

Mixing cultures



SHAKING HER BOOTY. Through the Israeli-founded volunteer organization Go Eco, Dana ended up in Kazo, a village near Kampala, the Ugandan capital.

While volunteering in Africa, an Israeli dancer performs a winning traditional African dance

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Ugandans love their cultural heritage. Traditional dances are still much more preferable for the general audience than Western forms of art. Although it is rare to see foreigners participate in it, Israeli dancer Dana took up the challenge.

A drizzling Sunday afternoon in Kampala. Today there is an awareness day for HIV/AIDS, and hundreds of children have gathered at Kitante primary school. AIDS awareness in Uganda is done in many ways, and today is supposed to be a fun day. The children sing songs about HIV, and the dangers of sugar daddies (rich men who have young girlfriends). Other pupils and groups perform skits, pointing out the risks of HIV/AIDS. The event, which has been going on since early morning, will last the whole day. In the afternoon, some of the attending children are starting to doze off.

But suddenly all children wake up when they see traditional Ugandan dancers taking the stage. Among them is quite an unlikely figure: the 21-year-old Israeli dancer Dana. Cheers and a lot of yelling follow, as Dana and the Ugandans put on a formidable show. The children scream in excitement, while one of the older boys appreciates Dana in the Ugandan way. He walks onto the stage in the middle of the show, giving her some Ugandan shillings. “What a great show,” comments the mas-

ter of ceremonies as the dancers leave the stage, sweating after heavy exercise. “Everybody who thinks *bazungu* [white people] can’t dance is wrong!”

Some time after her performance, which turned out to be the winning show of the day, Dana takes the time to tell her story. “After finishing my two years in the navy, I decided to travel to Africa,” explains the Shoham resident in a Kampala coffee shop. Through the Israeli-founded volunteer organization Go Eco, Dana ended up in Kazo, a village near Kampala, the Ugandan capital. “We were there with a group of 10 Israeli volunteers. However, we tried to live as much like the locals as possible.”

Living locally in villages like Kazo means that the toilet is a hole in the ground, while showering is done with just a basin and a jerry can filled with cold water.

While staying in Kazo, the Israeli volunteers engaged in different community projects. Some were aimed at helping the elderly, others at supporting people suffering with HIV/AIDS. “But there was also a dance group for youth, and we decided to participate in the upcoming dance competition.”

Dana, who had wanted to become a professional dancer but shifted more toward teaching after a serious knee injury two years ago, was immediately up for the challenge. “During the lessons, in which I was teaching hip-hop, I had already tried to do some of the traditional dancing,” she says. “People thought it was quite funny to see a white person, known as *mzungu*, trying to participate in a local dance.

“When you see Ugandan women performing local dances, it looks like it is very

easy,” says Dana. “However, when you actually try to do it yourself, it proves to be extremely hard.”

A main ingredient of Ugandan dance is the shaking of the behind and thighs, while standing straight and holding up the hands and arms. To grant the audience an unforgettable view, the dancers then turn their backs to the public.

Despite the simmering knee injury, Dana decided to give it a try, and in order to stand a chance in the competition, the group practiced every day for three hours. First they practiced a hip-hop dance, which was part one of the final show. “And after that, I continued so that I could get a private lesson in Ugandan dance. Each day when I was finished practicing, I was completely exhausted. However, after those two and a half weeks of training, at least I know how to do the shaking of the bottom,” says Dana, who adds she misses the dancing since her time as a volunteer is now over.

Besides the physical effort, the Ugandan rhythm also proved hard for Dana. “In hip-hop there is the counting during practice, while the local dance here just uses the drum,” she says. “I am glad it went well after all that practice, but it is interesting to see how dancing seems to be in the blood of the Ugandans. Almost all of them proved to be good dancers, even when there was a dance they’d never seen before. They just started and were good at it.”

From Uganda Dana is scheduled to travel more in Africa, before proceeding back to her Tel Aviv job toward the end of the year.