

This Couple Created The World's Most Viral Video. Now They're Getting 'A Little Radical.'

Two of the minds behind Kony 2012 are out to prove making a difference is a family affair.

By Emily Becker

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In 2012, Jason and Danica Russell released a movie. Nine years earlier Jason and two friends had founded a nonprofit called Invisible Children after a filmmaking trip to Uganda exposed them to the story of the Lord's Resistance Army, a rebel group in Central Africa that included in its practices the abduction of kids in order to force them to fight as soldiers. The nonprofit would use the footage from that trip as the basis to increase awareness in the United States of the conflict and the leader of the group — Joseph Kony.

It took one day for *Kony 2012* to hit one million views. On Facebook, the video was shared by 11 million people. The film raised awareness of the conflict but was also criticized for its simplification of a complicated issue and a lack of focus on its victims. The film put Invisible Children under a microscope and the Russells personally in front of a firing squad of Facebook comments and long-form think pieces.

At the time, *Kony 2012* was the most viral video of all time. While this was a new level of popularity for the organization, Invisible Children had already been on the ground in Uganda for nine years and had been supported during that time largely by college and high school activists who were idealistic and radical in their own ways.

I know because I was one of them.

My senior year of high school, I was deep in that part of my teens when I was questioning anything and everything. I sought something more to which I could hitch my ideals and motivations, and, for me, that more came in the form of a documentary called Invisible Children screened at my high school my senior year.

It was more than my wannabe revolutionary heart could take.

When I started college, the Invisible Children chapter at my university was the first student group I sought out. I wrote letters to members of Congress asking them to support the issue. I (occasionally) skipped class to attend rallies. And in 2012, when we were planning how we would raise awareness about a new video from the national organization about the leader of the LRA, I was the president of the chapter.

I bought into it. And yes, I bought into the T-shirts and the movies and the bracelets, but I also, more importantly, bought into the idea that we could do something. I bought into the notion that just because a conflict was affecting me directly didn't mean that we weren't responsible to work to end it. I bought

into the hope that my voice and my actions could do something that could change the world.

In short, Jason and Danica Russell helped make me an activist.

While activism in our country is nothing new, since the 2016 election, thousands of people have been mobilized to demonstrate their beliefs, including one of the largest marches in American history: the Women's March. Jason and Danica are opening up the conversation about what it means to think about the world with a greater understanding to the youngest portion of the population. For the Russells, activism does not have a minimum age requirement.

"So often, our kids are teaching us," Danica told A Plus. "They're seeing things and processing things and overhearing things. We realized there aren't a lot of vehicles out there to have those conversations with your kids early to make them think bigger."

Their experiences with their kids led them to create *A Little Radical*, an alphabet-style children's book written and illustrated by Danica that the Russells hope will serve as a way to open the conversation about activism between kids and parents. In the Russells' version of the alphabet, A is for action, E is for explore, L is for listen.

"When you think about how to change the world, it just hit us that the most important thing we can do is invest in our own kids," Jason told A Plus. "So often we think it's like after you graduate college or after you have this degree, you will then have this expertise on how to do something. What we found is a lot of junior high and high school kids who are already changing the world in their own ways. And we want that to accelerate. We want thousands or millions of kids feel like they have the power to make the world better."

That empowerment starts with Jason and Danica's own kids Gavin and Everley. Earlier this year, the Russells sold their house, consolidated their lives into suitcases and are now planning a family "alternative book tour" starting in 2018. For each letter of the alphabet in the book, the Russells are partnering with an organization to put the lessons of their book in action. The family will be starting domestically before heading abroad and are working on a homeschool plan for Everley and Gavin for the duration of the trip.

"For us, I feel like we worked so hard to get our kids into this bubble: the best schools and the best thing and now I feel like it's also our job to burst the bubble a little bit," Danica said.

Readers can follow the Russell family's tour along the way on social media and are invited to start their own activist journey alongside them.

"I always go back to this quote: 'don't ask yourself what the world needs, ask yourself what makes you come alive and go to that,'" Jason said. "What the world needs is for people to come alive."

Part of coming alive means getting out from behind the keyboard. While Jason and Danica recognize the

power of social media, especially in its ability to educate individuals about causes on the other side of the world, learning through first-hand experiences cultivates a sense of empathy that the Russells believe is crucial for an activist.

"I think in the next ten years, our minds are going to be blown in terms of what can happen with young people around the world being connected," Jason said. "You can't hate your enemy when you actually know your enemy and you're sitting down at a table with them."

But as the Russells know, the connection created through social media also opens your life up to critics and comments. What they hope does happen is that this fear of failure doesn't prevent individuals from taking action. So much so that the letter F in their book is for "failure."

"We have failed," Jason said. "We failed majorly and we failed in front of millions of people. You will have critics, you will have haters, that's a part of the human journey. Knowing who you are is a lifelong journey, but I think failure can be the best teacher."

Knowing who you are also includes knowing your limits. While activist work can easily take over, the Russells believe in setting boundaries and taking time for self-care. (In *A Little Radical*, z is for Zzzs.)

"Nothing wins compared to a genocide," Danica said. "Nothing in your life feels as important as that but it is. It's still important to be existing in the world, to be good to the people who are involved in your world. You still have to go to the PTA meetings. You still have to meet with your taxman."

As for the term "radical" Danica and Jason embrace it. Call them "radical." Call them "idealistic." Call them "naive." They might be all of those things, but they are also people who take action.

"It is a little radical to be someone who's trying to think differently, think outside the box, to believe you can change the world," Danica said. "But we believe you can. We believe that doesn't have an age."