“The day I was abducted as a child soldier I felt like a tree split from top to bottom by lightning.”

Ricky Richard Anywar was a typical young teenager, growing up happily amid family and friends, going to school and dreaming of college in his future. But there was evil heading his way. Uganda’s government troops were engaged in a power struggle with rebels, marked by brutality and genocide. Children as young as 8 were being dragged from their homes and forced to become soldiers. Ricky was just 14 when the nightmare reached his own backyard.

“We heard the gun shots. I got scared. I knew that today we were going to be abducted,” remembers Ricky.

What followed is impossible for any American teenager to imagine. Rebels tied up Ricky and his 16-year-old brother, locked their parents and three younger siblings in a grass-thatched hut and set it on fire. As Ricky and his brother watched, the Anywar family was burned alive.

“They were crying for help. It was the toughest moment in my life,” Ricky recalls.

For the next two and a half years, he and his brother endured relentless brutality and intimidation designed to transform them into battle-hardened warriors in an army of stolen children, fighting to overthrow Uganda’s government.

“I saw brutality beyond description. I saw tortures, rapes, killings and abductions. I was so scared, terrified and trembling.”

During the 20-year civil war in northern Uganda, more than 60-thousand boys and girls were dragged from their homes, schools and villages and marched to rebel hideouts deep in the bush. The boys were made to kill or be killed and the girls were used as sex slaves.

In 1991, Ricky’s brother made a daring escape. Three months later, Ricky also risked death and fled, making his way back to his home village. But instead of feeling jubilation, there was more traumatic news. His brother had also made it home but, profoundly traumatized by his experience, he had committed suicide.
“They took me to his grave and I got totally broken down again. Coupled with what I saw in the bush, how my parents had been killed, now the death of my brother, I felt that was the end of my life.”

To avoid being recaptured, Ricky walked 18 miles before hitching rides in cars and buses to the city of Jinja, nearly 300 miles from his village.

“At the bus stop, I heard people talking my language. I told them my story and that I wanted a job. One lady asked me if I wanted to work in a small gin factory. So I started working. I worked so hard for her. During the night I could work as a security guard and during the day I started learning how to brew gin. I never told anyone what happened to me. I was so ashamed that when I would think about it tears would begin rolling down my cheeks.”

Eventually, the woman agreed to sponsor Ricky so he could go to school. In the years that followed, he worked hard, earning a college degree and landing a good job in Uganda’s capital, Kampala. But home was never far from his thoughts. He felt compelled to return to the place where his happiest memories and his worst nightmares had happened, and where war was still devastating the lives of village children.

“When I told people in Kampala I was going back, they asked, why can’t you be here where it’s safe. But my heart was telling me I need to go back and help these children.”

In 1999, Ricky founded **Friends of Orphans (FRO)** with a mission to contribute to the empowerment, rehabilitation and reintegration of former child soldiers, abductees, child mothers, and orphans and to help combat the spread of HIV/AIDS. FRO admits 400 young people every year, providing them with vocational and life skills, basic reading and math instruction, business management training and, most importantly, psychological support.

“I saw from my own experience that if former child soldiers could be supported, they are still useful human beings and good citizens. “It’s very difficult for someone to say, yes, I killed 100 people; it’s shameful. A girl cannot explain how they used her as a sex slave. They always fear to tell strangers what happened to them.”

And Ricky adds that working to help people come out of their difficult situations has helped him cope with his own childhood trauma.

“When I look back at my past life and who I am now with a changed heart, I always feel joy. I know there are human beings who brutalized me, killed my people, made my childhood to be bad but there are human beings who helped me. A woman in America said she wanted to adopt me. So you see the beauty of human beings as well.”

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**Ricky Richard Anywar is a human rights and peace building activist, educator, and Founder of Friends of Orphans (FRO).** As a former child soldier and Director of FRO for over 19 years, Ricky has expertise in working with war affected communities, trauma healing and rehabilitation, and internally displaced persons.