Brooke Stern was all alone, seven thousand miles from home, camped out in a tent along the Nile River in Uganda and sick as a dog. For weeks, she had been unable to hold down food, finally prompting her worried mother back in New York to say “Brooke, I’m coming to get you.” Brooke didn’t hesitate, “No you’re not, Mom!”

What had brought Brooke to that place? And why was she determined to stay?

You could say it was all her parents’ fault to begin with. Brooke’s mother had dedicated her life to saving medically fragile children. Her father had a passion for cultural awareness and travel in developing countries. The combination had instilled in Brooke, from a young age, a sense of responsibility and a passion for improving the lives of others beyond her own backyard -- which is why a trip to Africa in 2009 became a life changer.

Shortly after Brooke finished nursing school, she and her father set out on a backpacking trip through East Africa. During the five days they spent in Bujagali Falls in Uganda, they were struck by the extreme poverty and lack of basic necessities, but they were in awe of the enthusiasm and hopeful spirit of the local people.

“In the village we saw hunger but we also saw thirst,” says Brooke, “thirst for knowledge, thirst for a better tomorrow, thirst for the opportunity to lift themselves out of gripping poverty.”

Just one month after that initial visit, Brooke returned to Bujagali Falls with a mission “to help the people harness the two conflicting realities of misery and hope into a powerful combination for success.”

She spent the next 13 months living in the community, talking with the villagers, listening to their needs and wants, and their frustrations. They had received aid from outside organizations, but their lives had not improved in any lasting way. Brooke realized that to break the cycle of poverty, she needed to devise a new model that would address and combat the underlying causes of poverty. She had a plan. It seemed an impossible one but, even as her family told her she was crazy, she was determined. First step -- education.

“I understood that by emphasizing education and self-sufficiency in the community we would have the ability to drastically increase their quality of life.”
Brooke put her heart and soul into her vision, creating the foundation *Supporting Opportunities for Ugandans to Learn* (S.O.U.L.).

What the villagers wanted is what she strives to make happen through a unique community-driven development model. Every S.O.U.L. program is created by Ugandans, for Ugandans, based on Brooke’s research and interactions with community members, who she believes are the true experts on the community’s needs and wants.

“I envisioned developing creative partnerships and business cooperatives, viewing every participant as a stakeholder, thereby lifting themselves up and out of poverty in a sustainable way.”

Eight years later, the model she used in Bujagali has been replicated across 30 other villages in Eastern Uganda, directly and indirectly impacting over 14,000 Ugandans. Its programs focus on education, women’s empowerment, food security, and maternal health. In Uganda, 16 women die each day in childbirth. Many women in rural areas continue to deliver their babies in unsanitary and dangerous environments.

As a new mother herself, Brooke is driven to save these women by educating them about pregnancy and providing them with ultrasound screenings, birthing kits, and prenatal vitamins. One of her dreams is to build a community birthing center where women will have access to life-saving maternal health services.

Today, Brooke divides her year between New York and Uganda where S.O.U.L. Foundation is giving thousands of rural Ugandans opportunities to transform their own lives and, ultimately, the lives of their entire community. What a difference five days can make!

*Brooke is currently the full-time CEO of S.O.U.L. Foundation which fosters sustainable and vibrant Ugandan communities through unique partnerships focused on education, women’s empowerment, food security, and maternal health. Brooke was a TEDx nominated finalist speaker and travels regularly between Uganda and the United States.*