Oz in Kabul, I asked the children if they could sing a song for me. Not one child raised a hand. This was not out of shyness. Their teacher explained to me that under the Taliban, music was strictly prohibited and these children did not know how to sing. You can imagine their faces when they watched and heard Dorothy sing "Somewhere Over the Rainbow."

The list of FilmAid success stories is long and inspiring but on my most recent trip to Kakuma, there were terrible food shortages. I asked all of the refugees I met how I could possibly continue raising money for films when they clearly need food. They all told me the same thing. Films are food for them. "If your mind is not well", they said, "the food doesn't help."

Although FilmAid's stated goal, to promote mental and physical health in the developing world, is being achieved, it is an uphill battle. The most challenging aspect of which is fundraising. The essence of my faith - that is to help repair the world - sustains my determination to keep FilmAid alive. Producing films is more than a full-time job and FilmAid would not exist without our NY staff of 2, the remarkable program managers in the field, the refugee staff and countless volunteers.

When I was leaving Kakuma in late January, a refugee stopped me and asked that I bring a message home. He said, please tell the people in your country not to forget us. I didn't have the heart to tell him that the majority of the people in my country and the rest of the world do not know that he or Kakuma exist. Until recently, I didn't either.

Every time I visit a refugee camp and see the impact of FilmAid's programs I return more motivated than before to keep going. It is a simple idea really, screening films to entertain audiences, but it's remarkable to see how they can provide human beings with life saving information, education, a sense of community, hope, and inspiration. Through our programs innocent victims of war are regaining their dignity- sensing possibilities, and perhaps most importantly, once again feeling connected to the world.

I share this honor with the worlds' refugees and displaced - not for their lives of commitment - but for their commitment to life in the face of constant and unrelenting adversity. When the movie ends in a refugee camp, the lights do not come up and the refugees do not go home. They may never go home.

Thank you.