

Humanitarian Discusses Tostan Model

By: *Thierry Adrien, Intern, African Development*

Molly Melching, a humanitarian and founder of nonprofit NGO Tostan, visited the University of Central Florida last week for a series of campus and community meetings about her work with grassroots change in West Africa.

Melching is the subject of Aimee Molloy's "However Long the Night: Molly Melching's Journey to Help Millions of African Women and Girls Triumph." Tostan empowers African communities to drive their own development and is best known for its role in leading the abandonment of female genital cutting (FGC) in West Africa. Melching's success as an activist can be attributed to her genuine love, respect and willingness to listen, all of which contributed to the rapid growth of this grassroots movement.

Students and community members gathered in the conference room in the UCF College of Sciences on Thursday afternoon for a presentation titled, "'Breaking out of the Egg: Molly Melching, Tostan and Development through Empowerment in West Africa.'" Melching outlined the Tostan model, a three-year educational program based on human rights, inclusiveness and taking a holistic approach.

Through various anecdotes, Melching illustrated how Tostan impacts millions of people in six different countries. She shared images of women holding signs protesting FGC and child marriages after learning about how fundamental human rights aligned with their values, culture and religious practices. Through a three-year program, Tostan empowers participants – men, women and children – to understand their rights and values, to seek public office, and to create their own businesses and public projects to improve their villages. These participants are often village leaders that hold inter-village events, facilitating the spread of this movement.

Melching also discussed some of the mistakes Tostan made early on, and how the organization learns and grows from these errors. She explained why it is essential that villages collectively declare an end to harmful social norms, such as FGC, rather than be told by an outside group that their norms are wrong.



Over lunch, Melching discussed the successful grassroots work of Tostan.

The following day, Melching spoke to several UCF students and community members over lunch about the importance of foregoing a savior complex when trying to affect change in other countries. Melching also met with several UCF faculty for a luncheon and discussion and presented to a classroom of Rollins College students. This visit was hosted by the UCF Global Perspectives Office and supported by the Diplomacy Program, the Global Peace and Security Studies Program, the Isle of Man Small Countries Program and the Global Connections Foundation.