

HEART, The Congo Chronicles

The true story of how a determined African mother convinces a U.S. humanitarian pilot to plot a bold new course for her only child.

Due to years of corruption, mismanagement, and war, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo) is one of the poorest countries on the planet. With an annual per capita income of approximately \$300 and a life expectancy of fewer than 50 years, the human suffering and lack of opportunity in this African nation is nearly too crushing to fathom.

When life is this bleak, seemingly unthinkable choices can become viable modes of survival. In the case of the formidable Madame TeeTee, a single mother eking out a living in DR Congo's capital city of Kinshasa, the best choice she can make for her daughter, Olga, is to send her away—perhaps forever—to be educated in the United States. How TeeTee, with great faith and persistence, makes her impossible dream come true is the subject of this compelling documentary.

TeeTee and Olga first lay eyes on Jeffrey Luken Hartlage—an American pilot with a one-year contract to fly humanitarian missions throughout the Congo for Air Serv International—when they spot him riding a stationary bicycle on the roof of his Kinshasa home, which is next to their tenement.

“A white man on a roof, riding a bike that doesn't move—now that got their attention,” recalls Hartlage, who was merely trying to get some exercise.

With the ice sufficiently broken, TeeTee, Olga, their many housemates, and other residents of the poverty-stricken area befriend the lanky, soft-spoken aviator, who has chosen not to live in the sequestered, relatively luxurious compound available to Air Serv employees because he wants to interact with Congolese people.

Hartlage entertains no illusions about changing the world. He knows his role is to fly doctors, condoms, and mosquito nets to various locations around the country, though when he isn't flying, he tries to make life better for his neighbors by providing them with potable water and organizing relay races for the children.

Then he receives a letter from Madame TeeTee, addressed to “Capitaine Luc” (Hartlage is known as “Luken” to his friends). Why write a letter when the recipient lives next door? Madame TeeTee, who is fluent in French, somewhat conversant in English, and understands the power of committing words to paper so they can be read again and again. Upon reading the letter, Hartlage learns that TeeTee also places an extraordinarily high value on education—especially in contrast with her neighbors, who view children as “vehicles to carry water.” The letter politely requests that Hartlage pay tuition for Olga to attend a modest private school nearby.

Hartlage readily agrees to send Olga to the school—after all, tuition is only \$74 per semester. We meet Olga's private-school teacher, who says he is qualified to teach English, and it becomes clear that the

new school is but the first step in TeeTee's master plan to send her child to America for a chance to break the Congolese cycle of poverty and despair.

Sure enough, once Olga settles into her private school routine, Madame TeeTee starts asking Hartlage to take the girl to America with him. Initially, he resists her inquiries. After all, he is a single man who spends his life traveling; the idea of being an adoptive parent seems incompatible with his profession.

Hartlage slowly relents, however, influenced by a combination of his Jesuit education, the appalling living conditions in Kinshasa, and his conviction that Madame TeeTee is hardworking, honest, and not in any way an embodiment of the corruption that characterizes her country's government.

"At an instinctive level, I knew that TeeTee and Olga were worth taking a chance on," he says.

Although Hartlage himself is not equipped to care for Olga, he resolves to use his network of family and friends to find a loving couple with the means and desire to change a young girl's life.

Hartlage's efforts to implement TeeTee's plan give the second part of the documentary a subtly different tone than the earlier scenes, which are shot with such immediacy that one can almost feel the oppressive African heat. The latter part of the film gives viewers a sense of the monumental tasks involved in securing a suitable home in the U.S. for Olga.

Finding an honest lawyer in DR Congo, meeting the requirements under which the U.S. Department of Homeland Security will grant Olga a visa, and convincing the devoutly Christian Madame TeeTee to entrust Olga to the gay couple who want to adopt her are all seemingly insurmountable obstacles to getting Olga out of DR Congo safely and legally. However, solutions are found and, one by one, the barriers fall away. The papers are signed, and Olga moves to the U.S. to settle into her new home in Atlanta, Georgia.

Writer/Producer Jeffrey Luken Hartlage and Director/Cinematographer Kenneth Lundquist, Jr., do a masterful job of transitioning from the gritty scenes in Kinshasa to the upscale American homes of Olga and another Congolese adoptee--a teenaged boy named Dorian whose biological parents, like Madame TeeTee, sought American adoptive parents for their child. Dorian lives with his new parents in Pennsylvania, where we see him playing the piano and discussing his love of sports.

In Georgia, Olga talks about seeing Celine Dion in concert (her adoptive fathers bought tickets as a reward for Olga's all-As-and-Bs report card) and opens the closet to display her new clothes and shoes. Her room looks like that of a typical American teenager – iPod in its dock, posters on the walls – but a closer look at the bulletin board reveals, among the magazine clippings and mementos of the life Olga is building in the U.S., a photo of Madame TeeTee, her inspired, inspiring mother.

HEART, The Congo Chronicles offers viewers uplifting proof that while it's impossible to change the world, with a clear vision--and a lot of hard work--it is possible to change the world for people like Olga.