

Life after LSE: Diamond rings re-purposed for good

*Writing your dissertation can leave you feeling more lost and confused about life than ever before, but as Amanda Schwartz, an MSc Development Studies alumni and co-founder of **The Ring Project** explains, keep your eyes and mind open and it could lead to great things.*



It wasn't too long ago that I was sitting across from my dissertation advisor, feeling wholly unprepared despite months of threatening emails that read something like this –

“Your dissertation meeting is coming up”

and,

“Please prepare for your upcoming dissertation meeting.”

But alas, there I was, trying to explain why I wanted to go to eastern Congo for fieldwork, probably unsuccessfully, and probably while sweating too much.

The great thing about graduate school, though, is the maintenance of at least some degree of autonomy in the face of discouragement. The truth was, I was going to find a way to get to the Congo whether my advisor thought it was a good idea or not. Don't tell anyone I said that.

Sitting there feeling preemptively embarrassed, my mind traveled to the chalky climbing gym back in California which inspired my focus on Congo in the first place.

I'd met my counterpart to-be, Marirose, in the form of a joyous ex-asylum-lawyer-now-baker who laughed as much as I did and who seemed as interested as I was in the fact that there were millions of people dying in a country that not many people in the United States could place on a map.



I was working behind the front desk attempting to convert people to rock climbers, and she was delivering muffins. I had barely asked her name by the time I jumped over the front counter and we were talking at 1,000 miles per minute. She mentioned she'd been recently divorced, and that she had been trying to figure out what to do with her ring. She wanted to sort out a way for it to benefit another woman somewhere, as a way to heal her own suffering. She thought it would be fitting for the money to go back to where it likely came from in the first place – the Congo. She had a name for her idea, and it was called The Ring Project.

I heard myself saying, “let’s do this.” As a 24 year old who had just broken up with her boyfriend so she could go to graduate school in London, I couldn’t really relate to the whole “diamond ring/divorce” side of the concept, but what I could do was focus my education as much as I could on Congo. I could try my best to learn her history and the landscape of aid actors and figure out how best to support local women so that when it came time for it, Marirose and I would have a roadmap for where to funnel the money we got from the rings that hadn’t actually been donated yet.

Fast forward to me on a truck in the Congo.

I had become obsessed with how US-backed aid packages were undermining local governance in Internally Displaced Persons camps outside Goma, which essentially served as a microcosm of humanitarian efforts in the rest of the province. Thanks to my previous classes in the International Development department at LSE and also by virtue of the fact that I wasn’t living under a rock, I was already well aware of the pitfalls of humanitarian and development aid initiatives, particularly in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In the capital of North Kivu, I would learn (on said fieldwork!) that its capital alone hosted over 330 international aid organizations.

You might imagine how an aid economy of that magnitude coordinated successfully to provide the humanitarian assistance it touted. Unsurprisingly, it was not uncommon that it didn’t. That isn’t to say that good things weren’t done, or that the people implementing these programs weren’t smart, driven, resourceful, or committed. Usually they were all of these things. But the situation in Congo is incredibly complicated and long-standing, and local attitudes towards many large organizations were at a low point.

One gaping hole in coordination within the camps was between INGOs and community-based organizations. That is to say, it was essentially nonexistent. While my fellow MSc student, Kaitlyn, and I rode the – to use a euphemism here – bumpy road, out to Mugunga III with our fixer Caleb (**aka Jack Bauer** – seriously, look it up), I was reminded exactly what I wanted The Ring Project *not* to be.

Goma did not need a 331st aid organization setting up shop. Our goal was to support women in a place where “the global North”, including our elected government, had stripped autonomy and human rights for over a century before pouring money back into it in the form of “aid.” We wanted to support already established, women-led, community based organizations with realistic missions.

We didn’t mind the idea of supporting one woman at a time. We had no donors to answer to and nothing to prove. On a later trip back to Goma, Marirose and I would find some incredible **local partners** for our not-yet-off-the-ground nonprofit.

Happily, I survived my dissertation meeting, my fieldwork, and writing my actual thesis. Barely. But, thanks in large part to what I learned at LSE, **The Ring Project** is now officially off the ground!

After a lot of hard work post-graduation and a little bit of panic, Marirose and I built our concept out and started hosting small events, meagerly asking if anyone *might* know of a divorcée who *might* not want their ring anymore. Somehow, those small events turned into larger ones, and then. last week, to an article in the **San Francisco Chronicle**.



In the last three days alone we've received 20 donated rings from as far away as Ireland, Germany, Australia, and all over the United States. We partnered with an incredible **jeweler** in San Francisco who re-designs and sells our rings, and that money goes directly into the hands of competent, incredible Congolese women who are providing vocational and advocacy training outside of diamond and coltan mines, and pursuing law or paralegal training so they can defend victims of sexual violence.

The Ring Project isn't the answer to Congo's problems. But we see it as an opportunity to amplify voices we've silenced for too long, as well as an opportunity for women thousands of miles away to heal from their own wounds. LSE helped me to open one of the most meaningful doors of my life, and for that I couldn't be more thankful.

Amanda (Robinson) Schwartz, to her own surprise, earned her MSc in Development Studies at the London School of Economics. She now lives on her houseboat in California. She is the co-founder of **The Ring Project and works another full time job as a Program Officer for **WAKE**, a women's rights organisation in San Francisco.**

October 26th, 2016 | [Department Alumni](#), [Featured](#), [Fieldwork and Travel](#) | [1 Comment](#)

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