

Date: Feb 9, 2012; Section: Local & Northwest; Page: A5

Humanitarian Lisa Shannon to speak at SVC

By ERINN UNGER

Staff Writer

For Lisa Shannon, it all started with Oprah.

It was just before her 30th birthday, and Shannon's father had just died. She was on the couch, watching a 20-minute segment on the democratic Republic of Congo. During that 20 minutes, her life teetered at the precipice of change — whether to do something about the mass rapes, the torture and the killings in that tumultuous region of the world, or to go back to her life as it had been.

"She (Oprah) was hoping that someone would hear their screams for help," Shannon said of the segment. "I wondered whether I could be one of those people."

Horrified by what was happening in the Congo — where it is estimated a woman is raped every minute — and wanting to find a way to help, Shannon began with a 30-mile trail run in her hometown of Portland, Ore. to raise money for the women of Congo. She established a formal fundraising effort, called Run for Congo Women, in 2005.

Since the movement's start, participants have raised \$1 million to help sponsor women in the Congo, through a group called Women to Women International, and it has extended to offer other fundraising events across the globe.

Besides traveling frequently to Africa, Shannon has taken her message across the United States.

She will speak at Skagit Valley College tonight to kick off the college's annual GlobalFest, a monthlong event highlighting "world cultures, global service, international business, human rights, and the global environment," according to a press release.

The event also includes an international dinner, featuring cuisine from other countries, and a fair highlighting nonprofits dealing with everything from human rights to health issues in developing countries.

"The college considered a lot of speakers who are doing humanitarian work to serve as this year's SVC GlobalFest keynote speaker, but Lisa Shannon really stood out ... An ordinary person — and a young person — who chose to get involved in a global effort and has inspired many people along the way with her work," Skagit Valley College information officer Arden Ainley wrote in an e-mail.

Shannon said she's excited to speak at the college.

"It has been my experience that Americans, when they know about what is happening in this world, they feel very concerned and engaged," she said. "Certainly if I can do it, anyone can."

With her only credentials being working as a stock photo photographer and a television viewer, Shannon was faced with a crisis much larger and with much deeper roots than what could fit into that 20-minute look into the atrocities featured on Oprah.

Since 1998, 5.4 million people have died in the Congo in the deadliest conflict since World War II, according to the Run for Congo Women website. The violence began at the end of the Rwandan genocide, when Hutu militias were forced over the border into the Congo and other militias were sent to attack them. Splintered factions began fighting each other, according to the BBC, and though the war ended in 2003, violence involving the country's huge mineral wealth has not disappeared and the eastern Congo is still unstable.

"There was one woman who talked about being dragged away to the forest by militia," Shannon said of one story which particularly haunted her. The men told the woman that no one would care if she died in the forest. Shannon thought, perhaps in some way they were right.

"Millions of people died and no one cared. Here we were being faced with that," she said. "I don't know how to fix this, but I've got to."

Her new purpose has led to a book, another organization called “A Thousand Sisters” and the first rape crisis center in Somalia, which she helped found with aid worker Katy Grant and Somali human rights activist Fartun Abdisalaan Adan.

“I feel like there was nowhere on the planet prior to the famine more written off than Somalia,” Shannon said. “And inside Somalia no one was written off more than women.”

The center offers sanctuary and support for survivors of the sexual violence that plagues the country.

Every day, Adan risks her life to support the women, and every day survivors risk their lives to receive that support and bring their experiences to light for the world to see, Shannon said.

“Letting women speak for themselves, that will motivate me for years,” she said.

Shannon said she wants people who come to tonight’s event to take away one thing: Don’t wait to be perfect, don’t wait to know what you’re doing — just show up, she said.

“There is still room in one’s life to have a global impact,” she said. “And engage in this world.”



Shannon

At a glance

What: Humanitarian worker and founder of Run for the Congo, a fundraising event for women in the Congo will speak to help kick off Skagit Valley College’s GlobalFest event.

When: 7:30 p.m. tonight

Where: McIntyre Hall Performing Arts Center, 2501 E. College Way, Mount Vernon.

Cost: Tickets are complimentary, but required and are available at the McIntyre Hall Box Office or by calling 360-416-7727, Ext. 2, or 866.624.6897, Ex. 2

Want to help?

www.runforcongowomen.org

<http://athousandsisters.org>

www.sistersomalia.org