



Bringing Hope to Africa

By Haley Beck, Indiana University

Jake Sasseville has big dreams. This 21-year-old college student has been working toward his dream of hosting a television show since high school when he created weekly segments for a local-access television station. Now he hosts, finances, produces and distributes his own television show, "The Edge." He is also filming documentary and writes a blog -- all while attending college full-time at Marymount Manhattan College in New York.

However, Sasseville's dreams go beyond his up-and-coming career. Since the death of his younger brother, Alexander, in 2002 he has also been concerned with making a difference in the world.

"It is partly my way of grieving," he said. "I think that there's a huge potential with children, especially those stricken with life threatening diseases." Sasseville's brother died of complications due to leukemia treatment, and he is now in the process of creating a nonprofit organization in his honor.

Sasseville's passion for helping others recently took him to Africa where he witnessed first hand what most people his age only read about in newspapers. Like many things in his life, following his dream of traveling to Africa involved persistence and a little bit of serendipity.

Sasseville first looked for funding through MTV in the summer of 2005 when he pitched his idea of traveling to Sudan to show what it was really like from a young person's perspective. Though he left without the funding, he did meet producer Amy Emmerich, who kept track of Sasseville and his project. Five months later he happened to sit down on a bus next to Kjerstin Erickson, executive director of the FORGE, a nonprofit program which takes American youth to Africa to aid refugees.

By the summer of 2006, Sasseville was not only going to film in Africa, but had also convinced Emmerich and cameraman Ray Pagnucco to go with him. "We went for a drink and talked about Africa," Emmerich said. "I wanted to go and wanted to bring the show and I know a little about both of those things. I believed in him."

The trio traveled to refugee camps in Africa, where they were partnered with the United Nations and escorted to dangerous areas in Zambia and Zimbabwe. Though their guides told them many travelers are too afraid to leave the vehicles, Emmerich and Sasseville

wanted to experience the country and people. "Jake and I were out of the car playing volleyball with the kids, teaching them songs and dances," she said.

The most shocking thing Sasseville saw while in Africa was children living underneath a bridge sniffing gasoline out of a ginger ale bottle. He remembered one child explaining the fumes were a blanket for their pain. "I broke down on camera," he said. "I mean I'm emotional but I don't usually cry like a baby. It was very hopeless. It is the thing I still have dreams about at night."

Sasseville was also struck by how brilliant the refugees were, many of whom spoke perfect English. But even though the refugee children wanted to learn, they lacked even the most basic school supplies. So Sasseville helped collect 7,000 notebooks in partnership with the Meade paper company, and he is currently working with a nonprofit company to send them to Africa. "It's a very frustrating thing knowing access to education is everywhere in the U.S.," he said. "To give them an opportunity for education is just the most exciting thing I can think of."

Now back in the United States, Sasseville and Emmerich are spending their nights and weekends slowly editing the footage from the trip. Though they aren't making any money for their efforts, Emmerich is confident that their work will be worthwhile.

"I'm always amazed at how much he gets accomplished for free," she said. "You meet him and know he'll be successful so it's like investing."

Sasseville's extreme persistence combined with his sense of humor is what gains the confidence of industry veterans such as Emmerich. "The Edge," a candid alternative to the traditional studio talk show, is distributed through edgewithjake.com where audiences can access episodes such as "Jake visits a sperm bank" and "On Sesame Street." In all the shows, Sasseville's enthusiastic personality shines through. Upon graduating with a degree in communication arts and business management next May, he hopes to step into a full-time career as the host of his own syndicated television show.

"I'm not the best looking guy, or smartest, or funniest, but man, I have the passion," he said. "I get in the rooms with these producers and unleash a firestorm."

For more information on the FORGE program or to make a donation, please visit forgeprogram.org.