

Rebekah Chilcote '07

healer, storyteller, champion of children

Even before Rebekah Chilcote came to Ursuline to earn her Masters in Art Therapy and Counseling, she knew she wanted to help children. What she didn't know was that her experiences would be shared both locally and globally.

Some of her earliest memories are of helping her missionary parents care for young orphans in Kenya and Zimbabwe. After returning to this country to finish high school and earn a bachelor's degree in psychology, she returned to Zimbabwe in 2002 on a Fulbright grant to help orphans with AIDS using art.

When she came back, she began studying at Ursuline. During her second year, an avenue opened for her to travel to Sri



Lanka to work with kids who lost family and homes to the Asian tsunami. She went with the blessing of her Ursuline professors.

As the children drew pictures of their tragic experiences, she saw that they began to heal. She treasured their stories of heartbreak told in crayon and took hundreds of photos of the young artists. She promised them that their stories would be remembered.

Since finishing her masters last year Chilcote, 27, has worked as an art therapist with the West Side Catholic Shelter for homeless women and children and with Cornerstone of Hope, a local grief center. She often thinks of the children she met overseas.

In November, she returned to Ursuline for an art exhibit at the Florence O'Donnell Wasmer Gallery. "Witness: My Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka Experience" included Chilcote's installation pieces, photographs that she took of the children and the kids' art.

While helping to set up some of the installation pieces, she felt moved to create an altar as a memorial for the Zimbabwe youth who had died.

"I had collected many stones and sat in the middle of the gallery painting the names of the children who died on each stone. Tears streamed down my face as I was able to memorialize them, honor them and find my own way of saying goodbye."



But she didn't stop there. One day during the exhibit, she brought a group of 16 women and children from the homeless shelter to see the show.

"I cannot even explain how wonderful this was. I felt in some small way that God was using me to help change lives. Not only were the African orphans' stories being seen and heard, but I believe they had a profound impact on the lives of the homeless women and children. It enabled them to see their lives differently," she said.

Several of the women were moved to tears. One woman whispered that she had a lot to be thankful for. Then there was a nine-year-old boy, who came to Rebekah and said, "When I grow up I'm going to get the biggest limo I can find and take it to Africa and bring all the orphans here."

For Chilcote the show was emotionally moving and healing.

"The exhibit was a powerful spiritual experience and I really believe that God orchestrated the entire event. I cannot imagine a better place, a more sacred or spiritual place for the exhibition than on the Ursuline campus within the quiet walls of the Wasmer Gallery."

In the meantime, she knows God has placed her in Cleveland for a reason.

"I am learning so much that I can take back to Africa with me and I also feel that the people I am working with really need my help. Even though I do dream of returning to Africa, God is truly present here and will use me wherever I go, as long as I am open and willing to do this work."