

Saving the Children, One Education At a Time

BY BECCA FINK

The Children First Club hosted, "Believe That You Can Help," on December 1 in the Penthouse of the Student Center, co-sponsored by the Model UN Club and Student Government.

Professor Gertrud Lenzer, Founding Director of the Children's Studies Program and Center welcomed those in attendance.

The Children's Studies program was founded by Lenzer at Brooklyn College and has been emulated by many colleges and universities both nationally and internationally.

Lenzer opened with a discussion of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989 in order to protect children's rights.

The UNCRC has been ratified by every nation except Somalia and the United States. US ratification of the UNCRC is one of many directives the Children's Studies Research Center and Children First Club are currently working on accomplishing.

The evening's keynote speaker was Haydee Britton, who currently works with the General Assembly Affairs Branch of the Department of General Assembly and Conference Management in New York.

Britton is one of the founders of Les Petits Okapis International, an organization founded in 2001 to help children living on the street in countries where war and poverty have torn apart communities and left families unable to support themselves.

The current focus of Les Petits Okapis International's work is helping homeless children in Congo.

The organization works to

provide street children with basic needs such as school uniforms, food, and clothing, as well as an education for skills necessary to support themselves and their families.

"You give a man a fish and he will eat for one day. You teach a man to fish and he will eat for a lifetime," said Britton, demonstrating what her work at Les Petits Okapis aims to achieve.

The organization is meant to give children and youth the tools they need to survive and succeed.

Britton emphasized that education was the most important thing to provide because it gives the children hope for the future – the organization has even been able to send some young men to college.

Britton, through the organization, wants to work on helping other young people become self-sufficient.

Some of the organization's projects in the Congo include: building and selling solar panels, selling mosquito nets, working as auto mechanics, and setting up a computer center.

Britton explained that a donation as small as fifty dollars would send one child to school for three months, and that five hundred dollars would send that child to school for an entire year.

The name "Les Petits Okapis" was chosen by the children they work with after a rare animal.

"Many think it's an imaginary creature, like the unicorn – An appropriate choice for a group of people whose accomplishments defy all expectations," states the organization's website.

Britton also discussed the thirty-seven children whom the organization currently



FOR THE KIDS: Haydee Britton is the founder of Les Petits Okapis International, which helps children in need. (Media Credit: Children First Club)

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works with in the Congo, of which only 2 are female. Britton explained that in Congo, females are not typically seen on the streets during the day because they are at home cleaning, cooking, and taking care of the younger children.

Regrettably, these young girls can sometimes be found on the streets at night, forced into prostitution.

In her presentation, Britton showed photographs of the thirty-seven students she currently works with.

"When I saw the photos of the students, I just wanted to know more," said Teresa Anderson, a senior children's

studies and sociology major and President of the Children First Club.

The Children First Club has many of the same goals in mind as Les Petits Okapis.

"Our aim is to assist children and youth in any way necessary, as far as their rights and support," said Anderson.

"I am very thankful so many people had interest in children's rights and the event," said Jeanny Kim, Vice President of the Children First Club, a senior children's studies and psychology major.

"Ms. Britton was so inspirational. The event was full of excitement."