

several high school kids getting off a bus. I asked them if they wanted to earn some money.”

Luken’s proposition for the children was a race; the winner would receive 100 rand (about \$15). A young girl won, and Luken revealed in the personal connections he’d made. He wrote an e-mail to family and friends about how he’d spent his 44th birthday, which led to him sending regular updates about his life in Congo. One of Luken’s former college teammates turned the e-mail updates into an adventure blog, “The Luken Files” (<http://www.thelukenfiles.com>), which would later become instrumental in telling the story that was about to unfold.

As Luken became friendly with the Congolese, one woman stood out. Madame TeeTee Kanku Muanda spoke particularly good English and had a sense of determination about her. Luken and TeeTee became friends to a point where she felt comfortable asking Luken to fund her daughter Olga’s education at a private school.

“I had gotten the sense that she was someone to be trusted in a town where you don’t trust anybody,” Luken said of TeeTee. “Every night I’d see her reading her Bible, keeping an eye on the local kids. The kids listened to her, the women respected her. Those things told me that she was someone worth taking a chance on.”

Luken agreed to send Olga to private school until she graduated. With that prize firmly in hand — yet knowing that Congo held little livelihood or safety for Olga — Madame TeeTee reached even higher: She asked Luken to adopt Olga and bring her to the United States.

Luken was not in a position to adopt Olga, but he promised TeeTee he would try to find Olga an American home — a process that took four years of networking, hope, and several dead-end leads. Just as Luken was about to give up, a friend mentioned yet another couple who wanted to adopt. As gay men living in Georgia, Scott Purcell and Jamy August couldn’t adopt at the state level, but federal adoption was a possibility. At TeeTee’s request, Luken went to Georgia in August 2007 to meet them.

“They were everything my friend had said they’d be,” Luken recalled. “They lived in a nice neighborhood, had great jobs, and were genuine about creating a family. They had neighbors from Cameroon, who had daughters. They even had a friend, a young African-American woman in graduate school, who could serve as a ‘big sister’ for Olga.”

Finalizing Olga’s adoption took teamwork. With the help of One World Adoptions, Purcell and August handled all the stateside matters, which included being fingerprinted by several investigative bureaus, undergoing a homestudy, and cooperating with Homeland Security. Luken consulted with TeeTee about the best way to navigate the Congolese bureaucracy and obtain an adoption judgment for Olga, which the American Embassy in Kinshasa finalized in October 2008.

Congo’s characteristic chaos, corruption and danger made itself known down to Olga’s last minutes in her country of origin. Luken, Purcell, and Olga were waiting to board their plane out of Kinshasa when an official grabbed Olga and demanded to

know whom she was with. When Purcell insisted that he unhand Olga, the official told her, “You don’t belong to him. Come with me!”

When Luken recalled that incident, as well as other challenges — the pile of documents in French, the lawyers who insisted the adoption was impossible, the intricacies of different types of visas — he was quick to assert that all the effort was worth it.

“Three months after she was adopted, I went to visit her and she was this giggly little school girl,” he said. “The next summer, this extremely polite, articulate, well-spoken young woman came to visit me in Connecticut. She’s a completely changed kid.”

Olga, who makes As and Bs in school and enjoys American Idol and Celine Dion, talks to her mother regularly. Madame TeeTee is thrilled with the growth and change she has seen in Olga. Luken himself hopes that one day, Olga will return to Congo and perhaps effect change there. He recounted their visit to the United Nations in New York City, where he found Olga lingering over an exhibit about women in the United Nations.

“I might like to do this someday,” Olga said.

“At the age of 15, this child is a citizen of the world,” Luken said. “She’s lived in Africa and she knows how it works. She’s fluent in French, English and Lingala. She spent every night of her life sleeping next to her mother, and now, bam, she’s in the States, living with her dads, sleeping in her own room. It makes you feel good, to be able to help like this.”

That feeling was revisited in 2009 with five more U.S.-Congo adoptions, all facilitated by Luken, Madame TeeTee, and One World Adoptions. Three of the five children are orphans, and the others had surviving parents who were simply unable to take care of them. The civil war endures, and the situation in Congo remains dire. The country’s infrastructure, including any health care and social services was devastated in the war. Forty-five thousand people die each month — one person each minute — and nearly half of them are younger than 5.

With the needs being so great, Luken has developed two additional projects that help Congolese children. Most recently, he has joined the board of directors of the One Small Step Foundation, a 501(c)3 organization that accepts donations for the support of an orphanage in Congo. Luken’s other project, which seeks to educate people about the plight of the Congolese — and tell in more detail the story of Olga’s adoption — is a documentary film, *Heart: The Congo Chronicles*. For more information about the film, visit <http://www.startattheheart.org>. For information about how to contribute funds to a Congolese orphanage, visit <http://www.OneSmallStepFund.org>.

*Becky Rodia is a Connecticut-based writer and editor with articles in *Exceptional Parent* and *The Parent Planner*. Rodia earned an MFA in creative writing from Emerson College and has published poetry and book reviews in journals such as *Quarterly West*, *CALYX*, *The Cream City Review*, *Poet Lore* and others. A chapbook of her poems, “Another Fire,” was published in a handmade letterpress limited edition by Adastra Press in 1997.*